

# WASTE AND TEXTUAL EXPENDITURE IN WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S *IMPERIAL*\*

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## ABSTRACT

As a consciously transgeneric text, William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* explores the delineated realities of the US-Mexico border region by zeroing in geographically, culturally, historically, even literarily via his own self-reflexive writing on the border county named Imperial. Vollmann's intense focus on one specific area produces a sort of Pynchonian excess, melded with minimally precise "delineations," that seeks a never quite settled ethical and aesthetic resolution of a reality where the border region is both literally divisive and ceaselessly porous. Such literal and literary 'mapping' articulates ambivalent strategies of material and textual wastefulness, it tracks toxic waste disposal and reckless waste abandonment, and it brings to light the conscious, exploitative wasting of human bodies and marginalized communities. But can a literary work of nonfiction invert the very wastefulness of waste through its own textual excesses? How does one confront an empire of waste through the very strategies of wastefulness?

KEYWORDS: William T. Vollmann, waste, textuality, imperialism, border.

DESHECHOS Y DERROCHE TEXTUAL EN  
*IMPERIAL* DE WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

## RESUMEN

Un texto conscientemente trans-genérico, *Imperial* de William T. Vollmann traza las realidades delineadas de la región fronteriza entre los EE.UU. y México, centrándose en el condado de Imperial. Lo hace tanto geográfica como cultural, histórica y también literariamente a través de su escritura autorreflexiva, elaborando una especie de exceso pynchoniano en la que convergen sus 'delineaciones' a la busca de una resolución ética y estética de una realidad cuya frontera es literalmente una divisoria y, a la vez, transgredida incesantemente. Su cartografía literal y literaria se fundamenta en estrategias ambivalentes de desperdicio material y textual; su texto persigue la gestión e irresponsable abandono de desechos tóxicos; pero también esclarece el intencionado y explotador desgaste de cuerpos humanos y comunidades marginales. ¿Puede una obra literaria de no-ficción, como es el caso, invertir el proceso de desperdicio de lo residual por medio de su textualidad excesiva y desperdiciadora? ¿Cómo se enfrenta uno a un imperio de deshechos, el deshecho de lo imperial, a través de las mismas estrategias de desperdicio?

PALABRAS CLAVE: William T. Vollmann, deshechos, textualidad, imperialismo, frontera.



William T. Vollmann was once touted as the continuer of the Pynchonian line of postmodern rhetorical excess and thematic exuberance. Now, after nearly forty years of textual expenditure sans editorial concessions and a plethora of strikingly transgeneric offerings, he has acquired his own independent mantle of literary maverick and quite literal risk-taker. Famous for placing himself in the very positions, physical and existential, of those he goes on to depict through his fusion of the literary and the journalistic—whether smoking crack with prostitutes in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, haplessly aiding the mujahideen against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, barely avoiding sniper fire in besieged Sarajevo, or nearly freezing to death in the Arctic in order to identify bodily with the fateful experience undergone by the Franklin expedition—Vollmann, through his poetics of empathy and his stress on the empirical and archival research that might give it some sort of historical and experiential grounding, has also built up a reputation of ethical commitment within and to the stories he tells.<sup>1</sup> These stories are, recurrently, tales of the other, the marginalized and wasted other, the others consigned to the literally waste territories of both historical and contemporary human existence.

Appropriately, in charting the terrains of the discarded and the refused, Vollmann also formally mimes the explosively burgeoning waste of the way we live now through a prolific and, some would say, profligate textual productiveness that seems to seek redemption from waste in waste, through the apparently wasteful textuality of his work itself. In the words of one commentator, “their excess is central to their essence” (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 345). Seen in another way, to borrow the words of a preeminent ‘rubbish’ theorist, “the best books about waste are actually about everything else” (Thompson 2017, 13), a statement that Vollmann’s work applies to the letter. Waste is always excessive to the categories that strive to capture or exclude it. This is true because, as has been repeatedly asserted, “anything and everything can become waste” (Kennedy 2007, 1) given that “all wastes result from the inveterate human habit of evaluation” (2). Waste and its cognates, as Mary Douglas famously averred, are a human creation, one consequent upon our ingrained ritualization and rationalization of the real: “Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order” (Douglas 1984, 159). Thus, if “dirt is not outside of order but what makes systems of order visible,” then “[w]aste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture” (Hawkins

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\* This article is part of the research project “Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste” (ref. PID2019-106798GB-I00), funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

<sup>1</sup> Though no guarantee of literary value, of course, fellow writer Madison Smartt Bell has remarked that Vollmann “has turned his presence within his work into a declaration of engagement. Instead of entering the work to declare that it is a trick, he stands inside it as a witness—vouching for its authenticity. With all his open manipulations, Vollmann never tries to show you that he is a clever imagination who is inventing something. He always tries to show that he is a witness who has seen something” (Bell 1993, 44). As Sam Anderson notes in a review of *Imperial*, “I write my heart out on everything I do,” Vollmann has written. It’s a very rare quality, and it should be subsidized, whatever waste might come along with it” (Anderson 2009, 3). ‘Whatever waste might come along,’ both thematic and formal, is precisely the point as Vollmann’s unselfconscious irony suggests.



2006, 12).<sup>2</sup> From this vantage, waste is “about everything else” and a literature of waste—not one just about waste, but one which is ostensibly and intentionally ‘wasteful’ in its very textuality—must always be excessive in the hope of harnessing the discarded and derided potