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EGE ÜNİVERSİTESİ

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LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Sezin ZORLU

Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı

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Thesis Advisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Yonca DENIZARSLANI

Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Yüksek Lisans Programı

ETİK KURALLARA UYGUNLUK BEYANI

Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğüne sunduğum "Çevresel Adaletsizliğin Çağdaş Amerikan Edebiyatındaki Temsilleri " adlı yüksek lisans tezinin tarafımdan bilimsel, ahlak ve normlara uygun bir şekilde hazırlandığını, tezimde yararlandığım kaynakları bibliyografyada ve dipnotlarda gösterdiğimi onurumla doğrularım.

Sezin ZORLU

ÖNSÖZ

Edebiyat öğrencisi olmanın bir kazanımı, öğrencilik hayatı boyunca çok sayıda eseri okuyup analiz ettikten sonra eleştirel düşünebilme yeteneğidir. Bir derece elde ettikten sonra bile bu kazanım, derece sahibine hayatın her alanında eşlik eder. Özfarkındalığa ve ahlaki hassassiyete önem veren biri olduğum için, edindiğim analitik bakış açısını insan haklarına olan ilgimle birleştirmeyi hedefledim. Çalışmalarım boyunca çeşitli metinlerde okuduğum adaletsizliğin kaynağını daha derine inme arzumdan yola çıkarak çalışmaya başladım. Edebiyatta insan haklarına olan ilgimin en yüksek olduğu dönemde, hem insana hem de çevreye yapılan adaletsizliklere olan alakamı genişleten ekoeleştiri alanıyla tanıştım. Literatürde çevresel adaletsizliği incelememin sebebi, çevre adaletsizliğinin ne olduğu, çevre bağlamında kimlerin adaletsizliğe maruz kaldığı, kimin çevresinin korunduğu veya dışlandığı gibi soruların cevaplarına ulaşmaktı.

Çevresel adaletsizlik hakkında daha fazla bilgi edinme arayışında, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki ihlal edilen ve ihmal edilen insanların, grupların veya toplulukların gerçek hayat hikayelerine dönmeliyiz. Bu anlamda edebiyat, özellikle de marjinalleştirilmiş insanların edebiyatı, haksız muameleyi ve yoksulların yanı sıra ırksallaştırılmış topluluklardaki insan haklarının eksikliğini dile getirir. Çevresel adaletsizlik ve şiddet olgusunu ele alan çalışmaları incelerken tezim, yoksul ve ırksal toplulukların zorla yerinden edildiğini ve ardından istismara uğradığını göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, ABD'de çevresel adaletsizlik ve şiddet olgusunu ele alan çalışmaları incelerken, yoksul ve ırksal toplulukların zorla yerinden edildiği ve istismara uğradığı tezimde gösterilmiştir.

Genel olarak bu tez Amerikan edebiyatının üç çağdaş eserini inceler ve ırk, sınıf ve cinsiyet tartışmaları yoluyla çevresel adaletsizliğin eleştirel olarak ele alınmasındaki katkılarını gösterir. Bu yüzden, çalışma öncelikle çevresel adaletsizliğin ortaya çıkışının temel noktası olduğu için ekoeleştiri üzerine bir inceleme sunmaktadır. Ardından ABD hükümet politikasının ve toplumsal hareketin tarihsel arka planının yanı sıra son zamanlarda gelişen ve gelişmeye devam etmekte olan bir fenomen olarak çevresel adaletsizliğin edebi

eleştirisini gösterir. İkinci, üçüncü ve dördüncü bölümlerde, çağdaş Amerikan eserleri çevresel adaletsizlik çerçevesinde inceleniyor.

PREFACE

A major gain of being a literature student is the ability to think critically after reading and analyzing a good number of works during formal education. Even after achieving a degree, this gain sticks with the degree holder in every aspect of life. As a student who values self-awareness and ethical sensibilities, I aim to combine this analytic perspective with my interest in human rights. I began my study based on my desire to dig deeper on the source of injustice that I have read about in various texts throughout my studies. During my most attentive period towards human rights in literature I became acquainted with the field of ecocriticism which expanded my interest of injustice of both the human and environment. The reason I chose to study environmental injustice in literature was to find answers to questions such as what environmental injustice is, who is exposed to injustice in the context of the environment and, whose environment is protected or excluded.

On a quest to learn more about environmental injustice we must turn to the real-life stories of the violated and neglected people, groups, or communities in the United States. In this sense literature, especially literature of the marginalized people, voices unfair treatment and the lack of human rights in poor, as well as racialized, communities. In studying the works that deal with the phenomenon of environmental injustice and violence, my thesis has shown that poor and racial communities are forcibly displaced and subsequently abused. This study aims to reflect the importance of the rights of the population exposed to environmental injustice in the U.S and to remind the existence of possible solutions to environmental problems and to contribute to the field of literature in order to make an environmental impact. Broadly speaking, this thesis studies three contemporary works of American literature and shows their contribution to environmental injustice through discussions of race, class, and, gender. To that end, the study first provides a survey of ecocriticism as it is the base point for the emergence of environmental injustice. Then it shows the historical background of the government policy and social movement as well as the literary criticism of the recent and developing phenomenon that is environmental injustice. In chapters two, three, and four contemporary American works are examined under the framework of environmental injustice

ÖZET

Çevresel adaletsizlik nispeten yeni bir fenomen olmakla birlikte ekokritizmde güçlü bir yere sahiptir. Adaletsizlik kapsamında, çevresel sorunların tarihi, hareketin bir hükümet politikasından bir sosyal protesto türüne ve son olarak bir edebiyat ve eleştiri temeline geçiş süreçlerini kapsamaktadır. Çevresel Adaletsizlik insan hakları ile çevre arasındaki ilişkiyle ilgilenir. Hükümet politikası olarak çevresel adaletsizlikle alakalı ilk yasa, 1948'de ABD hükümetinin su kirliliği kontrolü otoritesini genişletmesine yönelik olarak çıkarılmıştır. Çevre Adalet Hareketi 1982'de Kuzey Carolina, Warren County'de, kimyasal olarak kirletilmiş katı atıkların Afton adlı siyahi mahallesine bırakılması ve sularını kirletmesi üzerine çıkan ayaklanma ile başlamıştır. Benzer davalar, öncelikle Afro Amerikalı ve Latin mahallelerine katı atık boşaltıldığı için ve arazi doldurma alanlarının bu mahallelerde seçilmiş olması üzerine "çevre adaleti" teriminin "çevre ırkçılığı" olarak adlandırılmasına yol açmıştır. Bununla birlikte, bu adaletsizlik, yoksun bireyleri, grupları ve toplulukları hedefleyen; onları haklarından mahrum eden, yaşam alanlarını ve çevrelerini yok eden küresel bir sorun olarak hızla yükselmiştir. Çevresel adaletsizlik literatürü, Robert Bullard'ın *Dixie Dumping* kitabıyla ortaya çıkmıştır. Çevre adaleti literatürü vahşi doğa, çevre ve kimlik temalarını kapsar, ancak esas olarak bu temaların ırksal ve düşük gelirli grupların yazılarında ve savunuculuğunda nasıl ele alındığına odaklanmaktadır. Bu literatür alanının amacı, sağlık hizmetlerine erişim, gıda adaleti, mahalle sürdürülebilirliği, su, hava ve enerji adaleti ile yoksun grupların sosyal ve güç mücadelesi gibi sosyal eşitsizliklere dikkat çekmektir. Çevre adaleti literatürü doğa yazılarından ekonomik, ekolojik ve küreselleşme yazılarına kadar uzanmaktadır. Buna dayanarak, çevresel adaletsizlik kavramı, ekokritizm üzerine genel bir bakış, adaletsizliğin temel temaları aracılığıyla çevresel yazılarında ana ilkelerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu tez, çevre adaleti perspektifiyle ırk, sınıf ve cinsiyet sorunlarını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Amaç, şu anda karşılaştığımız zorlukları daha iyi anlamak için ekokritizm ve çevre adaletinin tarihsel anlatılarını sergilemektir. Bu nedenle, Karen Tei Yamashita'nın *Tropic of Orange*, Helena Maria Viramontes'in *Under the Feet of Jesus* ve

William T. Vollmann'ın *Imperial*, eserleri çevresel adaletsizliğin sonucu olarak insanların zorla yerlerinden edildiğini göstermek için analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelineler: Çağdaş Amerikan edebiyatı, eko-kritisizm, çevresel adaletsizlik

ABSTRACT

Environmental injustice is a relatively new phenomenon, though it has a strong place in ecocriticism. The history of environmental issues, from the standpoint of injustice, is also an account of the movement's shift from a government policy to a form of social protest, and finally to a staple of literature and criticism. It is concerned with the relationship between human rights and the environment. As a government policy the first legislation passed in 1948 which extended American government's authority of water pollution control. The environmental justice movement began in 1982 in Warren County, North Carolina, when a chemically contaminated landfill was deposited in the Black neighborhood of Afton, contaminating their water. A series of similar cases also included landfill sittings that were primarily disposed of near African American and Latino neighborhoods, leading to the term "environmental justice" being renamed "environmental racism." However, this injustice quickly escalated as a global problem that targets the disadvantaged individuals, groups, and communities and deprives them of their rights and destroys their living spaces and environment. The literature of environmental injustice surfaced with Robert Bullard's book *Dumping in Dixie* (1990) Environmental justice literature includes the themes of wilderness, environment, and identity, but it mainly focuses on how these themes are addressed in the writings and advocacy of racial and low-income groups. The goal of this field of literature is to bring attention to social inequalities such as access to healthcare, food justice, neighborhood sustainability, water, air, and energy justice, as well as underprivileged groups' social and power conflicts. Environmental justice literature ranges from early nature writings on economic, ecological, and global issues. Based on this literature the concept of environmental injustice, with an overview of ecocriticism lays out the main tenets of environmental writing through the core themes of injustice demonstrates the importance of this thesis.

This thesis aims to analyze issues of race, class, and gender through the perspective of environmental justice. The goal is to display the historical narratives of ecocriticism and environmental justice to offer a better understanding of the difficulties that we are currently

facing and will most likely confront in the near future. For this reason, the literary works of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* are analyzed to demonstrate displacement as one of the many consequences of environmental injustice.

Key Words: contemporary American literature, ecocriticism, environmental injustice.

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TUTANAK

INTRODUCTION

This thesis studies three contemporary works of American literature that have contributed to the critical study of environmental injustice. These works are, in order of appearance in the following discussion, Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* Helena Maria Viramontes's 1995 novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and William T. Vollmann's 2009 "nonfiction novel" *Imperial* (Kreig 70). The claim of this thesis is to show that all three books focus on the issue of displacement due to environmental injustice through the lens of race, class, and gender in the United States of America.

Karen Tei Yamashita was born on January 8, 1951 in Oakland, California. She is a Japanese American writer and Professor of Literature at University of California, Santa Cruz. She grew up in Gardena, los Angeles County and from 1969 to 1973 she attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota and studied a year at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. She graduated with degrees in Bachelor of Arts in English and Japanese literature. She travelled to Sao Paolo after receiving the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship where she researched the Japanese immigrant communities in Brazil. After living in Brazil for nine years she returned to California and worked at KCET, a local PBS station as an Executive Assistant for twelve years and then obtained her position as Professor of Literature at University of California Santa Cruz. She is strongly influenced by magic realism as seen in her works. She has written four novels *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), *Brazil- Maru* (1992), *Tropic of Orange* (1997), *Circle K Cycles* (2001) and *I Hotel* (2010) all include elements of magic realism and on epistolary novel *Letters to Memory* (2017). She has also written plays compiled in the book *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance* and some have been produced by the East West players, an Asian American theatre group. She has written a great deal of short stories which published under the compilations *Sansei and Sensibility: Stories* (2020). In 20210 Yamashita was a finalist for the 2010 National Book Award and in 2011 she became a Fellow of United States Artists. In 2013 she was co- appointed to a distinguished position at University of California as the Presidential Chair in Feminist Critical Race and Ethnic Studies which aimed for interdisciplinary program development.

In her novels, Yamashita talks about the discontents of cultural diversity in the globalized age and as she does in *Tropic of Orange*, she aims to blur the lines between borders. In her essay "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World," Kandice Chuh states that Yamashita's literary world harbors themes of immigration and the challenges of acculturation characterized by cultural hybridization and intersectionality. She argues that

> Yamashita's work encourages an opening out of US boundaries in different registers (the political, the imaginative, and the critical) and multiple directions (south and west, especially). Her writings are coherent wholes without insisting upon or privileging unity, and the energy and narrative pleasures of the work issue from the plotlines and characters that manage to be at once surprising and deliberate. Commitment to a thematic and generic eccentricity and a formal elasticity, whereby protagonists transform into minor characters and the latter enlarge into central actors, characterizes Yamashita's work. Likewise, her settings regenerate repeatedly under pressures of forces both local and global, mounted at the hands of both human agents and nonhuman (and sometimes inhumane) ideologies. Together, these representational strategies enable her work to resist delimitation by specific geography even as it attends with intimacy to a sense of particular place. (5)

Chuh's suggestions can be observed in *Tropic of Orange* as Yamashita diverges the borders between Mexico and United States with an invisible line drawn by an orange that falls from the tree and rolls "under the barbed-wire fence, and just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel's property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway" (*Orange* 40). The barbed wire fence is also a simile for the Mexican American fences on the border. Yamashita emphasizes the elasticity of the border which is carried out by the orange as she gives the orange a role in the book as a minor character. Moreover, she brilliantly transforms the orange into a major character as it literally moves from the South to the North in the course of the book. The imaginary line that the orange paves is fluid yet subtly full of purpose: "she sensed that it [the line] continued farther in both directions, east and west, east across the highway.

And west toward the ocean and beyond" (38). Yamashita presents intersectionality "without privileging unity" (Chuh 5).

The second contemporary American writer this study analyzes is Helena Maria Viramontes. She was born on February 26, 1954 in East Los Angeles. She was one of eleven members of a large family consisting of six sisters, three brothers, a kind mother and an uneducated, abusive, alcoholic father. She received her high school diploma from Garfield High School, consisting of students underprivileged and lack financial and social opportunities. The demographics of the student body are mainly minority groups that is dominantly Hispanic and Latin American. In 1968 Garfield High School was one of the five schools that initiated the student protests named the East L.A Walkouts or Chicano Blowouts. The students protested against discrimination, their lack of access to opportunities, and education. The Chicano movement of the 1950's and 1960's gave the students the power to demand civil rights and the walkouts became a source of pride for them. Viramontes witnessed the Chicano movement first-hand which enriched her experience and contributed to her passionate articulation of these issues in her writing.

In 1975 she graduated from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles and received Bachelor of Arts in English literature. Shortly after her graduation she won prizes for her short stories: "Requiem for the Poor" was awarded by *Statement Magazine* in 1979, and her short story "Birthday" won the literary prize from University of California Irvine's Spanish Department. She gained attention when she became a grad student in the English department at the University of California at Irvine in 1981. During her study, one of her professors demotivated her and discouraged her writings about Chicanos and expressed that she should write about people from all walks of life instead and she left the program. After leaving the program her first collection of short stories was published under the title *Moths and Other Stories* (1985). She then returned to Irvine and graduated in 1994 and in 1995 she published her first novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*. She then moved to Ithaca, New York with her husband and two children and started work at the Creative Writing program at Cornell University. In 2007 she published her second novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* which tells of the cruel

reality displaced people endure. She is currently the Goldwin Smith Professor of English at Cornell University.

She has received the National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1989, and Fellowship from the Sundance Institute in 1989. She won the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature in 1996 for her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Her short story collection *Moths* was exhibited in Autrey Museum of Western Heritage in 1998. In 2006 she received Luis Leal Award at the Santa Barbara Festival of Books. Her latest novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* received the 2007 Outstanding Latino/a Cultural Award in Literary Arts or Publications followed by the United States Artists Fellowship in 2007.

Viramontes's writing is inspired by the conditions of her childhood, her environment, neighborhood, and family. She describes her childhood in an essay from 1989 titled "Nopalitos': The Making of Fiction" which jumpstarts her career as a writer (Latimer 323). She grew up in a crowded household that was extended with each joining family member or acquaintance who crossed the Mexican border to the United States for various reasons such as earning money, fleeing from male oppression but all in hope for a better life than the one they managed to escape. As a part of a working-class family, they constantly had economic struggles that put pressure on everyone in the household. Her mother grappled with the pressure to feed the household doing the best she could with little resources such as tortillas and cactus. Viramontes reflects her memories in the details of her writing, for example her title *Nopalitos* is the name of the dish her mother would make to feed everyone which is a type of cactus that grows in the scarce vegetation of Northern Mexico. This dish significantly presents the malnutrition in crowded Mexican American households as the thorns of the cactus are removed and cooked with eggs "to expand their bulk and feed more people" (324). Viramontes believes that her background contributed to her profession because each person that resided had a different life story which they shared around the kitchen table and Viramontes reflected these stories in her writing. Viramontes incorporates both English and Spanish words in her writing style and she applies code-switching as a distinctive attribute of living in an immigrant household. However, she is also bitter about the result of being part of an immigrant family and being a bridge between cultures because she has forgotten

Spanish and she writes in English. She states that Spanish was "stolen" from her and that she is uncomfortable speaking both languages as she struggles to clearly express herself and cannot find the exact words to express herself (325).

In his essay "'The La Brea Tar Pits, Tongues of Fire: Helena Maria Viramontes's 'Under the Feet of Jesus' and Its Background" published in 2002, Don Latimer focuses on Viramontes's writings and her family background. Accordingly, he suggests that Viramontes's main theme is the oppressions of the patriarchal family and that it is a "deeply-felt theme" in all of her works (324). Latimer emphasizes the oppression on Chicana writers and how they were not allowed to write alongside their struggle between finding time to write and the pressure of carrying out the assigned role of woman in a patriarchal Latin household. In his reading of Viramontes's story collection *Moths*, Latimer describes the father's heavy influence on the typical Latin family in which the "obligation to men is controlled by violence and the voice of the father is the voice of God" (Latimer 325). With these obligations and the requirement to be submissive, it is truly a struggle for a Chicana writer to flourish in her environment. Latimer also has a rather contradictory take on Viramontes's writing style as he believes her main theme is not a narrative of systemic victimization:

> Her theme, to put it bluntly, is not what the system has done to the Chicano. There is strikingly little bitterness about exploitative bosses, and few calls for collective action. Ethnic or class activism is not at all the point. the point for Viramontes is personal. It concerns what we Chicanos are doing to ourselves, especially to women, without goals and our way of life; even more, it concerns what women through their desire and fertility close off for themselves in the way of possibilities for living. It is not the literature of conventional victimization. (326-7).

Latimer describes this as a theme of self-critique, rather than a system critique which opposes other views on Viramontes. He also contradicts himself in his analysis of *Under the Feet of Jesus* as there is visible oppression, exploitation, and victimization of the characters. He gives a specific example from the novel where Estrella thinks "Is that what happens? People just use you until you're all used up, then rip you into pieces when they're finished using you?" (*Under* 60). Latimer refers to this instance as an example of the exploitation of Mexican

American laborers which exposes exploitation by the system and he contradicts his statement, but, his proposed theme of self-criticism is also evident in Estrella's judgement.

The final writer this study examines is William Tanner Vollmann, who was born on July 28, 1959 in Los Angeles. He had a sister three years younger than him, but she is tragically drowned in a pond under his supervision. Vollmann was burdened by this loss as he felt responsible for his sister's death. He believes that this loss immensely shaped and affected his writing style. He studied at Deep Springs College and then completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in Comparative Literature at Cornell University. Vollmann went on to higher education of doctoral program of Comparative Literature at University of California Berkeley but decided not to continue and dropped out.

He has an interesting career background; he took up many different jobs, travelled to different places, observed and reflected his experience in his writing. Vollmann calls himself a "hack journalist" in this sense since he travels and writes reports for his non-fiction works. For example, he worked as a secretary at an insurance company to earn money to go to Afghanistan in 1982 so he could do research about candidates who could benefit from American aid. He witnessed the war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union at the time. Sadly, he returned to U.S because he had dysentery. He wrote his first non-fiction book *An Afghanistan Picture Show* based on this experience. His first novel was *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987) which he wrote surviving on candy bars at the office working as a computer programmer. Vollmann's critics agree that he was influenced by a diversity of writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Ernest Hemingway, Comte de Lautréamont, Louis Ferdinand Celine, Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata, and Leo Tolstoy. Vollmann has written a great deal of books, articles, and stories and most are collections or series which add up to about forty books of fiction, non-fiction and memoir as the list goes on.

Despite having published many important books, Vollmann does not receive much scholarly attention. In other words, there is a lack of research or secondary sources on his writing. Vollmann's handful of critics agree that there are recurrent themes in his work that make his massive output very approachable. His approach towards life is reflected in his writing, he has a constant curiosity for the rich spectrum of human experience, and he strives

to indulge himself fully in every encounter with the people he writes about. Vollmann spends time with street people, visits countries at war with one another around the world, talks to criminals and immigrants, and writes about his experience using themes of ethics, violence, history, war, and, death. Before turning the 1,300-page book *Imperial* into non-fiction, Vollmann sets out to Imperial County, California to write assignments for magazines and gradually realizes the slow violence this county has experienced. It is an ecocritical nonfiction concerning the once rich and prosperous farmland that has been scorched and deprived due to environmental injustice.

In his 2020 essay "'A Better-Informed Citizen of North America:' Environmental Memory and Frames of Justice in William T. Vollmann's Transnational Metafiction," American critic C. Parker Kreig notes that William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* can be seen among literary attempts to "mobilize personal, biogeological, and collective narratives" through a use of "environmental memory" with the intention of "redressing economic and cultural injustices" (74). It holds a place as a literary monument of environmental justice and landscape memory of dwelling that reflects the heartbreaking, disastrous interference of human activity in nature.

The thesis devotes a chapter to each of these books in order to unpack their handling of environmental injustice. In Chapter One, a survey of ecocriticism and its important works identifies the main tenets of environmental writing and the critical scope of environmental injustice, and thereby lays out the central themes of the works discussed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. The first chapter also illustrates how the main ideas of ecocriticism are incorporated in or employed by literature. The discussion then moves on to an account of the shifts, or the various waves of ecocriticism to track the transformation of the assumptions and beliefs of ecocriticism as a field. The chapter identifies the second wave of ecocriticism as the origin point of the emergence of environmental justice and gives a short survey of the history of environmental justice and its important figures. It concludes with various examples from literary works involving environmental justice.

Chapter Two analyzes Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* under the framework of environmental justice. It aims to present Yamashita's vocalization of social,

political, and economic issues in the multicultural hub of Los Angeles. This chapter also favors an ecocritical reading of the novel as it points to the upbringings of industrialization and gives detailed examples on problems of infrastructure, exploitation, and mistreatment. These details are examined under the such sections as immigration, homelessness and gendered violence in *Tropic of Orange*.

In Chapter Three of this thesis, Helena Maria Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*'s attention to issues of environmental justice are analyzed through the lens of Mexican American migrant workers' experiences. A brief history of Mexican emigration is provided to highlight the displacement of migrant workers in the United States of America. The first section of the chapter discusses labor mistreatment and exploitation of laborer's bodies and the romanticized marketing image of female workers. The second section of this chapter is devoted to a reading of the novel from Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence. It analyzes the novel's treatment of the laborers' lack of access to healthcare, unsanitary conditions and unsanitary water, and chemical poisoning.

Chapter Four studies William Tanner Vollmann's non-fiction *Imperial*. This part of the thesis reveals the disturbing environmental background of an ongoing problem at the U.S Mexico border and displays the ecologic disparities between Mexico and U.S caused by environmental injustice. It aims to present the environmentally catastrophic consequences of border politics happening at Salton Sea in Imperial County drawing on Rob Nixon's slow violence theory. Finally, the chapter discusses the displacement of Mexican American laborers and how they are forced to search for work in the U.S due to environmental justice issues of water politics. In doing so, the analysis offers a gender critique of labor issues.

In conclusion, the works discussed in this thesis tackle race, class, and gender issues from the wide lens of environmental justice. The purpose is to show that displacement, which is one of the many effects of environmental injustice, is a recurring concern in all three books. The accounts of the historical background of ecocriticism and environmental justice enable a deeper understanding of the issues all of us are facing now and will very likely face in the near future. The historical background of the mentioned immigrants is presented to raise awareness about the prolonged effects of environmental injustice. Overall, this thesis

attempts to draw attention to the prevalence of environmental injustice issues in contemporary American literature and aims to contribute to American ecocriticism by remedying the lack of sustained scholarly focus on contemporary American literature's investment in raising environmental consciousness.

1. OVERVIEW OF ECOCRITICISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

1.1 SURVEY OF ECOCRITICAL THOUGHT

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field where literature and environmental studies form a theoretical contact zone that examines environmental concerns and nature's place in literature. The term *ecocriticism* was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert, an American literature educator and writer. He describes ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Glotfelty xx). Rueckert focuses on the study of ecology as a scientific endeavor and in this way, he presents the interdisciplinary side of this field. Studies on literary ecocriticism begun with compilations of early works that emphasized environmental concerns. From then on, contributions to the field developed gradually and in 1990, the University of Nevada, Reno opened the first academic position of Literature and the Environment with Cheryl Glotfelty as the first Professor. In 1991 the Modern Language Association (MLA) held a special session named "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies.'' In 1992 the Western Literature Association formed ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) which has grown greatly as an international association for interdisciplinary studies involved in various disciplines of the humanities.

Patrick Murphy, who is one of the foremost theorists of literary ecocriticism, established a journal titled ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) which is dedicated to addressing environmental concerns through interdisciplinary critical studies. In 1996 Cheryl Glotfelty, Professor of literature and the environment and co-founder of ASLE, expanded Rueckert's concept of ecocriticism and redefined ecocriticism so that it encompasses the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). From these two very important definitions, Serpil Oppermann, a Professor of Environmental Humanities at Cappadocia University and President of EASLCE presents a common ground for ecocriticism's task: "to formulate a conceptual foundation between literature and the environment" (2-3). *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Glotfelty and Fromm is a perfect

example to Opperman's statement because the book presents environmental concerns in literature in a chronological fashion from the perspectives of important figures in literary ecology.

Cheryl Glotfelty is inspired by the flow of development in Elaine Showalter's three stages of feminist criticism and uses this scheme to divide the development of ecocriticism into three stages. Showalter's three stages give deeper arguments on feminist theory, and this allows for theoretical expansion in the field. Accordingly, Glotfelty divides ecocriticism into three stages to provide expansion to ecocriticism. The first stage of Glotfelty's ecocriticism involves the study of nature's representation in literature, where the focus is on human interaction and perception of landscape, animals, waste and the urban. The second stage strives to raise environmental awareness and seeks to educate urban society on the value of natural world rather than material world, "nature writing boasts a rich past, a vibrant present, and a promising future" (Glotfelty xxiii). A variety of nature-oriented writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Willa Cather, Gary Snyder, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker complement this stage of ecocriticism. Critical theories and their interconnection with ecocriticism are prominent in this stage such as psychoanalytic theory, critical theory, feminist theory, Bakhtinian theory and deconstructive theory. The third stage goes beyond the literary discourses of gender, sexuality, and symbolic construction and dives deeper into dualisms grounded on various cultural and literary theories from which two examples shall be provided below. The first literary theory connected with ecocriticism is ecofeminism as it analyzes oppression and violence towards women and nature. The second theory is deep ecology which critiques the anthropocene as a destruction to the universe and William Rueckert describes it as man's tragic flaw: "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (qtd. in 113 Glotfelty).

Greg Garrard's influential book *Ecocriticism* (2004) serves as a wonderful introduction for the general reader as well as comprising an incisive analysis of the field for the scholar. Garrard divides the chapters into eight by genre, metaphor, narrative and

dedicates six of the eight chapters to the major concepts that ecocriticism has studied. Garrard's idea for this book relies on the myth of mutual constructionism, a term coined by Lawrence Buell. The myth of constructionism is the cultural shaping of the physical environment which consists of both the natural and the human-built environment. It is the undoubted belief that culture defines the constructed nature and the intact nature itself. For Garrard, the ecocritic must keep in mind that "environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection" (14). However, the ecocritic's greatest challenge when writing is to actively keep in mind the myth of mutual constructionism, which means that the two mutual structures of nature must always be remembered. Garrard's first chapter "Pollution" begins with a brief analysis of an ecocritical *sine qua non*, that is, Rachel Carson's groundbreaking *Silent Spring* (1962). Garrard praises Carson's success of publicizing—and popularizing, a scientific ecologic problem in the media and to culture. *Silent Spring* is the most noticeable work when it comes to the concept of pollution among ecocritics, and Garrard refers to this work frequently throughout the book.

Garrard then moves on to listing tropes of ecocriticism, and he starts off with "Pastoral." Pastoral is an implicit or explicit contrast of the country to the urban that incorporates the hardships of labor and glorifies nature. Garrard highlights that glorification promotes the importance of preserving nature's balance and that it has become eternally significant for environmental discourse (34). Beyond the trope of pastoral is the trope "wilderness," which comprises the uncontaminated, untouched virgin land and shows the "sharp distinction" of nature and culture in settler narrative (60). This concept of wilderness brings two arguments into respective. The first argument is the concept of nature as a retreat similar to the pastoral: "Wilderness is the natural, take know unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (Cronon).

William Cronon's article on wilderness demonstrates the idealization of wilderness as a sacred place. On the contrary, there is another point of view on wilderness which is the anthropocentric approach and can be seen in Bill McKibben's book *The End of Nature*:

"We have changed the atmosphere, and that's we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot-on Earth man made an artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us" (McKibben). McKibben explains that human activity has ruined nature, has altered the climate, destroyed habitats and thus nature has become artificial. Garrard concludes his argument by proposing a balance between the concept of nature as sacred or as artificial. He states that this can only be possible if we "subvert the dualistic construction of wilderness and civilization" (83).

Besides wilderness there is another trope: "apocalypse," which is also a prominent genre in literature, popular culture and the media. The apocalyptic pastoral critique of disease, illness, destruction, and death due to pesticide pollution is blatant in *Silent Spring*:

> THERE WAS ONCE a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings… Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours. There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? (1)

Carson's striking opening in the first chapter "A Fable for Tomorrow" provokes the reader to question the source of environmental fatality, revealed as "man's assault" (23). Another noticeable apocalyptic rhetoric is overpopulation. In his important work, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1789), Thomas Malthus argues that "unchecked population growth would always outrun subsistence" (Garrard 94). Garrard puts forth these examples as Earth's

apocalypse as well as the anti-apocalyptic views and ends with a hopeful message to find the middle ground that yes, the planet is indeed facing these problems but leading it to an apocalypse or saving it from destruction, is in the hands of civilization.

Apart from these tropes which help us understand nature, Garrard turns the spotlight to the "immediate reality" which is the trope of "dwelling" (108). He describes that dwelling is "a long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry, and death, of ritual, life and work" (108). In his analysis of this trope, he focuses on the human experience of residing on Earth. This part of his discussion is a comprehensive reflection on incorporation of nature in religious rituals, the sacred pastoral, the bond between humans and nature, and the exploitation of nature. This experience begins with spiritual ideas of pastoral and a harmonic dwelling which then leads to failure and becomes a dwelling landscape of injustice. Garrard builds up to the main argument that continues to concern ecocritics today which is the abuse of natural resources. He concludes by agreeing with an argument by Andrew Ross on the injustice of access to natural resources. Ross criticizes the political, economic and cultural manipulations carried out by humans to access natural resources under the disguise of philosophy which causes social inequality.

Moving on to the one of the last two tropes of his *Ecocriticism*, "animals," Garrard unfolds the two perspectives of human and animal interaction ecocritics are concerned with; animal rights and animal representation in culture. He explores notions of anthropomorphism, the morality, and ethics behind domestication of animals, and the importance of wild animals and biodiversity, and how human activity destroys biodiversity. He includes the concept of the zoo and talks about how it "distorts human perception of animals as well as being a spectacle of imperial or neocolonial power" (150).

In the same way that the nineteenth-century London Zoo was designed to make visitors proud of vicarious engagement in their culture's imperial prowess, today's zoos are marketed to flatter spectators' roles as active members of a gloriously affluent consumeristic society (qtd. in Garrard 150). Garrard quotes Randy Malamud's 1998 book *Reading Zoos* to fiercely criticize the problematic, horrible impact of human activity. Lastly, Garrard concludes his book with the final trope: "the Earth." Garrard flies to a birds-eye view of the

earth and gives a photographic portrayal as he quotes from Wallace Stevens poem "The Planet on the Table":

> As you read the poem, hold in your mind's eye a photograph of the earth taken from space: green and blue, smudged with the motion of cloud… so small in the surrounding darkness that you could imagine cupping it with your hands. A planet that is fragile, a planet of which we are a part of but which we do not possess (qtd. in Garrard 160).

Garrard uses this quote to emphasize the abundance of our surroundings and to detach from possession of nature and the earth. He brings forth ecocriticism's concept of pastoral on a cosmic scale. He moves on to Earth as globe and visits the idea of globalization of culture and the globe as a market (Garrard 163). Then he explores Gaia, as the inflection of the Earth which James Lovelock has spectacularly asserted that our planet has become a kind of super-organism because of the physical and chemical alterations of its inhabitants (173). His hypothesis is that Gaia is dynamic and hosts a harmonious balance of energy, chemical elements which contributes to the balance of an organism. Garrard concludes this trope with Earth's various representations as a place for retreat, technology and commerce and habitat of biodiversity in ecocriticism.

Any account of ecocriticism has to consult Lawrence Buell, a Professor of American Literature and a pioneer of Ecocriticism. Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) stand out in a survey of ecocriticism. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell concentrates on Thoreauvian writings of the American natural environment to arrive at a deeper meaning on "the place of nature in the history of western thought" (*Imagination* 1). His analysis of Thoreau's influence in literature show that Thoreau's writings help us to understand and modify an eco-centric environmental imagination. As much as Thoreau is important to the development of environmental writing, Buell, like most scholars of ecocriticism, states in the book that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is equally important to environmentalism. Carson activated public anxiety on environmental concerns and contributed to the emergence of environmentalism which gained worldwide recognition. Buell dives into the history of environmental literature and puts *Walden* on a

pedestal and explores the tropes of environmental literature, explained in previous section, within multiple frames. Buell then moves on to literary examples from different periods of literature with examples from colonial literature, indigenous literature to contemporary literature and compares reflections of nature in these periods through environmental tropes. Buell concludes his environmental reading of literary texts and places Thoreau as a Saint of ecological restoration which canonizes as "green Thoreau" (339).

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism,* Buell aims to explain environmental literature and criticism in a comprehensive, or holistic manner. It can be said that in Buell's previously discussed book he manages to present a micro perspective to ecocriticism whereas this book expands all over the globe in a macro view. He begins with chronicling the emergence of environmental criticism and main works of the aforementioned writers and associations such as Glotfelty, Carson, ASLE etc. Buell's main distinction from other ecocritics is his statement that ecocriticism has two waves. He states that although the two waves overlap, each exalts a different philosophy. He compartmentalizes the first wave as an exploration of nature and wilderness in literature in which the philosophy depended heavily on a glorified rural rather than urban. The second wave distinctively separates itself from the prioritizing nature and shifts to the human experience where the focus becomes the maldistribution of environmental advantages—or also known as environmental injustice. Specifically, in the third chapter titled "Space, Place, and Imagination from Local to Global," Buell heavily accentuates the importance of local and community-based environmental injustice. He proceeds to show the future of environmental criticism as he states that it continues to be an emergent discourse:

> Right now, as I see it, environmental criticism is in the tense but enviable position of being a wide- open movement still sorting out its premises and its powers. Its reach is increasingly worldwide and from bottom to top within academe… It is wide open to alliances with environmental writers, environmental activists, and extra academic environmental educators. Not the least of its attractions is the prospect of encompassing all these roles. Increasing critical sophistication may make environmental criticism more professionally cautious and more internally stratified.

> But its intellectual zest and its activist edge are likely to gain more from its future evolution than they sacrifice. (*Future* 28)

This statement demonstrates that ecocriticism is open for constant development and welcomes new perspectives and collaborations from different fields. His foresight on ecocriticism's future becomes validated four years after the publication of this book with Scott Slovic's *The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections. On the Current Phase of the Discipline* (2009). Scott Slovic is the founding president of ASLE and is a professor of literature and the environment. With this book he embraces a new issue which focuses on the cross cultural "human experience from an environmental point of view" and studies the "human experience in relation to the more-than human world" (4). Slovic aims to explore the cultural experiences of human-environment relations around the world by embracing a global perspective.

To sum up, a survey of ecocritical thought shows that ecocriticism has such a broad, and broadening scope. Critics continue to enlarge the critical contours of the field. Moreover, in light of the information on the field's history, such as its emergence and its main tenets as discussed above, ecocriticism looks more and more ripe for interdisciplinary investigations. In this sense, literature's contribution to ecocriticism appears to be of great importance as it enriches the field's critical discourses on race, gender, and class.

1.2 DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

Broadly defined, environmental injustice deals with the relationship between human rights and the environment. It is concerned with the disproportionate exposure poor communities face in terms of pollution, disposal of hazardous waste, landfill, and the lack of governmental regulations and laws for the health and environment of the residents in these communities. For our purposes, it is important to first note the origin of environmental justice. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, but its place in ecocriticism is solid, and its duration is almost as long as the field's presence itself so, in a way, the evolution of concerns about the environment from the perspective of injustice is also an account of the movement's transformation from a government policy to a form of social protest and finally toward a mainstay of literature and criticism.

Attention towards environmental issues began around the 1950s in the United States with events that led up to the Environmental Movement of the 1950s and have established the foundation for the 1980s protests on environmental injustice. The first legislation on environmental law was during the postwar period when Congress passed the federal regulation of water quality also known as the Federal Water Pollution Control Act on June 30, 1948. It was followed by three more amendments in 1956, 1965, and 1972 which aimed to expand the U.S government's authority in water pollution control. In the same year of 1948 on October 30-31 a sulfur dioxide emission from a steel and wire corporation poisoned over six hundred people in Donora, Pennsylvania of which twenty lost their life and drastically conveyed the first conference on air pollution in the United States held in1950. Environmental awareness increased during these years followed by Paul Ehrlich's notice on the disappearance of butterflies in New Jersey in 1949 which Ehrlich correlated to the spraying of DDT and its effect on human life. On October 22, 1951 a nonprofit organization to protect global lands and waters was established in Washington D.C, known as ''The Nature Conservancy'' (The Modern Environmental Movement). Over the span of five years, public awareness on environmental issues heightened as death and poisoning cases increased which were caused by air pollution of the nearby factories and resulted with the government's

Air Pollution Control Act of July 14, 1955. In June 1962, Rachel Carson's revolutionary book *Silent Spring* gathered acclaim about the use of DDT and pesticides and *Silent Spring* became the monumental work for environmental injustice. In 1963 the Clear Air Act passed followed by other legislations which were 1965 Water Quality, the 1966 Endangered Species legislations, and the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act. The Environmental Protection Agency was established in June 1970 to ensure the continuity of these acts and support the actions needed for environmental justice. Ten years after the attribution of *Silent Spring,* DDT is banned in the United States in 1972. This success highlighted the importance of a literary work to create public awareness on environmental issues.

On its road to evolving into a social movement, environmental injustice issues were initially case studies. Most critics, as well as the ''Father of Environmental Justice'' Robert Bullard, claim that environmental injustice has been present for a very long time. W.E.B. Du Bois's social study *The Philadelphia Negro (*1899) is the first example of a study on environmental injustice in neighborhoods. With this study Du Bois analyzed the African American communities and the unjust problems they encountered due to poverty in their neighborhoods. However, studies on environmental injustice escaped being solely an issue on paper with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The emergence of environmental injustice protests began with the garbage workers strikes in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. The initiation for the environmental justice movement dates to the 1982 protests in Warren County, also known as the North Carolina PCB, protests as chemically contaminated landfill was dumped in the Black community of Afton and led to the contamination of their water. It was a massive protest that went on for six weeks but did not stop the construction in Afton however it paved the way for other lawsuits and protests related to the unjust environmental, work, and economic conditions of African Americans to surface. It also prompted awareness to the Commission for Racial Justice as they studied the national waste facility sites and its correlation of demographics depending on race, class and poor communities titled *Toxic Waste and Race* (Bullard 1). Cases that followed were involved with landfill siting's which were predominately disposed of near African American and Latino communities and for this reason the term environmental justice has also been called environmental racism.

Nevertheless, it has extended as a global problem that affects disadvantaged individuals, groups, and communities as a part of systematic racism. Bullard defines racism is "reinforced by government, legal, economic, political, and military institutions" as is environmental injustice since it targets the globally poor (2). In response to the movement, grassroots emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as they focused on the violation of human rights and thus environmental injustice gained a global voice. In 1991 the first conference on environmental injustice was held in Washington, DC under the summit ''First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit'' and seventeen principles of environmental justice were established. These principles were adopted in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in the 1992 Earth Summit to target the injustice of marginalized racial groups concerning public health, worker safety, land use, and infrastructure. The steps towards eliminating injustice and providing people with equal human rights and a healthy environment resumes by various concepts of economy, politics, and literature.

In his article "Environmental Racism and Invisible Communities," Robert Bullard defines the concerns of environmental injustice and criticizes the system and shows that environmental injustice is caused by disproportionate attention to and economic assistance in poor communities as well as social inequity in the environment of the marginalized groups such as hazardous waste disposal, air pollution, land appropriation, and basic human rights like the lack of access to transportation.

> A new environmental justice paradigm is needed to replace the current system which trades human health for profit, places the burden of proof on the ''victims'' as opposed to the polluting industries, legitimize human exposure to harmful chemicals, pesticides, and hazardous substances, exploits economically and politically vulnerable populations, delays clean-up activities based on race, class, and geographic location and creates an industry around risk management, and risk communication as opposed to risk elimination and pollution prevention. (Bullard 5-6)

With this statement Bullard highlights that these issues continue due to the system and highlights those actions of elimination as well as prevention steps should be prioritized.

Moving on to the literature of environmental injustice, the first book to address economic, health and environmental disparities between minorities and socioeconomic groups was Robert Bullard's 1990 book, *Dumping in Dixie*. In this book Bullard chronicles the history of the environmental justice movement and emphasizes the actions and strategies that should be carried out to develop and reconstruct African American communities. It can easily be said that Robert Bullard was the first to adapt issues of environmental injustice to literature and advocated for the social, political, economic as well as the health of physical environments of the underprivileged individuals, groups, and communities.

Although environmental injustice literature is not to be confused with environmental literature, some literary critics have aimed to bring out the similarities of environmental literature and the environmental injustice movement which contributed to the field's literary works. First, we must define what is meant and explored by environmental literature and environmental injustice literature. Environmental literature focuses on the human-nature relationship and places human activity as the source for the destruction of nature through themes of nature, wilderness, and identity. In contrast, environmental injustice voices the systematic structure of unjust conditions due to social oppression and a lack of social ecology and human welfare (Eddy F. Carder). Environmental justice literature also relies on themes of wilderness, nature and identity but focuses on how these themes are explored in the literature of racial and low-income group writer and advocators. The aim for this field of literature is to draw attention to social inequalities such as access to healthcare, food justice, sustainability in their neighborhood, water, air, and energy justice, as well as the social and power struggles of the underprivileged groups. The literature of environmental justice broadly expands from a connection to early nature writings all the way to writings on economy, ecology, and globalization.

Now we will see these concepts brought together from two literary critics with different claims. To take a glance back at the earlier connections of human and environment in themes of literature before it was joined under its umbrella term of environmental injustice,

Lawrence Buell states the first wave of environmental criticism beholds writers who perceive environment as nature and believe that nature serves as a nurturer to the human life. He demonstrates the prominence and interconnectedness of nature and body of the first wave from the ecological Indian paradigmatic in an example from Kathleen Dean Moore's book *Pine Island* ''You could cut off my hand, and I would still live… You could take out my eyes, and I would still live… Take away the sun, and I die. Take away the plants and animals, and I die. So why should I think my body is more a part of me than the sun and the earth?'' (qtd. in *Future* 23). Buell emphasizes the body is constructed by nature in the first wave and that this is also evident in the second wave that is concerned with environmental injustice and the environmental effect on human health. Buell acknowledges the previous works whether it is environmental racism or early as works from Native American literature have all contributed to the ecopolitical issues of environmental criticism and have helped "catalyze a shift towards sociocentric 'eco-justice revision'" (qtd. in Garrard 173).

In her article "Cosmovisions," Joni Adamson she provides a visual to the field's transformation from political activism into literary criticism. Her argument revolves around Lawrence Buell's claim that the early works of environmental injustice in literature focus more on environmental racism. Adamson brings Ursula Heise's statement to light to oppose Buell's statement as she believes environmental justice deals with multiculturalism and that American studies have "pushed the field in a more politicized direction" (qtd. in Garrard 175). Adamson shares these two perspectives to support her critique of the inequality between the rich and the poor. She aims to explore environmental injustice in a globalized world:

> I explore the implications of a transnational social justice and environmental movement, made up of indigenous groups and nations, ethnic minorities, and the poor, that was emerging in the 1980s to protest the increasing power and mobility of transnational corporations that-under cover of trade liberalization-we're gearing up to exploit on even economic deregulation and a exacerbate the chasm between rich and poor. (qtd. in Garrard 173)

Adamson provides a modern approach to her readings in her article, and she focuses on the economic and political factors that cause environmental injustice through a multicultural perspective.

All things considered, it is important to notice that Buell refers to the first and last provisions of the "Principles of Environmental Justice" in the *Future of Environmental Criticism* as these principles will gather attention and thus literary works on environmental injustice will increase.

> 1-Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
>
> 17-Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our life-styles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations. (*Future* 114)

Surely enough, Buell's visionary claim comes true as these principles are adapted into themes of environmental literature but as contemporary works emerge, it is inevitable that they cannot escape the multiculturalism and globalization that Adamson mentions. The two principles are selectively prominent in the works studied in this thesis. The first principle aligns with Helena Maria Viramontes's 1996 novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* as Viramontes criticizes the use of pesticides as it harms both species of human and more-than-human and leads to the fatal destruction of chemical poisoning. The disapproval that Viramontes shoes at the destruction of ecological unity through slow violence in Mexican American labor camps through water contamination from toxic spills mixing into their drinking water is the topic of this study's Chapter Two. Furthermore, William Tanner Vollmann's *Imperial* (2009) realistically shows environmental problems at the U.S-Mexico border and aims to gather attention to the "right to be free from ecological destruction" by displaying the risk of crossing the border as he criticizes the dismissive attitude towards human life as zero action is taken against the dangers Mexicans face at the border (*Future* 114). Secondly, Vollmann criticizes ecological destruction at the border and at Salton Sea, as the importance

emphasized in principle one, the interdependence of species is violated, and the unity is destroyed. The healthy ecosystem of the lake is polluted due to irrigation systems and the birds and fish have lost their natural habitats and Salton Sea has slowly become a poisonous trap, and this is analyzed in detail in Chapter Four of this study. Lastly, we can see the seventeenth and final principle of Buell's aligns perfectly with Karen Tei Yamashita's criticism of waste and consumerism in her novel *Tropic of Orange.* Yamashita emphasizes mass consumption in Los Angeles and how much waste is produced while many people who are hungry are going through dumpsters to eat the leftover food others mindlessly dispose. In accordance with Yamashita's feminist point of view of working women in Los Angeles, Julie Sze argues that women face environmental injustice more than men in urban societies because their bodies are targeted by the controlling of their presence in global economy which is the topic of Chapter Three.

To conclude, when making a survey of environmental injustice, the bulk of the discussion ends up addressing its gradual integration with social issues through governmental policies, civil uprisings, and literary criticism. What this account reveals is that issues of environmental inequality have been present for a very long time, but that they remained somewhat silent, or were muted, due to the poor representation of underprivileged people. Major cases of poisoning, land appropriation and unequal working standards lead to civil uprisings which achieved to attract the government's attention to regulate environmental laws. However, these laws failed to provide sufficient ailment to marginalized communities and people poured to the streets to protest injustice and the environmental justice movement emerged bringing attention to maltreatment in poor communities and their exclusion from human rights. Narratives on injustice have prominently found their place in literary criticism and successfully brought older works written about the human and the environment into light. It is both a social concept and literary ground that has a wide range of contributors extending from civilians, activists and academics that stand against environmental and economic inequality of the underprivileged individuals, groups, and communities.

2. *TROPIC OF ORANGE:* YAMASHITA'S CATASTROPHIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION*TROPIC OF ORANGE*: YAMASHITA'S CATASTROPHIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION

Environmental justice deals with the patterns of discrimination based on race, class and gender in underprivileged communities. Karen Tei Yamashita's 1996 novel *Tropic of Orange* turns to the poverty-stricken LA of late 1990s and offers an innovative ecocritical reading of some social, political, and economic issues. She vocalizes the environmental justice-related aspects of labor rights, infrastructure, waste management, free-trade, human trafficking, immigration, homelessness, and eco-resistance. Yamashita showcases the rising levels of production and consumption in American society on its path to globalization and how the outcome of this path affects people in terms of race, class, and gender under the umbrella term of environmental justice. This study looks at Yamashita's analysis of immigration, homelessness, and gendered violence from the critical framework of environmental justice.

2.1 AMERICA'S WAY OR THE HIGHWAY: IMMIGRATION

L.A is considered the multicultural hub of the world let alone the U.S. The city's history of war, Western migration, connections of infrastructure, and industrialization has led to its dense population of immigrants. Chronologically, L.A reached its prime as a bearer of labor opportunities in the early twentieth century for incoming migrants and mid-twentieth century for immigrants prominently after the amendment of the 1965 Immigration Act. Yamashita approaches multiculturalism from a historical ground to emphasize cultural richness not as a set, but as significance to each culture. She unravels diversity by individually focusing on each character's story and withholds unity until the end in a way that opposes the melting pot concept to accentuate diversity. She reflects feelings of displacement and alienation of the immigrant characters Manzanar, Bobby and Rafaela. Her characters encounter physical or mental hardships and social injustice based on internment, labor, and globalization solely because they are immigrants.

Tropic of Orange is set in the equally hostile landscapes of urban Los Angeles and rural Mexico that treat the immigrant and the poor alike. The author puts the multicultural and disadvantaged aspects of her characters a little bit too much under the spotlight so that she can highlight the parallel between underprivileged environments and underprivileged people. In other words**,** the book is heavily concentrated on the experiences of the immigrant and how their environment turns out to be similar in terms of living in unwelcoming or hostile spaces in America because of their identities. This section will begin with a brief history of Japanese American immigration in order to talk about environmental injustice through the poor conditions in internment camps, the struggles immigrants encounter such as cheap labor, unemployment due to globalization and climate change with the overall emphasis that immigrants are not accepted in American society. The novel's most significant emphasis of hostility towards immigrants applies to the mistreatment of the Japanese Americans and the anti- Japanese sentiments they faced before and after the Pearl Harbor attack including the painful history of internment camps. Early Japanese immigration to the United States began as a search for better living conditions outside of the homeland because of social upheaval

caused by the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This group of Japanese who were predominantly male became the first-generation immigrants known as Issei. The Japanese began to work as contracted field workers in Hawaii and migrated to California and other parts of the U.S in the 1880's. By the early 1900's Japanese immigrants took up work in agriculture and began to own property. Between 1900-1930 many Americans felt threatened by the growing Japanese population which consisted of both Issei Japanese and U.S. born Japanese Americans; the second generation known as the Nissei. Americans conspired that the Japanese would "steal" both their opportunities of work and their women through racist and patriarchal indictments which began the hostility towards Japanese Americans before the war. Similar to anti- Chinese indictments, hostility for the Japanese grew and Congress banned Japanese Americans to own land with the 1913 California Alien Law and restricted Japanese immigration with the Immigration Act of 1924. Both acts also led to devaluation of their hard work in the United States. After the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack the Japanese American community faced extreme violations such as detainment, abuse and public violence, unemployment, and internment.

The 1942 Executive Order 9066 targeted Japanese Americans as a threat to the U.S and forced them out of their homes and relocated them into concentration camps where they were humiliated and denied human rights. Most of the American Nissei were born or grew up in these internment camps where they suffered many environmental injustice issues such as inadequate living conditions where they were deprived of access to clean water, sufficient sustenance, and healthcare. The camps were made up of uninsulated barracks surrounded by barbed wire fences and had guards constantly surveilling the Japanese. The Japanese were required to speak English and answer questions of allegiance to the U.S government to present that they were not a threat. Internment camps were closed after World War II ended and in 1988 Congress issued an apology for their mistreatment with the Civil Liberties Act but unfortunately, this was not enough to compensate for the trauma and injustice the Japanese Americans underwent. Most had little to nothing left of their previous conditions as they had lost their homes, jobs, and their esteem as human beings because they were rejected from society due to distrust, hate and racism. The post-internment trauma shattered their

identities and created a cultural trauma that was difficult to explain to their children; the Sansei or third generation Japanese Americans. The cultural trauma was repressed because the Nissei had become accustomed to proving themselves loyal and obedient and they believed that speaking about their conditions would be difficult for their children to handle but this resulted in Sansei's disconnection to heritage.

In the novel Yamashita explores the trauma of Japanese immigration through two characters from different generations who are related to one another; Manzanar Murakami and his granddaughter, Emi Sakai. Little is known of Manzanar overall, but bits of his identity are revealed as the novel progresses. The reader's first glimpse of information is given in chapter five: ''Traffic Window'' as he is a ''sooty homeless man on an overpass'' who possesses a baton, to conduct the noises of the highway pointing out the musical ability that he may have learned at camp (Yamashita 50). The clothing items he wears are minimal and they only change according to the seasons, displaying the lack of material possessions of the interned Japanese. He conducts music on the freeway, but people are too busy to notice and in this way his invisibility, alienation and negligence represent the space held for the interned Japanese Americans in the United States. The limited information Yamashita gives about Manzanar permeates the absence of personality as a representation of the tattered identities of the Japanese that had been transplanted into camps and forced to dispose of their possessions, property, and belongings. His alienation and homelessness are all signs of the post-traumatic situation he faces:

> Long ago, Manzanar had been a skilled surgeon. His had entailed careful incisions through layers of living tissue, excising tumors, inserting implants, facilitating transplants. At what point the baton replaced the knife, he could no longer remember. Perhaps the skill had never left his fingers, but the will had. He could as easily have translated his talents to that of a sculptor in clay, wood, or even marble-any sort of an animate substance, but strangely, it was the abstraction of music that engulfs his being. One day, he left a resident to sew up a patient, removed his mask, gloves and gown, strode through the maze of corridors down the elevator through patient waiting, to become a statistic under missing persons. (Yamashita 70)

Although he is depicted as a faint figure in society, Buzzworm describes Manzanar as ‘‘a real human interest’’ insinuating that he holds a powerful source of relatability. As ‘the first Sensai born in captivity’’ who ‘’had created his name out of his birthplace, Manzanar Concentration Camp in the Owens Valley’’Manzanar establishes to challenge society by ‘choosing homelessness’’ and by making his past his name (Yamashita 122).

> For Japanese Americans, the Sansei were a carrier group who could bring attention to the incarceration trauma, encourage former incarcerates to break their silence, and facilitate the seeking of governmental redress for the injustice. The Sansei were better situated than the Nisei to bring the incarceration into public and community awareness. They were motivated to fill in the gaps in their family histories that had been created by the Niseis’ silence and had witnessed their parents’ unresolved pain. (Kim 15)

In this way he subtly raises awareness and draws attention to Japanese American history as he puts himself on the freeway for everyone to wonder who he is, and why he is there thus embodying the carrier group Sansei mission.

Manzanar is not accepted in the Japanese American community because his choice of homelessness damages the image of the model minority. Japanese Americans were seen as a threat after Pearl harbor, they were stripped of their identity and later apologized for with the Civil liberties Act of 1988, but resentment and distrust towards Japanese Americans continued. To establish trust and gain acceptance, Japanese Americans felt entitled to assert themselves as unthreatening, friendly, and patriotic. In the novel, immigrant rejection is seen towards both Japanese Americans and Mexican American characters which Yamashita embodies both perspectives through the travelling orange and identifies immigration as the ‘‘illegal alien orange scare’’ which insinuates to the political propaganda of red scare where foreigners were perceived as a part of anarchist movements. In the phrase ‘‘All oranges were suspect…See an orange? Call 911’’Yamashita draws attention to racial discrimination and hostility Japanese Americans encountered after Pearl Harbor and the stereotyping of Mexican Americans as illegal, dangerous and suspects of criminal activity (Yamashita 150).

Unarguably, globalization's most anti-green influence on the environment is its effect to climate change by air pollution, chemical waste, water contamination and lead exposure caused by the production of manufacturing goods. The increased demand for goods is upheld by the competitive urge of manufacturers who rush to supply these demands which causes for more factories to arise and produce more products otherwise known as mass production. These environmental concerns affect every citizen of the planet, but countries that are abundant in natural resources yet lack the economic power to utilize their sources have become environmental victims of injustice. A global example of disproportionately affected countries involves the Western manufacturer's exploitation of the workers and natural resources in the Global South. Particularly, mass production is responsible for the many health problems that arise because of land appropriation. The destructive outcome of over production and abuse of natural resources in the field of agriculture disrupts the health and wealth of the people and the land which results in the larger concern that is climate change. And since agriculture directly makes up these countries' source of income the change in weather conditions disrupts the efficiency of soil and the quality of the crops due to which devalues their production and labor. Yamashita displays globalization as the cause of extreme weather conditions in Mexico and the destruction of nature by reflecting the problem of inefficient yields and premature, aberrant, and raw crops with the unripe orange:

> The tree was a sorry one, and so was the orange. Rafaela knew it was an orange that should not have been. It was much too early. Everyone said the weather was changing. The rains came sooner this year. ''What do they call it?'' mused Dona Maria. ''Global warming. Yes, that's it.'' Rafaela had seen it herself. The tree had been fooled, and little pimples of budding flowers began to burst through its branches. And then came a sudden period of dry weather; the flowers withers away, except for this one. Perhaps it had been the industriousness of the African bees, their furry feet dusted heavily in yellow pollen, that had quickly mated the flower to, its future, producing this aberrant orange- not to be picked, not expected, and probably not very sweet. (Yamashita 28)

It is no doubt that climate change poorly affects the Mexican agriculture however this problem must be considered as a chain of outcomes that impacts the people as well. With the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexico became the United States' largest importer and the number of foreign owned manufacturers such as *Maquilas, accumulated greatly. However, studies show that due to high concentration on import, many Mexicans lost their jobs and began to search for labor opportunities outside of their homeland and emigrated North:

> The United States Labor Department reports that because of Nafta, 41,201 American manufacturing jobs have been lost since January 1994. But America's loss was not always Mexico's gain; the latest Mexican Government figures indicate that a million Mexicans have been put out of work this year alone, continuing a trend. Manufacturing employment has dropped every month since September 1990. (Depalma)

The novel highly criticizes Nafta and how this agreement only values the economic contribution of Mexican labor and agriculture and undermines Mexican workers ''He (Nafta) is only concerned with the commerce of money and things. What is this compared to the great commerce of humankind?'' Likewise, in the newspaper article written a year after Nafta was signed, Depalma states that the United States has been trying to establish an unlimited form of trade stating ''But Nafta is the guarantee that Mexico is committed to the kind of no-holdsbarred economy that Washington has long tried to get it to adopt. Perhaps more than anything, Nafta, and the years of trade liberalization it capped, have increased United States influence in Mexico (Depalma). Yamashita indicates that Nafta exploits resources and diminishes Mexican domestic production under the guise of a no-holds-barred economy policy and reflects these intentions of the contract and the resistance Mexico tries to establish in terms of trade as a fight between Mexico and United States ''Already, it was being billed as the Greatest Fight of the Century: El Contrato Con America'' (Yamashita 145). Although the influence of Nafta only diminishes and cheapens the value of Mexican labor, the inequal imposition of cheap labor largely includes immigrants of different backgrounds. Yamashita

addresses this problem through the character Bobby, who is a hardworking ‘‘stereotypical’’ Asian as he continuously works so he can support his family:

> Ever since he’s been here, never stopped working. Always working. Washing dishes. Chopping vegetables. Cleaning floors. Cooking hamburgers painting walls. Laying brick. Cutting hedges. Mowing lawn. Digging ditches. Sweeping trach. Fixing pipes. Pumping toilets. Scrubbing urinals. Washing clothes. Pressing clothes. Sewing clothes. Planting trees… (Yamashita 93)

Bobby’s everchanging job descriptions show exactly how hard and unstable it is for immigrants to work in the United States. Immigrants face environmental injustice as the problem of cheap labor forms unsafe and inhuman working conditions where neither their work nor their identity is respected “We’re not wanted here. Nobody respects our work” (Yamashita 93).

Lastly, Yamashita juxtaposes climate change with unemployment and delivers the feelings of displacement and alienation through the character Rafaela, a seasonal worker, with her compassion towards the “aberrant orange.” “But from the very beginning Rafaela somehow felt this particular orange was special. Perhaps it was her desire to see a thing out of season struggle despite everything and become whole’’ she relates to the feelings of displacement and to the struggles of being a seasonal worker (29). This comparison is heightened when the orange falls from its branch like a migrant worker illegally crossing the border over fences to the United States, ‘‘She did not realize that the orange had fallen irresistibly from a height of two meters, rolling in dusty turbulence down a small slope, under the barbed -wire fence, and just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel’s property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway (30). The orange lands in an ambiguous space of ownership and the highway representing a seasonal worker, who is denied access as a whole, in between two forces of either private owned spaces or spaces belonging to state authority and forced to accompany one or the other.

2.2. UNINVITING SPACES: HOMELESSNESS

Among the themes in the novel, homelessness is one of the most mentioned issues Yamashita chooses to repeat through her characters. She emphasizes homelessness as a result of unwelcoming space for people of color in America and delivers the ongoing problem of homelessness in Los Angeles through Manzanar's life on the highway. Manzanar's identity is unclear, but he is a character who ''embodies multiple experiences'' as a homeless person who previously was a surgeon and was born in camp Manzanar (Crawford 88). His painful history of internment and life on the highway of Los Angeles makes up his fractured identity and places him as an outsider to both society and the Japanese American community:

> To say that Manzanar Murakami was homeless was as absurd as the work he chose to do. No one was more at home in L.A. than this man. The Japanese American community had apologized profusely for this blight on their image as the Model Minority. They had attempted time after time to remove him from his overpass, from his eccentric activities to no avail. They had even tried to placate him with a small lacquer bridge in the Japanese gardens in Little Tokyo. (Yamashita 53)

In the novel people are indifferent towards him and his music, he is not a person of interest, but his faint figure beholds an important message that ''Manzanar's homelessness stands as both a gesture of solidarity with all people of color who suffer injustices and a challenge to the misleading stereotype of Japanese Americans as a model minority'' he represents homelessness as an outcome of disproportionate environmental conditions concerning racism (Crawford 94). "He might just look like one more crackpot homeless figure who got stepped on by the system. But this was a case where the man had side-stepped the system" but he also resists conforming to society's identity assignment as model minority and acts as part of the Sansei carrier group (Yamashita 119).

Yamashita tackles environmental injustice through disproportionate and inadequate access to healthcare and healthy food, and environmental neglect of the homeless and the underprivileged communities. Through Buzzworm's description of the community he grew up in, we clearly see the lack of attention paid to infrastructure of racial communities in the

United States, ‘‘Said when he was growing up, never noticed trees. No trees to mention. Bushes, dried -up lawns, weeds, asphalt, and concrete. Consequently, no shade this side of town. What’s trees? he always wondered… poor people don’t get to have no shade. That’s what porches are for” (Yamashita 48). The lack of green spaces in reclined communities display the city’s insufficient infrastructural investment for the neighborhood’s development. In addition, the vacant and unattended spaces in these communities produced an environment for problems such as violence, gun conflicts and drug dealing to emerge in these regions. Yamashita tackles this correlation in Buzzworm’s conversation with a boy who almost got shot. ‘‘Buzzworm looked the kid over- not dead, a survivor- remembered he was the same kid mouthing off yesterday. Same little homey looking foolish, looking the other way, pawing the concrete with his Air Jordans sticking out his baggy pants’’ confirmatively this neighborhood is absent of green spaces and gun violence is seen regularly in such space: ‘‘Few days ago, getting shot at was just as usual. Surviving was no big deal’’ (140).

A study for public health in Columbia University on *How to Reduce Crime and Gun Violence and Stabilize Neighborhoods: A Randomized Controlled Study* has found that when these vacant spaces were restored the rates of crime, gun violence, vandalism, burglaries, and the resident’s safety concerns reduced which created a secure and improved environment. As a walking social services, Buzzworm’s importance to the novel displays the message of giving back to the community. In fact, he plans to create grassroots in underprivileged communities and gives a powerful and hopeful message that environmental concerns are acknowledged and that he plans to find solutions to these problems:

> Buzzworm had a plan. Called in gentrification. Not the sort brings in poor artists. Sort where people living there become their own gentry self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification. Latinos had this word, gente. Something translated like us. Like folks. That sort of gente-fication. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Trim and water the palm trees (Yamashita 97).

When interviewing Manzanar, Buzzworm asks questions about his health status to understand how much he is affected by environmental hazards so he can navigate if he needs any service.

Regarding food injustice, Manzanar compares the homeless, including himself as the recyclers of society stating, ‘‘The homeless were the insects and scavengers of society, feeding on leftovers…’’ displaying the devastating disparities of the people on the streets as they rummage what they can find in such unsanitary conditions (70). While Buzzworm tells Gabriel:

> It’s a wake-up call Balboa. All these people living in their cars. The cars living in garages. The garages living inside guarded walls. You dump the people outta the cars, and you left with things living inside things. Meantime people going through the garbage at McDonald’s looking for a crust of bread and leftover fries’’ how global companies throw out their goods highlighting over production. (Yamashita 59)

The negative outcomes of globalization as discussed previously, emerge once again as Yamashita points to mass production and how global companies throw out their goods highlighting over production. The comparison of people to things is also a criticism of globalization where everything is seen as a commodity and replicable, tradeable, or replaceable.

Even though Yamashita delivers homelessness through the chapters of Manzanar, the same injustice is voiced through Buzzworm in the novel when he tells Gabriel that the problem is everywhere where people live inside their cars. In Chapter 37 titled ‘’Car Show’’, we see a radio host interviewing people who live in cars, some which are ‘‘borrowed’’ because these people do not have a place to sleep. This chapter is significant as it displays a grassroot in progress in a racialized community, working together to overcome inequalities in neglected communities. These people create urban gardens in cars as they plant vegetables to sustain themselves, ‘’You see here, these blossoms? And here’s baby tomatoes. Call it urban gardening. We gonna be feeding ourselves don’t you worry.’’ just like the *Green Guerillas* did in the 1970’s: by throwing seeds and cultivating plants in urban spaces

(Yamashita 225). Yamashita emphasizes urban resistance through gardening in these communities and Crawford points out communal unity:

> This communal project not only provides food for those who are hungry but also simultaneously feeds the spirit of a struggling people and transforms urban waste into food and art. The car provides shelter, shared community space, an environment for growing food, and a focal point of natural beauty. Supplying spiritual and physical nourishment… (Crawford 96)

2.3 GENDERED VIOLENCE

Yamashita emphasizes gender through labor and service, globalization, and border crossing through the exploitation of women's bodies. This is seen when the only female characters, Emi, a Japanese American television producer and Rafaela, a Mexican American worker and temporary housekeeper for Emi's boyfriend, Gabriel both experience physical acts of violence. Both Crawford and Sze agree that women, especially women of color face environmental injustice more than men in urban society, ''in particular women's bodies and labor are central to the new global economy and are targeted by acts of symbolic and actual violence'' (Sze 30). Unfortunately, women who cross the border face hardships that have become so regular and common that their bodies are degraded to a means of transport and price on their passage to access better standards in the United States. By stating that ''this novel traces the geography of neoliberalism and free trade, including the shifting barriers between nature and culture, as inscribed on women's bodies, because women's bodies are the means through which new processes of global production and consumption operate'' Sze points to the fact that women's bodies are seen as both a route of service or good in trade (35). Yamashita voices this through Bobby ''Places 'long the border everybody knows, every woman don't get raped, she don't pass. The price she pays'' (Yamashita 211).

On her way to crossing the border with her son, Rafaela is brutally violated by a man as she sacrifices herself to save Sol from being the victim of human traffickers. She resists and fights as the scene is clearly depicted by the narrator as two people taking on animal like roles in two sides of a war: ''Two tremendous beasts wailed and groaned, momentarily stunned by their transformations, yet poised for war. Battles passed as memories: massacred men and women'' (228). Rafaela's battle represents the history of injustice, the revolutions, the history of colonialism, slavery and the fight for independence referencing as back as to the 1812 Cochabamba war where it was the women of Cochabamba who fought the Spanish army. Yamashita significantly mentions historical Latin American women and depicts Rafaela's struggle through the perspective of exploitation and massacre of both women and nature, ''… that dug and slashed and pushed and jammed it all out and away, forever'' (229);

in this way she becomes the human embodiment of the environmental justice movement, an ultimate female warrior in the fight against oppression integrated in social and environmental exploitation.

While through the character Rafaela we see gender-based violence and exploitation on the border, with Emi we see exploitation in terms of labor and consumerism. Emi, is always working or dealing with issues of work when even on her lunch breaks, she is paged and rushes back to work, ‘‘I read somewhere that these days, if you are making a product you can actually touch and making a comfortable living at it, you are either an Asian or a machine’’ (Yamashita 40). Crawford supports by saying that ‘’the environmental backdrop to Emi’s participation in a consumer culture is the story of Asian women globally, exploited for their cheap labor in the production of unsustainable products’’ (Crawford 98). The act of violence towards Emi is when she is shot while tanning on the top of the news caravan right after she criticizes popular culture and the image women are expected to display as glowing, healthy and ‘’New Age Tan’’. Emi’s last words are ‘’Abort. Retry. Ignore. Fail…’’ as she references back to her own words of being an Asian or a machine her death in this rhetoric, makes her a martyr of the New Age -production oriented-world (Yamashita 257).

Aside from this, Yamashita criticizes ‘‘free trade’’ by referencing the 1970’s Nestle baby formula scandal in Latin America and Third World countries, which the company commercially manipulated baby formula through saleswomen in nurse uniforms, in which nursing mothers stopped feeding their children with breastmilk and switched to formula ‘‘The benefits of NAFTA. Mexican wet nurses. I wonder if Nestlé knows about this’’ (Yamashita 91). The formula was affordable in the beginning but was later taken advantage of by the company as they increased the price once it became on demand. As a result of this horrific reproductive exploitation of women and their children in poor countries, women because they became dependent for such a period, could not produce breastmilk. It also became harder to afford the formula so uneducated mothers diluted the formula causing under nourished babies and led to many health problems. Yamashita again uses the orange to deliver an important

issue as she puts ‘‘spiked breastmilk’’ and the spiked orange contaminated by drugs on the same scale.

To conclude, Yamashita visibly presents the immigrants’ worth based solely on tangible value, demonstrating that an immigrant exists only as much as he/she contributes to the economy and that their labor is more important than their identity. The classification of racial groups, such as the labeling of model minority, humiliates other minorities and openly shows that the United States glorifies those ethnic groups only for their contributions. The social and economic conditions provided for immigrants are disproportionate to the amount of labor they perform. Whether through the painful history of internment, illegal work, or the negative outcomes of globalization mentioned above, immigrants are doomed to face environmental injustice. Similarly, people in low-income communities disproportionately suffer from living in unsecure environments, prone to violence, because of the city’s lack of infrastructural investment in these neighborhoods. This neglect conveys the message that the poor are not accepted in urban spaces, like the homeless who are completely disregarded and suffer greatly from disproportionate environmental conditions. Yamashita delivers a hopeful message through Buzzworm, who is a promising figure that works towards impacting the environment through grassroots movements. Unfortunately, the hopeful message of change does not apply to the women in urban society. Within a sum of seven characters, there are only two women while there are five men. This uneven ratio in the novel depicts how women lack representation in both society and the global industry. The characters reveal how women actively struggle to cross the invisible borders of globalization and the legal borders of immigration as they both experience bodily exploitation through systematic violence. Yamashita shows how Western industries exploit women’s bodies for cheap labor and marketize their reproductive system such as the 1970’s Nestlé baby formula scandal. All three themes of immigration, homelessness and gendered violence indicate that immigrants, the homeless, people of color, and women disproportionately bear the burden of environmental injustice in urban society.

3. RECONSIDERING ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN *UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS*

Environmental justice aims to remove the social, political, and economic barriers that withhold people from access to a healthy environment. It creates and maintains an environmental awareness that would enable—and expand, nondiscriminatory access to sanitation, clean water, safe housing as well as reducing people's exposure to pollution, toxic waste, chemicals, and pesticides. Helen Maria Viramontes, who is one of the leading voices in contemporary Mexican-American writing, can be seen as illuminating the concerns of environmental criticism in her fiction. Her 1996 novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* provides a striking insight into the lives of migrant workers that bear the physical and mental burdens of environmental discrimination. Viramontes's lens zooms into the rural California grape fields and she chronicles the various environmental problems migrant workers experience. Foremost among their troubles are inferior labor safety conditions, unfair access to healthcare, poor hygiene and sanitation, inadequate access to clean water, indiscriminate use of pesticides, and substandard housing conditions. Moreover, she makes the case that laborers suffer from horrendous effects of environmental injustice not only through such biological hazards as poisoning but also through indirect political outcomes of environmental injustice such as constant anxiety of deportation and legalization. In an attempt to analyze Viramontes's sweeping take on environmental justice-related issues facing Mexican American laborers, this study highlights the importance of her deployment of the themes of race, class and gender. To that end, the discussion turns to issues of misemployment of labor, mistreatment of immigrants, poor access to healthcare, and the romanticized marketing images of female workers.

3.1 LABOR RIGHTS AND MISEMPLOYMENT OF LABOR

Under the Feet of Jesus rises on the shoulders of migrant workers. Comprising the greatest work force in the U.S. since early republican times, the history of the massive influx of laborers is worth briefly noting before unpacking Viramontes's investigation of the seamy underbelly of contemporary labor conditions for migrant workers in the novel. After all, the history of Mexican laborers in the U. S. is as long, and complicated, as the history of the nation itself. To begin, the United States has been a place of interest for laborers around the world since its industrial rise in the late nineteenth century. Immigrants came predominantly from Canada, Europe and Latin America and found labor in fields such as agriculture, mining, and railroad construction.

However, emigration of Mexican Americans differs from other groups because many Mexicans were already living in parts of America since the colonial period and parts of Mexican territory were taken over by the U.S. gradually. After the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, previous Mexican residents became citizens of the United States. Many Mexicans came to work, and then returned after they had earned enough money to reach better standards in their own country. The number of Mexican immigrants increased between 1910 and 1920 due to the Mexican Revolution. Most of these people were war refugees who became contracted laborers in the U.S to escape the ongoing economic crisis in Mexico. Mexican contracted laborers primarily worked in fields of agriculture especially since opportunities rocketed due to Europe's increased demand of U.S agricultural products after World War 1.

During this period, the give and take economic balances were maintained on both countries; American farmers needed cheap labor force, and wages offered for field work, railroad work and mining in the United States were higher than what was given in Mexico. Although conditions seemed better in the United States, Mexicans encountered many difficulties such as crossing the border and faced racism and mistreatment from officials and were overworked on unequal standards. Even more, the term cheap labor gradually changed the farmers, employers, and government officials' perspective towards Mexicans as their

value decreased by the following noticeable events. In 1924 the United States passed a strict Immigration Act to limit the heavy flow of immigrants from coming into the country but excluded citizens of only a few countries which Mexicans were one of the exempted. This exemption displayed how much U.S government needed cheap agricultural labor and Mexican immigration was welcomed for the purpose of seasonal work, but this embrace wore out when the 1930's Great Depression sunk over the country.

A devastating period of food shortages, job crisis and unemployment problems of Americans increased their hostility towards immigrants and formed the prejudice that immigrants would steal their jobs. Racial discrimination, social, and economic oppression from farmers affected political officials' decisions and the previously welcomed Mexicans got deported. The repatriated Mexicans faced poor treatment in the United States but when they returned to Mexico, they encountered a similar discrimination from other Mexicans as they did not accept them into their communities and were treated as outsiders who left their country and came back to take their jobs. This period was incredibly challenging to the immigrant group because they no longer had a place to call home, they were misfits in both countries and were never truly accepted.

This period came to an end when many Americans left for World War II and the U.S government decided to sign a contract between Mexican government to support the deficit in American work force caused by the war. This contract was called the Bracero Program and was signed between both countries in 1942 as an exchange of temporary labor to compensate the shortage of agricultural labor in America. This program serves as a key point for the amplified mistreatment of Mexicans in the United States because the guaranteed conditions were not provided, and what is worse, the contracted laborers were denied basic human rights. The contract promised Mexicans shelter, transportation, fair pay, adequate working hours, food, and sanitation as part of a plan to improve the conditions of post-war America. Thousands of Mexicans full of hope came to work in the United States only to be disappointed to realize that the conditions were far from what was promised. The migrant camps were unsanitary, their overall living conditions were substandard, and they were mistreated and discriminated. Due to poor standards the laborers caught disease, were

exposed to harmful chemicals and became ill but were denied healthcare, the laborers overworked without receiving proper wages, so they faced hunger and malnutrition.

One year later the American Farm Bureau Administration decentralized the conditions of the program and prioritized adequate and efficient labor over the importance of standards for Mexican farmers and degraded them completely. Despite their maltreatment, most contracted migrant workers did not complain because they believed that conditions were worse in Mexico and that they could achieve the ‘‘American dream’’ and access better standards through hard work. American employers saw that Mexicans endured and continued to work despite the harsh conditions and minimum wage, and took advantage of their desperate need for work. The Bracero Program ended in 1964 but Mexicans continued to emigrate to the U.S and work in various fields as either temporary or permanent labor but they struggled to obtain a legal condition, so they illegally crossed the borders and hoped not to be deported. Overall, although this exchange of wage for labor provided many Mexicans advantages such as American citizenship, financial relief, extra support to their family back in Mexico and new conditions both in their homeland and the U.S, it also brought them disadvantages. The previously mentioned historical events of back-and-forth movement for short-term labor created the perception that Mexican laborers were mediums to amplify the U.S economy through temporary and cheap labor and this degraded them as servants rather than contributors as humans.

Through *Under the Feet of Jesus,* Viramontes displays Mexican mistreatment in the U.S. through the systemic violation of characters' labor rights, such as harsh working conditions in the fields, unsanitary labor camps, constantly migrating for work, overworking, and receiving low wages. This part examines how Mexican Americans are compelled to sacrifice their labor and are at times conditioned to perform unpaid labor in order to access basic human rights. The novel displays a migrant family in California and how the issues of hunger and livelihood force all the members except for two toddlers to work in fields under very harsh conditions. Estrella, a thirteen-year-old girl who has travelled around with her family as a seasonal migrant worker is the main character of the novel. The book revolves

around her coming of age story and her memories serve as a chronicle to the struggles of Mexican American families at the border.

Early on in the novel, Estrella's memories infiltrate the narrative. She remembers how her parents had conflicts over economic hardships, how this damaged their relationship, and how the family overall was always struggling with migration problems. The narrator of the novel remarks that:

> What she remembered most was the mother kneeling in prayer or the pacing, door slamming, locked bathroom, the mother rummaging through shoe boxes of papers, bills, addressed correspondence, documents, sent for his return, screaming arguments long distance, bad connections, trouble at the border, more money sent, a sickness somewhere in between. Each call was connected by a longer silence, each request for money more painful. She remembered every job was not enough wage, every uncertainty rested on one certainty: food. The phone was disconnected. She remembered the moving, all night packing with trash bags left behind, to a cheaper rent they couldn't afford, to Estrella's godmother's apartment, to some friends, finally the labor camps again. Always leaving things behind that they couldn't fit, couldn't pack, couldn't take… (Viramontes 20)

From a young age Estrella internalizes the injustice experienced by migrant workers, especially how they are unable to find stability of living or income of labor, and how they always have to struggle with low wages and poverty. As Viramontes puts it, "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (15).

Estrella's family faces the same problem as the Mexican Americans who came to the United States through the Bracero Program: the threat of hunger. What is more, the broken promise of compensation to Mexicans continued after the termination of the program. Employers took advantage of vulnerable Mexican laborers in need of money and overworked them in harsh conditions for temporary and cheap labor. According to Dennis Lopez, Mexico bases the issue of class discrimination of Mexican Americans on historical incidents that have

to do with racial discrimination. Lopez adds that this discrimination led to labor abuse and that it was integrated into American economy:

> Crucially, processes of racialization and class formation share a deep and mutually determining history in the Southwest United States. The increasing reliance on superexploited and racially subjugated (im)migrant Mexicana/o farmworkers would deepen during the Mexican Revolution and the interwar years, ultimately becoming in the post-World War II period a fixed feature of US agricultural production under the auspices of the bracero program. (45)

As an inevitable result of such discrimination, the abuse of power led to the fatal compromise of Mexican laborers' livelihood: it was now an issue of hunger for Mexican migrant contracted workers because the payment they received for an unbearable amount of work was neither enough to make a living nor fill their empty stomachs. To battle the starvation line, many Mexican Americans worked in the fields regardless of their age or health conditions, and this is reflected in the novel through the gap in Estrella's young age with the ages of other laborers such as her mother as well as her stepfather Perfecto. Estrella remembers accompanying her mother Petra, when she was as little as four years old while her mother was also pregnant. She remembers that her mother covered up her belly so she could work because otherwise their income would decrease:

> The mother showed pregnant and wore large man's pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover he drum tight belly. Even then, the mother seemed old to Estrella. Yet, she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back, plucking with two swift hands, stuffing the cloudy bolls into her burlap sack, the row of plants between her legs. The sack slowly grew larger and heavier like the swelling child within her. (Viramontes 61)

Although Estrella has become accustomed to the harsh conditions from a young age, her brother Ricky has not. When Ricky becomes feverish under the hot sun, Estrella helps and then advises him to wait until the truck comes to pick them up at the end of the day: "'No sense walking home when the sun is the meanest. You don't know how to work with the sun yet,' she told him, and she set him under the vines. 'Sit until you hear the trucks honking, go

that way, okay?'" (63). Estrella feels the heavy burden of injustice and thinks: "'Morning, noon, or night, four or fourteen or forty it was all the same. She stepped forward, her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again. 'Don't cry'" (63). Despite everyone's hard labor the family struggles to live within fair standards as Petra reflects her resentment for the wages they receive: 'for the pay we get, they're lucky we don't burn the orchards down'' (41).

3.2 MENIAL LABOR AND THE EXPLOITATION OF THE WORKER'S BODY

The Bracero Program turned into a prolonged period of injustice in which Mexican Americans have endured the abuse of their labor. Most Mexican Americans relied on contracted work where labor justice was nonexistent. The lack of and insufficient amount of pay pushed them to accept the exploitation of their bodies and consent to unpaid menial jobs in an attempt to overcome the system's economic barriers so they could access basic human rights. In the novel, Estrella observes that their substandard conditions and lack of access to healthcare depends on their economic displacement in the American labor force. Alejo becomes ill due to an exposure to pesticides and the family takes Alejo to a clinic. They arrive at an empty-looking clinic and immediately Perfecto impulsively scans the room to see if the clinic needs repair:

> Perfecto slid his hand on the wood-panel wall, checked for a loose knob. He read the room for signs of disrepair so that he could barter his services for theirs. He knew by instinct, and he thought of a shellac paint job as he ran his big flattened palm against the flaking wood grain. The smell of bad plumbing. A toilet needing repairing, what else? (145)

Perfecto's 'what else' displays a search for labor opportunity: he is accustomed to offering his services because money is always short, so he questions what else he could be valuable for, what else he can do to be of service. Similar to Mexican American laborers, Perfecto feels obligated to search for more opportunities due to the insufficiency of their labor value.

We see that Alejo gives an automatic reaction whenever he enters a new environment: a constant search for opportunities accompanied by the ongoing question of *what else* he can do to earn money. After Alejo's examination of checking his weight and measuring his blood pressure, the nurse states she is not a doctor and shares in an uncertain way that he might have dysentery and that they must go the main hospital for blood tests. She avoids a definitive diagnosis to ward off her responsibility in his treatment. For this simple visit she requests fifteen dollars but then lowers it because she notices they do not have much money. Perfecto

searches for money in his wallet to pay the fee but when the money falls short, Estrella asks the nurse if he could pay the remaining amount with his services:

> Perfecto slipped his battered leather wallet from out of his back pocket. The wallet was shaped like the contours of his hip rounded corners thin and contained an expired driver's license his green card a photo of a child of an acquaintance he no longer remembered strips of paper receipts for reimbursements or reminders of money owned. He slipped out five then one dollar to three. And that was that. A deep dark in mouth gave between the lips of the wallet. Detect a second time, looked up at Estrella. He dug into his pockets deep for coins, counted the assorted change. Altogether, change and bills, the total came to nine dollars and seven cents. Perfecto ask Estrella to ask the nurse if a toilet needed fixing. He would do this, and sand and paint this wall, for services rendered. She wants to know Estrella said, flipping her thumb over her shoulder at perfecto. He wants to know if you could maybe fix your toilet. He's very good, she added, his name is Perfecto because… (Viramontes 155)

The nurse waves them off saying that "a few pennies short don't mean much" and thus she belittles the remaining amount of money. Yet for the workers that money is earned with extreme difficulty, and they depend on each penny because they are underprivileged, and she does not understand such destitution since she is a privileged person (155):

> The clinic visit is fifteen dollars, but I'll charge you only ten because… she paused, glanced at Estrella, then added, because I know times are hard these days. She removed her black patent leather purse from the bottom drawer and placed it on the desk beside the phone. Estrella stared at the nurse an extra second. How easily she put herself in a position to judge. (Viramontes 154)

We can see that the nurse sees they are desperate for help and deliberately tries to take advantage of their helplessness by taking out her own purse. Estrella is shocked to see such insensible attitude from the nurse who seems so self-absorbed and unaware that her behavior is offensive and morally inappropriate. The nurse's casual request of money implies that she is accustomed to exploiting Mexican Americans who are impoverished, vulnerable and in need of care. Perfecto tries his chance once more and Estrella translates: ''the poles

outside need new cement. Maybe he can do that instead of the money?'' but the nurse does not pay any attention and dismisses the request and denies having responsibility to approve his request. Perfecto defeatedly hands over the money:

> In the end, he gave it to her, placing the coins on top as if the thinly worn bills were a raft. She handed it to the nurse and the nurse placed a purple carbon between two sheets of the receipt book and pressed hard, misspelling the name. When she was done, she separated the pennies from the dimes and nickels, counted the money and slid it into her palm and placed the bills and coins in the appropriate slots of the tin box and the coins dropping sounded like uncooked pinto beans dropping into a steel pot. (Viramontes 156)

For Perfecto and his family each coin is very valuable, he delivers the money like on a raft departing from him. The money is described as 'thinly worn', meaning its worth is decreased. In his hands the money was valuable because he needed it to survive but for the nurse it is a matter of greed, she does not need the money. This is an act of conscious exploitation, previously the nurse tries to display sympathy by giving them a discount as she sees they are poor, however, if her sympathy was sincere, she merely could have charged less or none since she did not properly examine Alejo.

Viramontes delivers a powerful message of undernourishment as an outcome of the nurse's exploitation as Perfecto hands the money over to the nurse and the coins drop like uncooked beans. Pinto beans have been used as a trade commodity in Latin America and Mexico and it has been a big part of their cuisine and culture for many years. The strong emphasis on *uncooked* pinto beans refers to the malnutrition of the family and serves as a simile. By comparing the coins to the beans Viramontes demonstrates a realistic perspective on how migrant workers depend on money in exchange for food and they will be hungry after giving up their money because money equals sustenance. After giving up the money, Perfecto is left with an empty wallet and an empty gas tank and Alejo is so ill he cannot speak. Estrella tries to convince Alejo to go the hospital because he has given up on himself after he is denied access to basic healthcare and is exploited, he concedes this mistreatment and internalizes worthlessness. Estrella suggests that Perfecto can exchange his labor for the hospital expenses

by planting seeds, clearing the garden, she also puts her bodily labor into market and states she could baby-sit, just so Alejo does not give up on his worth, on his life. ‘‘They were not asking for charity, not begging for money…They would all work, including the boys if they had to, to pay for the visit, to pay for gas. Alejo was sick and the nine dollars was gas money’’(Viramontes 158). Perfecto and Estrella both offer their unpaid menial labor knowing that they will be exploited, underpaid but they consent because they have to, they have no other way to access what should be their birthright: equal access to healthcare, standard living conditions, and equal pay for the amount of their labor.

“Perfecto and Petra watched nervously from the sidelines not wanting to transgress the medical protocol of the clinic.” Their nervous gaze reveals how anxious, even paranoid, they are any questioning of their legal documentation status. In a conversation, Petra impulsively asks, “Does he have papers? What if the hospital reports him” and Estrella responds that “He was born in Texas. His grandma was born there too and her grandma. They belong here, mama” (105). In other words, from Petra’s nervous waiting, it is understood that she fears any sort of legal documentation. Her fear is noticeable when she questions whether Alejo has papers or not. She specifically asks the possibility of him being reported and the underlying fear here is that of deportation. With Estrella’s calmer response it is understood that Petra is more fearful of legal documentation than Estrella seems to be. Since Petra belongs to the previous generation, she most likely witnessed more limitations and problems of documenting her legal status and residency in America than did Estrella. It is evident that they perceive things differently: “Estrella spread open both her hands and held them up for Perfecto to see. Petra saw her do this, and it made her think of when people surrender to the police or La Migra and how they put their hands up when they the pistols pointed at the bull’s-eye of their bellies. Petra was outraged” (107). Petra may not have been born in the United States so she may have had to prove documents or provide paperwork, or even come close with officials but whether her fear depends on her own experience or not is uncertain. Petra’s fear of documentation comes from the threat of La Migra- meaning the officials from Immigration Services and her fear of being deported. Even when Mexican Americans have

legal status or citizenship, officials assume they are illegal and attempt to deport them, meanwhile Mexicans face abuse and mistreatment in this investigation period.

When the nurse enters the room, she is shocked to find them inside the office, but the family becomes more shocked when they see her because she looks very different from them. Perfecto, Estrella, Alejo and Petra all have dirt on them from working in the field, their poor personal hygiene is due to their lack of access to clean water and their state of deep fatigue is a burden of race and class injustice. Perfecto has dirt on his face except around his eyes because his glasses have created a distinctive shield from dirt. Petra wishes she wore her apron because she wanted to hide her hands, she is uncomfortable and feels nervous to be at the clinic. The nurse has on freshly coated red lipstick, strong perfume, and a clean white uniform. Her strikingly different appearance and attitude almost mocks them, and the strong distinction makes Estrella self-conscious:

> She became aware of her own appearance. Dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress where shad cleaned her hands. The nurse's white uniform and red lipstick and flood of carnations made her even more self-conscious. It amazed Estrella that some people never seemed to perspire while others like herself sweated gallons. (Viramontes 147)

Estrella's-stained clothes reflect the hard labor and long hours of harsh field work. She observes that the nurse's work conditions are not equal to hers. The nurse has a clean uniform, without a trace of dirt or soil, she smells of perfume, and her freshly applied lipstick shows how comfortable her working conditions are: she can take time for herself to look presentable.

Whereas Estrella's clothes are covered in dirt, she does not smell any nice let alone like perfume, and she does not have the time to put on lipstick. In fact, she barely has time to sleep because of the long working hours. Estrella's encounter with the nurse places her in a position where she notices both class and race inequality. ''Others like herself'' in the above quote refers to the Mexican American migrants, so the particular word choice insinuates a racial difference and otherness which implies a collective imbalance for people like Estrella. The migrant workers are the ones who struggle under harsh circumstances, they suffer from

inequal standards, unsanitary conditions, and healthcare. The nurse's image in itself is enough to juxtapose the class distinction between the struggling Mexican migrant family and economically comfortable, privileged white American. Moreover, Petra is annoyed at the nurse on account that ''she wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean.'' She seems to think that the nurse is too self-indulged—or involved with herself and her appearance rather than her job, to help and treat the patient in need. Petra is specifically repulsed by the smell of the nurse's carnation perfume and finds her perfume choice inconsiderate; she is pregnant and has heightened olfactory senses: ''She had smelled the carnations even before the nurse appeared and the smell repulsed her, and she fought against upchucking right there into the shiny trash barrel. The nurse should know better than to wear something so venomous to pregnant women as carnations'' (Viramontes 147).

At its core, Petra is annoyed because the nurse's mistreatment is based solely on racism and contempt: she disregards them and is uncaring towards them. She is insincere and disinterested in her communication with them and her check-up examination is ridiculous, and she takes advantage of her position. The nurse is inconsiderate to request such an amount of money for such an inadequate medical examination from the poor family. She performs her duty insufficiently and carelessly; she does not see Alejo as deserving, as a rightful recipient of her attention, and thus she acts inconsiderate and unwilling to help. What adds injury to insult is that she misspells his name, mispronounces his name, and assumes that he doesn't know English. Instead of asking detailed questions to Alejo about his symptoms or complaints, she converses casually about the weather. She displays her lack of service as a healthcare worker but more importantly she ignores their presence as humans. Instead of treating them equal, she looks down on them and mistreats them, and humiliates them with her actions. She abuses her position of authority against them as she is in the position of a medical healthcare worker, and they are poor, ill and in need of medical help from her. Not only does she conduct a ridiculous inspection by only checking his blood pressure but has the audacity to request a ten-dollar fee which is an act of power abuse.

Through each character Viramontes displays realistic mistreatment towards Mexican Americans and their internalized psychological responses to systematic injustice. As an interdisciplinary matter, environmental justice deals with the inequality of labor rights and the fair treatment of everyone in the environment regardless of their race, class, gender, origin or income (EPA 2021). In this sense, the rest of the discussion turns to the issues regarding race and class in the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

3.3. SLOW VIOLENCE IN THE FIELDS OF CALIFORNIA

Rob Nixon coined the term slow violence in 2011 with his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. As he puts it, ‘‘By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is disperses across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’’ (Nixon 2). The concept of slow violence addresses environmental destruction otherwise invisible unless specific attention is paid to understanding the consequence of long-term human activities on the environment. In this light, Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* emphasizes the interconnectedness of nature and human interaction. She notes that to have a better understanding of nature, a more profound meaning of materiality must be studied. She mentions a contact zone where non-human natures and human bodies connect and this makes up the definition of “matter’’:

> *Bodily Natures* explores the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures. By attending to the material interconnections between the human and the more-than-human world, it may be possible to conjure an ethics lurking in an idiomatic definition of matter (or the *matter*): ‘The condition of or state of things regarding a person or thing, esp. as a subject of concern or wonder’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Concern and wonder converge when the context for ethics becomes not merely social but material- the emergent, ultimately unmappable landscapes of interacting biological, climatic, economic, and political forces. (Alaimo 2)

What this means is that for matter to exist, the concept of wonder or concern must emerge. The existence of this concept depends on the contact zone or a movement. Alaimo also refers to this movement as a *trans* or flow- of human life and environment making it inseparable because the human is infinitely meshed with the more-than-human world (Alaimo 2-3). The activities that emerge in the contact zone negatively impacts both sides of human and non-human life and interconnects with Rob Nixon’s term of slow violence. Both Alaimo and Nixon aim to emphasize the destruction that comes from this interaction: climate change,

distribution of toxic waste, deforestation, and pollution. Each human and non-human entity living in our ecosystem is exposed to environmental harm however, and Nixon argues that the ones most vulnerable to injustice are people of impoverished communities and thus directs the experience of environmental injustice to the distinction of classes. As most scholars agree, environmental injustice is harder to overcome in these communities due to the lack of resources and the inability to demand rights. Since affording food and housing is placed on a higher level of priority than their long-term health conditions as people are more concerned with the possibility of feeding their stomachs today rather than planning for tomorrow, thus the significance of their health conditions are set aside. This study displays the numerous examples of interconnectedness between human and inhuman life and the contribution to slow violence in *Under the Feet of Jesus.*

As mentioned above, the number of Mexicans that emigrated to U.S in the early 1900s was quite large. Mexican settlement ranged all over America, however, one of the places with the highest amount of Mexican population was California. The reason many migrant workers chose to settle here was because of the mild climate. There were more opportunities of seasonal labor due to longer periods of warm, sunny weather and the diversity of crops provided alternating planting and harvesting cycles. The accommodation options were slim for the poor and constantly travelling migrant workers. They did not have the money nor the financial stability to guarantee long term accommodation, so migration camps and temporary lodging became their only option. Some farmers allowed accommodation on their property but not all growers and employers promised such comfortable conditions. Most laborers found migration camps, but the state of these camps was horrendous. In the first chapter of *Under the Fee*t, the migrant family arrives at the camp and Estrella's stepfather Perfecto inspects the bungalow:

> Cobwebs laced the corners. There were no beds and only a few crates used for chairs arranged around one table as if for a game of cards. Perfecto figured only men had stayed here. He planned to move the table outside near the cooking pit. Three crates in the corner would be a good place to set up Petra's altar with Jesucristo, La Virgen Maria y José. He walked slowly, studying the ceiling for leaks. (Viramontes 43)

As seen in the example, the housing conditions were unsanitary, most did not have much furniture, there were no kitchens or toilets inside the rooms so the workers would have to go outside, they dug a hole in the ground to make fires and cook their food and another hole for the toilet. The labor camps were often tents, self- made by the laborers, and barely protected against rain, wind or too much sunlight. Historical excerpts provide insight of the unsanitary conditions of these times for example, labor camps served the purpose of having a roof over their head, the camps lacked garbage disposal, there were no sewer lines or cesspools and due to this sanitation of both human life and nonhuman life resulted in major fatalities. Overpopulation in the illegal migrant camps speeded the spread of diseases, parasites and disproportionately contributed to the infestation of the soil. The laborers who did not have the option of housing were constrained to live in shacks, automobile or ditch banks. Another major concern was the migrant's access to clean water: it was scarce. Although all the living conditions were substandard, unsanitary, and degrading for the mental and physical health of migrants, the ditch banks were additionally toxic to all inhabitants of the ecosystem. According to a research study on the California settlers, a digital archive provides interview from a state relief director from one of the illegal settlement camps, Imperial County in Imperial Valley in southeastern California. The director explained the appearance of the ditch water; ''Deep coffee brown in color. Some of the families rig up a filter out of sand and charcoal, but most of them just take the water out of the canals, let it settle in gasoline drums and drink it off. And, of course, the canals serve not only as the water mains but also the sewers'' (qtd. In Gavin and Milam). The substandard living conditions and contaminated waterways began the spread of numerous diseases such as poor man's disease of typhoid, dysentery, diarrhea, as well as the outbreak of smallpox and tuberculosis, among each other and span out to the public state.

Under the Feet of Jesus is set in one of the California migrant camps and happen to be near a ditch bank. The migrant laborers concern of slow violence is emphasized through many ways, though they cannot fully grasp that their poor living conditions decrease their lifespan, they are aware that the unsanitary conditions lead to various health complications. Estrella, the 13-year-old girl works in a California grape field like the rest of the migrant

workers at the camp and she does not have much time to rest let alone live her childhood however, she meets a girl from a family of white migrant laborers, Maxine, who lives in a cabin near the ditch bank. They become friends and meet up along the irrigation ditch from time to time. After one of the numerous exhausting days, Estrella and Maxine, go over to their usual meeting spot the irrigation ditch. Maxine suggests swimming but Estrella is hesitant to swim in the water, she asks Maxine if their children will have mutations because of the water and Maxine mocks her for wondering about her future children and states that her mother has been drinking it for more than forty years and nothing has happened to her (44).

> They headed for the irrigation ditch and halted near the walk bridge. By then their throats were dry and sore and swallowing meant a painful raking. Estrella had heard through the grapevine about the water and knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day. (Viramontes 44)

The growers mishandle the use of pesticides in the fields for their crops. Throughout the novel the fields are sprayed by a biplane that releases thick gasses of chemicals and the farm workers are unjustly and directly exposed to pesticides due to a lack of precautions. Direct exposure consists of the inhalation of pesticides, the contamination of the soil and drinking water, the farm workers dermal contact through picking crops and ingestion of the crops. Evidently, the novel reveals at one point that the water in the irrigation ditch is contaminated with pesticides due to a leak and the farmer lies about this crucial incident. The exposure to hazardous pesticides is inevitable for Estrella and her family because everyone including the other workers nearby bathe, swim, wash their produce and drink from this highly contaminated water. The employer's deceitful behavior and connivance of the worker's use of contaminated water is a direct violation of labor rights and farmer health and safety rights.

Estrella's innate concern about her reproductive health displays that she is aware of the outcomes of toxic exposure but her overly exhausted and sweaty body struggles to resist. The harsh conditions the laborers not only push them to over exhaustion but also leads to the

negligence of their health. They do not feel valuable under these circumstances, nor do they resist because their survival depends on their compulsion to adjust and comply to the life-threatening environmental injustice. They do not have another source for water, and they do not have access to clean water so they are compelled to use what they can find. Returning to the text, while the girls are spending time near the water, they notice the repulsing smell of a decaying body. It is the body of dog that has been dead for some time, floating along the canal that then gets hedged under the bridge and Viramontes vividly describes the thick coat of horseflies that surround the dog (45).

The dog carcass that floated down the canal displays the outcome of slow violence in the migrant camps. The death of the dog has happened gradually over time, it is not a matter of attention, and they are unaware of the situation until Estrella and Maxine see the dead body. Depending on the key points Viramontes gives in the novel, the dog has likely died from a contamination or disease from living in the same area of the migrant workers, its similar exposure to pesticides from water, the crops on the fields, inhaling the air and dermal contact to the pesticides which proves the gradual effect and outcome of slow violence: death. The carcass floats down the canal, the same water which they bathe and drink in. The issue of unsanitary conditions and the lack of access to clean water is strikingly evident with this part.

Another form of slow violence, the indiscriminate use of pesticides, is emphasized throughout the novel and both Estrella and Alejo's close contact with the pesticides are gradually put under the spotlight. Viramontes describes these exposures through an escalation of events amplifying the destructive outcomes of insecticides. As Estrella works in the tomato fields all day, she notices that she begins to smell like the field of tomatoes, the smell lingers on her for days and that the scent gets stuck in her nose. However, Estrella is too young to wrap her head around the extensive harms of pesticide mishandling so she does not comprehend that it is not the scent of tomatoes but, it is the viscous pesticide smell that is thick and strong like paste. 'The fragrance of tomatoes lingered on her fingers, her hair, her pillow, into the next morning and throughout the day, until it became a thick smell that no longer simply lingered but stuck in her nose like paste'' (44). This is another example of slow

violence caused by using pesticides because she cannot fully get rid of the scent signifying that the pesticides remain in her system for a long period of time and due to the leak of pesticides in their drinking and bathing water, it is impossible for her to completely clear her respiratory system or decontaminate her clothes, skin, and hair from the chemicals. “The wagon would pass the long rows of tomato plants where the two girls had plucked tomatoes, rubbing off the white coating of insect spray with their shirt sleeves, and bitten into the hard greenish flesh with relish, adding salt and sucking the warm juicy seeds” (Viramontes 49). The girls wipe off the visible insecticide and bite into the tomato, but this is classified direct contact and exposure of the chemicals. They believe they have cleaned the produce and unknowingly intake toxic elements.

Viramontes forms an ethical loophole of earning money when the underprivileged migrant workers Alejo and his cousin sneak to the fields to pick peaches at night to sell them at the Sunday flea market for additional money. The low wages of the migrant workers force them to question their conscience and feel guilty for searching alternate ways to survive. Viramontes creates these loopholes several times throughout the novel when Petra puts rocks in her cotton bag so it would weigh more and she would receive only a little more money for her hard work, or when the peaches look irresistibly juicy and delicious and there are too many on the ground already that making the decision to pluck one of the tree for oneself would not be thievery but serve to suppress the emptiness of their bellies. While Alejo is still in the fields by the morning he notices a biplane overhead spraying chemicals on the fields:

> Between the rows of trees, Alejo caught sight of the biplane. A few miles east a white biplane zipped over the acres of grapes. Its buzzsaw motor descended, low, straight. The plane dusted the crops with long efficient sprays of white cloudy chemicals, then ascended to dust another row farther away on the horizon. The birds, with their blank and nervous eyes, began to caw. (Viramontes 54-55)

Nature is defenseless against the biplane, the chemicals are sprayed without control, and the farmers are ignorant and disregardful in the sense they mishandle pesticides. They do not care for the lives of field workers, nor do they care for the environment since they uncontrollably distribute highly toxic chemicals into the air, soil, and water. Viramontes

carefully and intentionally places the birds and their worried stares and cries to emphasize the harm the pesticides slowly and regularly cause the environment. Alejo regularly drinks, bathes and swims in the contaminated water, he eats contaminated food, and is tragically caught under the gray shadow of the biplane which crossed over him like a crucifix. He is sprayed twice by white clouds of toxicity and the hazardous chemicals poison him (87):

> He shut his tight to the mist of black afternoon. At first it was just a slight moisture until the poison rolled down his face in deep sticky streaks. The lingering smell was a scent of ocean salt and beached kelp until he inhaled again and could detect under the innocence the heavy chemical choke of poison. Air clogged in his lungs and he thought he was just holding his breath, until he tried exhaling again but couldn't, which meant he couldn't breathe. He panicked when he realized he was choking, clamped his neck with one hand, feeling his Adam's apple against his palm, but still held onto a branch tightly with the other, afraid he would fall long and hard, like the insects did. He swallowed finally and the spit in his throat felt like balls of scratch sand. Was this punishment for his thievery? He was sorry Lord, so sorry. (Viramontes 88)

Viramontes describes his poisoning in such a way that it comes to stand in for a spiritual sacrifice achieved by slow violence. He represents the contact zone Alaimo refers to: he is in the fields, in unity with nature and the pesticides affect him—the human life, in the same way it poisons the inhuman life. Viramontes's comparison between Alejo and the insect's reaction to insecticides is violently disturbing as she vividly narrates the immediate effects of pesticides. She also manages to critique the inaccurate and misleading perception that pesticides are necessary for crop growth. Specifically, DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane) is a popular insecticide that has been used since 1939 and was marketed as an overnight solution to farmers that struggled with crop destroying insects. DDT became a universally used pesticide and it did not have immediate effects therefore the harms were not easily detected. In fact, DDT was used in powder form during wartime on soldiers, refugees and prisoners as an effective solution for lice. People were in close contact with the chemical and saw no side effects and automatically assumed that it was innocent (Carson 21).

However, Viramontes destroys this common misconception that pesticide use is ‘‘innocent’’ and harmless through here vivid and dramatic portrayal of Alejo’s poisoning. ‘‘His clothes were dampened through, then the sheet of his skin absorbed the chemical and his whole body began to cramp from the shrinking pull of his skin squeezing against his bones’’ (Viramontes 89). This direct reaction leads to Alejo’s slow, painful death as he is assumed to have dysentery, one of the many diseases caused by pesticide contamination. Rachel Carson also emphasized the gradual destruction of DDT’s and similar chemicals on both human and inhuman life because the toxins are passed on between organisms through the food chain (Carson 22).

According to Nixon, ‘‘chemicals and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed and untreated’’(6). At the clinic, discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, the nurse does not care for Alejo and does not acknowledge the migrant family at all. She treats them poorly and barely conducts a proper examination on Alejo only checking his blood pressure and weight. Her inconsiderate and insensitive attitude aligns with Nixon’s quote that the poor are often untreated. The nurse is only focused on herself, when she will leave the clinic to go home rather than helping the patient in need, especially in Alejo’s condition since his pain is visibly clear. Near the end, Alejo must be admitted to a hospital due to the intoxication, but they do not have any money to provide him the care he needs, they barely have gas money to go to the hospital. Alejo tells Estrella that his life is not worth it and they should not spend their money on him but Estrella and her family take him to the hospital. They reach the hospital late at night and Perfecto tells Estrella to leave him there and that the doctors will take care of him. Without any choice or any financial resources, she has no choice but to comply. She leaves Alejo at the hospital and the novel does not mention Alejo again, indicating that he may have died.

It is unfortunate to see that his life was treated as a disposable migrant worker, and he was ignored and disregarded as a human being. He did not receive the proper care he needed and he became a martyr of the fields, and an example figure of environmental injustice directed towards Mexican American laborers. His presence connects the human and inhuman

chain of life and represents the fatality of unsanitary conditions, exposure of pesticides, and overworking.

Overall, Viramontes exposes seasonal worker displacement, unequal labor pay, overtime in working hours, worker exploitation, pesticide poisoning, a lack of sanitation and clean water, and the marketing image of female workers. The novel's pay injustice, or pay gap, forces employees to volunteer their free menial labor, knowing well that they would be exploited, but submitting to the mistreatment since they have no other way to acquire their environmental, health, and civil rights. They must exchange their labor for social and justice rights, and they must accept that they may be forced to work for free at times. Viramontes emphasizes Rob Nixon's theory through pesticide misuse and laborer intoxication in *Under*. Not to add that their lack of access to clean water, continually subjects the laborers to gradual violence. They drink, bathe, and wash their produce in the ditch banks, which are the only source of water. They are aware that pesticides have leaked into the water, but they have no choice. As a result of slow violence, one of the laborers dies from direct chemical inhalation and the effects of irresponsible pesticide spraying. The migrant workers are displaced because of low wages and seasonal labor. On top of their displacement from labor, they are forced to relocate to unsanitary camps, tents near ditch banks with unsanitary and unjust conditions. More so, after Alejo's poisoning he is forced to believe that his life is unimportant, and this results in giving up his dreams. He is displaced physically, from the field to the hospital, and mentally from his dreams to a reality of illness and eventually yet quickly, death.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AT THE U.S MEXICAN BORDER IN WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S *IMPERIAL*

In his 2009 book *Imperial*, contemporary American writer William T. Vollmann looks at the US-Mexico border from an ecocritical perspective. His focus is on immigration issues, labor rights, water politics, agriculture, gender inequality, and slow violence as it happens in the Imperial County that lies at the California border with Mexico. Since it is at the border, it is frequented by illegal immigrants. Vollmann also envisions a Mexican counterpart to California's Imperial and the title also refers to a part of the Mexican territory that the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave to the U.S. There is no such place that occupies both Mexico and the U.S. in real life though: Vollmann says he imagines a place called Imperial as comprising parts of both the U.S. and Mexico. What characterizes this place the most is the oppositions it contains—oppositions that give away which Imperial is at the south and which is at the north of the border:

> Imperial is green, green fields, haystacks, and wide mountains. Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness. […] Imperial is bright fields, then desert wastes, stacks of hay bales almost Indian yellow. Imperial is a dark field glimmering white with irrigation sprays. Imperial is a loud lonely train whistling in darkness. Imperial dreams fragrant vegetable dreams. Imperial dreams resentfully of the wealth it could have if the stink of death would only depart from the broken-windowed resorts of the Salton
>
> Sea. Imperial is the smell of a feedlot on a hot summer night. […] Imperial is the brown-skinned man who somehow missed every immigration amnesty. […] Imperial is solid white farmer-citizens. […] But most of all, Imperial is "Mexicans" legal and illegal, and Imperial is also "Mexican-Americans. […] Legally and illegally, they establish themselves upon the land, and they try to stay; they want to live. […] *Imperial is the continuum between Mexico and America*. (49)

In this sense, two distinct Imperials emerge on the basis of their relationship to nature, the fertility of their respective lands, and the status of their workers. In other words, border is shaped not by territorial lines but rather through different ecological situations. The disparity between the South and the North, then, is an ecological matter. In order to talk about this in more detail, Vollmann talks about how his imaginary Imperial became a zone of a series environmental crises that resulted in such difference despite such close proximity.

4.1 WATER POLITICS AND SALT VIOLENCE

To begin, the border that Imperial lies on is marked by a river canal, namely, the All-American Canal, which is itself a notorious example of environmental disaster. In 1942, the canal is built and it comes to give the abstract border line an actual shape. It also has severe "ecological, economic, and moral" consequences for the Mexican side of Imperial (246). The canal was built with the purpose of bringing farming water to Imperial and it was diverting the water from the Colorado River that runs toward Mexico. Needless to say, Mexicans needed the water from the Colorado River for agriculture. Because of the canal, the river flow gradually weakened, and eventually Mexicans began collecting seeping water from the canal to water their farms. Yet in 2003, US authorities fix the seeping water and Mexican farms are completely devoid of water. US argues that "We reserve the right to lay concrete, thereby preserving our water from crossing without permission to Southside" (931). This statement shows the imbalance of water distribution between the U.S and Mexico. The U.S confiscates water resources on the border and deprives Mexican lands from water which then collapses Mexican economy. The soil becomes barren and crops are unable to grow, sustenance cannot be provided in the area and this increases unemployment of farmers leading to Mexico's dependency on imported goods. Today, the scenery is depressing: "It was hot and thorny and dry on the Mexican side with all those American fields appearing so cruelly green like Paradise, because the water belongs to America" (6).

Just like water crossing, and not crossing the border, Mexicans are also crossing, and failing to cross the border/canal since they have to swim through the canal to cross the border illegally. The All-American Canal is one of the busiest sites for American border patrol officers as they try "to keep the have-not millions out of Paradise" (3). The destination these have-not millions are trying desperately to arrive at is ironic: they are trying to illegally immigrate to America so that they can work as laborers on the rich farms of Imperial; these American farms are irrigated by Colorado River's water that is withheld from Mexican farms, and were this water not taken away from them, it would have enabled these people to survive

in their own country rather than risking their lives to illegally immigrate. In the words of a patrol officer, "You can see these guys picking watermelon, bent over all day. They do work most Americans wouldn't do (4). Of course, the crossing is a matter of life and death. An unknown number of crossers drown every day and Vollmann spends a night with a border officer to observe how the US authorities handle border patrolling amid such tragedies. He sits in a car with an officer who waits for swimmers to come out for air. Illegal immigrants mostly swim underwater and the officer is confident that "They'll pop their heads up in a minute" (3). They do, naturally, and about six hundreds of them are verbally warned to get out the water per night, some more are caught crossing the fence of the canal, while the number of those who cannot pop their heads remains unknown. Vollmann observes those crossers who were caught:

> The Mexicans walked more quickly now, carefully cradling their water jugs, attended by the bright, bright lights. Now they sat in a line on the roadside, a long line of them, with their jugs and bottles of water between their legs. Most of them wore baseball caps. They were young, wiry, strong to work. Their eyes shone alertly in the night. Already resigned, they quickly became philosophical, and in some cases even cheerful, slapping their knees and poking one another smilingly in the ribs. Soon they'd join the people staring out the panes of the holding cells. After eight hours or so, if they had no criminal history, they'd be sent back to Mexico. … We got some that made the river, but we bagged the rest of 'em, an officer was saying. (9)

While Vollmann refers to illegal immigrants as individuals, the officers refer to them merely as "bodies." Vollmann displays his attitude to such naming by entitling this section of the book "Body Snatchers". In the night vision cameras that reflect on monitors, "the word *bodies* seemed chillingly appropriate, for in the green night the aliens glowed white like evil extraterrestrial beings or zombies out of a science-fiction movie" (8). Besides the erasure of their identity when they are called bodies, they are subject to other forms of eradication of individualism: "Another name for them was EWIS—entries without inspection. Bureaucrats subclassified them into *criminal aliens* and *administrative aliens*" (12).

Another environmental catastrophe resulting from America's border politics is what happens to Salton Sea in Imperial County. The Salton Sea used to be a lake full of fish and a home to the birds as well as a swimming resort for residents in the mid-twentieth century. But gradually it was polluted. The culprit of its complete destruction as the pollution became insufferable is again irrigation systems: as irrigation systems age, salt builds up in canals and salinized water pollutes and poisons where it ends up. Salinized irrigation water reaches Salton Sea and irreversibly ruins its ecological system. Now, Salton Sea's stinking "beach adorns itself with salt-baked strata of carcasses" (43). In this sense, Vollmann displays the Salton Sea as a victim of slow violence because it gradually transforms from a clean and healthy ecosystem into a poisonous and deadly natural trap. Vollmann displays the extent of slow violence on the Salton Sea:

> The beach literally comprised of barnacles, fish-bones fish scales, fish-corpses and bird-corpses whose symphonic accompaniment consisted of an almost unbearable ammoniac stench like rancid urine magnified. Fish 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 almost within reach of the occasional half-mummified bird, such were the basic elements of that district. (64)

Vollmann's vivid narrative itself sounds graphic. He displays the extreme violence nature has suffered in very direct language and powerful details. We can visualize the effects of slow violence on nature as the above paragraph attests.

> There are other factors that add up to the Salton Sea's environmental disaster. For example, the New River joins the Salton Sea after collecting every possible environmental hazard on the way: "Picking up untreated sewage, landfill leachate, and industrial wastes from the Mexican boomtown of Mexicali, the New River swings north to receive the salt, selenium, and pesticides running off the fields of the Imperial Valley. It dead-ends in the Salton Sea. (66)

In this way Salton Sea and the ditch water in *Under* are similar, they both have carcasses and chemicals which make them unsanitary to swim in or drink from but due to despair of the Mexicans they still drink and swim in those waters described by Viramontes:‘‘She could see the inside of her water bottle when she held it up to measure its contents. The water was tepid with particles floating like pieces of exploded stars in space and she drank in deep gulps, long and hard’’ (Under 44).

What happens to the Salton Sea is connected to the unnatural project on nature that went on the north side of Imperial. Imperial country is in fact located on a desert-like area. It is on arid territory. Yet the possibility of irrigation canals turns it into a rich and productive farmland. In the process, rivers and water resources, other fertile lands, animals at sea and on earth are sacrificed. Over time, as a result of slow violence on nature, northern Imperial ends up destroying its southern counterpart in a complete ecological cataclysm. Vollmann writes that “Imperial is a dream and a lie” (124): “Water is life; Imperial is, among other things, water; we are Americans, so water must be infinite… In no section of Arid America can there be found so large a tract of so fertile soil, capable of being furnished with a water supply so abundant at so low a price for the water right and with so cheap water for all time to come” (123).

> Another victim of this instance of slow violence and environmental injustice is the flora. Vollmann reports from a 1920 agronomical research carried out on farms in southern California: Severe alkali injury was observed in a number of citrus groves in several districts, and a large percentage of this injury was due to irrigation water. Sometimes the water contained chlorides, which yellowed citrus leaves around the edges; in more serious cases the leaves turned brown and fell off. Sulphate and bicarbonate poisoning, on the other hand, prevented the trees from growing. The irrigation supplies rarely contained enough alkali to harm citrus trees directly, but the injury was due to the concentration of salts after a variable period of years. (503)

Vollmann’s ecocritical perspective and focus on environmental justice has attracted the attention of American environmental critic C. Parker Krieg. In his recently published

essay "Teaching Jesmyn Ward and William T. Vollmann in Finland: Genres of Environmental Justice," Kreig argues that Vollmann "offer[s] opportunities to introduce environmental approaches to the study of U.S. literature and politics in a transnational context, since environmental justice has become an increasingly important framework for addressing overlapping social and ecological crises in the twenty-first century" (1). Similarly, in his 2020 essay "'A Better-Informed Citizen of North America:' Environmental Memory and Frames of Justice in William T. Vollmann's Transnational Metafiction," Kreig displays the importance of "Vollmann's reconstruction of environmental memory" in Vollmann's *Imperial* (64). By writing the history of US-Mexico border from the perspective of Imperial's relationship to water, Vollmann demonstrates "an approach to reframing environmental justice in transnational contexts" (63). Calling the book "ostensibly a nonfiction novel," Kreig thinks that

> *Imperial* attempts to represent the entity[3] the spatial, temporal, geographical, peopled, racialized, farmed, financialized, irrigated, polluted, diverted, policed, bordered, militarized, and undocumented, entity known as Imperial Valley, California. …It is as much about the agricultural and labor history of the valley, and the border cities of Mexicali and Calexico, as it is about Vollmann's effort to tell its story. At over 1300 pages, this encyclopedic novel reads at the very limits of narrative itself. It is a fragmented and halting assemblage of post-natural nature writing, interviews, ethnography, photographs, and short stories, shot through with legal documents, disembodied quotations, and archival ingenuity that builds a composite mosaic of past and present. Vollmann's reconstruction of Imperial's history explores how societies and environments condition one another, and how the memory of that conditioning is carried. (70-71).

For Vollmann, "the history of Imperial agriculture is the history of waves of farm labor in this order: Native American, Chinese, Japanese, and then, without interludes of blacks and Filipinos, Mexicans" (226). He pays special to the southern and northern forms of agriculture, namely, Mexican ejidos and American homesteads. Once a government-funded and secure

way of self-sustenance, Mexican family-based farming units called eijdos have lost blood first because of water scarcity and second because "A lot of people born [in Mexico] have gone to work in the United States, so the ejidos are losing many people" (338). As owners of American homesteaders earned enough money to hire labor, they started employing Mexican-Americans who "were reduced to the status of menial laborers serving white masters," and for Vollmann, "This is a fair description of the state of affairs that exists in the border region today" (356). This unfair treatment of laborers is not specific to Mexican American workers. Vollmann explains that "It is bemusing, and ultimately chilling, to watch how American Imperial uses up one race after another for her ends, and then they're gone… Mexican labor has lasted the longest, a good century now" (357).

4.2 LABOR AND GENDER INJUSTICE

In order to illustrate the labor injustice that he presents as the result of slow violence at the border, Vollmann presents us with the details of the daily lives of two Mexican workers, Lupe and José. Lupe is a legal immigrant and he works as a seasonal farm worker. Compared to many of his fellow countrymen, he seems to be more advantageous but his life is so full of hardships: waking up three a.m. in the morning, doing backbreaking labor for hours on end while exposed to harsh weather conditions, and going out of work when there are no crops. Yet his illegal counterpart, José thinks that "Lupe is luckier than me, just by the fact that he can be on *that side*" (364). The difference between them however seems to be something even more sinister and more subtle: while Lupe suffers from labor injustice, José is exposed to the effects of slow violence in his lack of access to lean water. José tells Vollmann:

> When I go to sleep, I take with me a gallon of tap water. You gotta ask somebody you see watering their garden. Some people don't even wanna give you water, man. Some people are just mean. So I bring it to the abandoned house at night, so I can wash up in the morning, so I don't have to go out and then come back again and maybe get caught by the police. I go to the public showers once or twice a week. The other days I just shower, take a leak, whatever. In restaurants I get napkins, whatever, to wipe myself. Sometimes I have to use a paper bag. (362)

This comparison between José and Lupe about having a better life and better conditions in America is similarly presented in Tropic of Orange between Bobby and Rafaela. Bobby is a Chinese immigrant who lives in the U.S and has worked in various jobs under harsh conditions in exchange for little pay and he represents the immigrant striving to reach the ''American Dream''. Rafaela is a Mexican immigrant who came to the United States with the help of Pepe, her brother in hope of a better life. Pepe is Bobby's friend and he suggests that Bobby marries her so she can stay. Once Rafaela begins her life in the United States she realizes that it is not as easy as she imagined. Even though Rafaela has a college degree she works in low-income jobs because she is an immigrant. Another example of the reality of

labor injustice and overworking versus the continuous search for work despite the conditions can be seen from the telephone calls Bobby receives from immigrants looking for labor, and it is constant ‘‘Every night he gets these calls…They call. They leave messages, they want work… Phone calls like this every day. Everybody looking for work. Work’’ (Orange 92-93). At one point Bobby’s cousin illegally comes to the U.S and while she is energetic and curious, ‘‘She don’t know. She’s just curious. It’s all new to her. America’s a surprise… Bobby’s not paying no attention’’(239). Bobby is the opposite he is monotonously working and apathetic towards her arrival because he knows she will soon be unhappy due to labor injustice.

As a counterpart to the two Mexican men, Jose and Lupe, Vollmann presents the plight of female Mexican immigrants and laborers as well. To begin, there is Maria, who Vollmann befriends and interviews extensively. Maria is an educated Mexican woman: she is a teacher. But in the U.S., she is merely an illegal immigrant with nothing else to do but clean houses to survive. Sometimes when her brother visits, a scene similar to an account in *Under the Feet of Jesus* takes place. Maria’s brother is a legal immigrant, and he is always anxious about proving his legal status: he’ll flash his identity card whenever a white person seems to talk to him and for Vollmann, “it must be a reflex, the reflex of submission to this foreign power which took half his country but which repays the theft by oozing money from its bowels—what phrase could better locate his sister who cleans toilets?” (170). Although Vollmann feels sad witnessing the brother’s helplessness, he finds it even more intolerable that a smart woman cannot fulfill her intellectual potential and explains “the compassion I feel for her intellect which wastes itself on drudgery” (170).

Maria’s story is followed by less fortunate female Mexican laborers who are employed at modern day labor camps: the *maquiladora*s, or factories, owned by Americans and located in Mexico. Female laborers in these factories work at backbreaking jobs for staggeringly low wages and they have to endure the constant sexual advances of the employers. These women may have been farmers on their own lands had the Colorado River reached Mexico as in the past and watered their fields. But their land has turned into a desert, and they have to endure sexual abuse if they want to keep their meager wages for the meanest

jobs. Vollmann shows that gender inequality is a natural outcome in the environmental disaster suffered at the border.

To conclude, through *Imperial,* environmental justice is seen under a sharp spotlight due to its actuality and specific details that have been supported by the people Vollmann interviewed. He writes about the cruel mindset of border patrol officers and their views towards Mexican immigrants as disposable bodies and the political interferences that result in environmental injustice. He shows the gradual destruction of Salton Sea through acts of slow violence through chemicals. In this sense slow violence is once again emphasized as seen in *Under* as the poisonous chemicals have leaked into the drinking, bathing and swimming waters of the ditch bank. Vollmann also presents labor and gender inequality through low wages, overworking, violation of worker rights as well as sexual abuse towards women laborers. He aims to display the anxiety of deportation which is also a prominent fear in the Viramontes's novel as Petra and Perfecto are nervous to encounter any government worker or official despite their legal status. The parallels of gender inequality towards Mexican women are seen in *Orange* when Rafaela is attacked, raped and wounded at the border. Her encounter with a perpetrator is symbolic in the sense that all immigrant women on their way to the United States near the border face violation and abuse as she represents the horrific regularity of harmful events. Through the women perspective of border crossing, rape is normalized and depicted as a price of reaching the United States. In *Under* gender inequality of labor is painfully depicted as Petra's body serves as a canvas of her hardships in the fields as a migrant worker. She works under the sun for long hours and carries crops she picked on her back while pregnant. Her body aches and her struggle with daily tasks:

> The mother struggled upward, straightening one knee then the other, and Estrella noticed how purple and thick her veins were getting. Like vines. Choking the movement of her legs. Even the black straight skirt she wore seemed tighter and her belly. Spilled over the belt of waist, lax muscles of open births, her loose ponytail untidy after the laundry. (Under 50)

The similarities between the three works prove that Mexican American migrants face environmental injustice while government officials let the violations pass without a care. Vollmann displays the destruction of nature from human activity by analyzing the relationship between human and nature. In that regard he endures extreme conditions to present environmental injustice from the lack of environmental rights and human rights and shows the exploitation of nature, mistreatment of laborers and gender inequality of Mexican migrants.

CONCLUSION

This thesis focused on three works from contemporary American literature that display the concerns of ecocriticism in order to assess their contribution to discussions on environmental justice. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Helen Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* not only demonstrate an awareness of the degradation of Nature but also illuminate how literature's possibility of social criticism enhances our understanding of environmental crises in man-made environments such as cites, borders, farms etc. In this sense, these writers answer Lawrence Buell's call for a more socially-minded ecocriticism. What is more, these works stand as excellent examples of what Buell defines in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* as second-wave ecocriticism which revises traditional environmental theories that are nature oriented. Buell suggests that urban landscapes and neglected landscapes should also be prioritized by the ecocritic and paid equal attention to its protection. By doing so the second wave ecocriticism makes room for social criticism to develop, the environmentalism of the poor. Researchers can learn more about environmental injustice in contemporary American literature by reading the other works of the three authors presented in this study. In addition, researchers who will study environmental injustice in contemporary American literature can also examine the influence of environmental injustice on other literary genres in the literature of this field and see that environmental injustice is effective not only in the genre of novel, but also in other literary genres such as poetry, short story, film and drama.

As discussed in Chapter One's survey of ecocritical thought, the issues of human and more-than-human have always been at the center. While the first wave of, or early works in ecocritical thought, focus more on pastoral and wilderness, writers such as Yamashita, Viramontes, and Vollmann demonstrate a different approach to environmental criticism in their focus on environmental injustice aligned with the priorities of second wave of ecocriticism.

Works that contributed to the first wave of ecocriticism favored a careful observation of the natural and humanmade artifacts in the environment and accordingly, its central theme

of environmental engagement was formed. The second wave is more so an ecological and racial activism of the poor, hence the relevance and importance of Robert D. Bullard's article ''Environmental Justice: Grassroots Activism and Its Impact on Public Policy Decision.'' Bullard argues that people of color and low-income persons have faced more risks regarding their health and environment in their daily lives than the general public does. He states that many grassroots activists have been opposing government regulations to administer new policies that prioritize the solution to injustice in disadvantaged communities. Protests about environmental injustice began with the 1968 Memphis strike that demanded equal pay for Black trash disposal workers and continued over the years with trials on landfill disputes, waste facility sites and toxic chemical exposures in the poor communities and these issues were reflected on literature.

When we look at Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* in Chapter Two, we first encounter the diverse and multicultural setting of Los Angeles. The Mexican American and Japanese American immigrants of the novel struggle with overwork as Yamashita displays labor abuse of immigrants in the United States. She criticizes mass consumption and its harmful effects on people and the environment. Next, she highlights the problem of displacement as she draws attention to homeless people through the lens of the character Manzanar and others who live on the highway, either in their cars or on the street. Yamashita portrays environmental injustice by addressing disparities in and access to healthcare and healthy food, as well as environmental neglect of the homeless and disadvantaged. We can see the lack of care devoted to racial communities' infrastructure in the United States through Buzzworm's expressions of the community he grew up in. The grassroots activism that Bullard writes about is delivered through Yamashita's character Buzzworm. "Growing grassroots community resistance emerged in response to practices, policies, and conditions that residents judged to be unjust, unfair, and illegal" (Bullard 4). Buzzworm helps others and plans to take action against the injustice in his community. Yamashita also emphasizes the environmental injustice affecting women and their bodies. She highlights exploitation of women's bodies in labor and service, globalization, and border crossing.

Chapter Three takes a more focused approach to the multicultural America and concentrates especially on the experience of Mexican American migrants, specifically the migrant workers. Helena Maria Viramontes reveals the displacement of seasonal workers, unequal labor pay, overtime in working hours, exploitation of the worker's body, pesticide poisoning, lack of sanitation and clean water, and the marketing image of female workers. The pay injustice, or the pay gap, in the novel pushes the laborers to offer their gratis menial labor, aware of the exploitation they will face but submitting to the mistreatment because they do not have another option to obtain their environmental, health, and civil rights. They must trade their labor for social and justice rights; they must accept that they may at times be compelled to offer their labor for free.

For instance, Perfecto wishes to tear the barn down as he will earn extra money for his labor, but Estrella refuses to help him. But when the family needs the money to access healthcare, she feels obliged to say yes. Perfecto would like to tear the barn down as this would earn the family extra money for their labor. However, Estrella does not want help him until they need the money for Alejo's hospital expenses, and she gives in to the extra labor. Her despair of tearing the barn down for her labor in exchange for money makes her feel exploited. She states that people and things are used up and ''ripped to pieces'' because they are not taken into consideration other than when they are needed for labor use (Orange 75).

Don Latimer writes about the despair of the migrant workers and the menial labor forced out of them without charge. The perspective then shifts to slow violence as Viramontes accentuates Rob Nixon's theory under the issues of pesticide mishandling and the intoxication of laborers in the novel. Not to mention the fact that the laborers are constantly exposed to slow violence as they do not have access to clean water. They drink, bathe and wash their produce in their only water resource: the ditch banks. They know that pesticides have spilled in the water but they have no other option. As a result, slow violence gradually kills one of the laborers from his direct inhalation of chemicals and he suffers the outcome of careless pesticide spraying.

As discussed in the previous chapters, Chapter Four analyzes the current problems of displacement at the U.S.-Mexico border. This chapter intends to familiarize the readers of

this thesis with a "nonfiction novel'' by William T. Vollmann (Kreig 70). Vollmann observes and writes about Imperial County at the California border with Mexico. He presents environmental injustice in a dual display of Imperial in its relationship with nature and the workers of Imperial County. Displacement is emphasized through the themes of border crossing and water crossing because the Mexicans are deprived of their farmlands and are driven to extreme conditions of hunger and poverty.

Thus, the ecocritical perspective turns to the source of slow violence and overall injustice: water politics. Sadly, the victims of injustice encompass both the human and the more than-human entities in the area. Specifically, in Salton Sea the animals in the water and on land are sacrificed, the water resources are destroyed, and the once-fertile lands are deprived of the unnatural project on nature on the north side of Imperial. It is an ecological catastrophe that comprises parts of both Mexico and the U.S.

Ultimately, the discussions presented in this study bring to our attention three points ripe for further consideration. First, by analyzing these works we come to the conclusion that displacement is an inevitable outcome in all poor communities who face environmental injustice. These works have mainly focused on the environment of the racialized and poor communities however this does not mean that poor white communities do not face environmental injustice. The Homelessness Institute conducts studies that measure homelessness in the U.S. The institute began to collect information in the 1950s and 1960s which is around the period of the Civil Rights movement and the Environmental Justice movement. This proves how effective these movements were in drawing systemic government attention to the poor and displaced people's exposure to environmental injustice. In The Homeless Research Institute's 2019 data project that analyzes intersection of race and ethnicity of homelessness and the rate of homelessness in groups of race and ethnicity on a national level, the statistics are ironically nondiscriminatory. It can be seen from the chart on the website that forty nine percent of the people experiencing homelessness in 2019 are White, forty percent are Black, twenty two percent are Hispanic, three percent are Native American and only one percent of homeless people are Asian (National). In light of this data as well as the insight offered throughout this thesis, it can be said that among the racial and

ethnic groups, Black and Hispanic groups are overrepresented and White and Native American groups are underrepresented in both society and in contemporary American literature. Further studies in the field may benefit from considering the nondiscriminatory effect of environmental injustice on all races and ethnicities.

To illustrate, in *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita provides representation for one of the underrepresented racial groups—homeless Asians, and two examples of the overrepresented groups—Blacks and Hispanics. Through her character Manzanar, she emphasizes the background of emigration and the result of displacement due to the internment history of Japanese Americans. Manzanar's significance is that previously he was a surgeon but the traumatic effects of being confined in unsanitary spaces while being deprived of clean water and stripped of their possessions led to identity alienation and displacement in society. Another Asian character is Bobby, a Chinese immigrant who lacks labor rights because he is an immigrant. He struggles with overwork and his work is devalued as he does not get enough money to provide for his family. With Buzzworm's character we see that he is an activist for environmental injustice in poor communities which consist mostly of Black residents. Buzzworm begins a grassroots movement drawing attention to government neglect in racialized communities. In this sense, displacement as an outcome of environmental injustice in degraded White communities and Native American communities should be considered and put under the light of criticism. Considering the fact that *Tropic of Orange* is the most inclusive of the three selected texts in terms of its representation of racial and ethnic diversity, the absence of underprivileged White and Native's exposure to environmental injustice stands as an issue to be reconsidered.

Secondly, and related to this, this thesis is an attempt to demonstrate the concerns of environmental injustice that Lawrence Buell clarifies as its "emphasis on contemporary works by nonwhite writers that confront the issue of environmental racism'' (*Future* 26). Both Karen Yamashita and Helena Maria Viramontes are nonwhite and thus the present study is theoretically aligned with the common practices of the field. Vollmann, however, is white but he writes equally truthfully and strongly about environmental injustice. Therefore, he should not be excluded because he is white nor should we restrict the field's investigative

outlook to works by non-whites. As an effort to remedy such a shortcoming, discussions of writers like Vollmann may be taken into account as well since they provide equally provoking analyses of issues of color from the lens of environmental injustice, and they do so equally passionately and critically as non-white writers as Yamashita and Viramontes.

Finally, from an evolutionary perspective, it remains for future scholars to discover or identify how the changing interaction between humans and nature will redefine what it means to be human. New habits, living conditions, climate changes, diseases, technological innovations and all the other possible transformations in human life, leave an imprint on our DNA. Eventually, as social genomics puts forth, our brain adapts to these new situations by building new neural pathways or even modifying the existing neural pathways. So, the question is: how subjection to environmental injustice will transform our relationship with nature as well as transforming us. In other words, since environmental injustice is permanently changing how humans live in and live with nature, we are bound to see new ways or habits and feelings related to our relationship with the degradation of nature. It remains to be seen what new ways of being human will emerge as a result of our altered response to an experience of environmental hazards and slow violence. In this sense, we are faced with another problem: what is the effect of slow violence on mental health and our cognition?

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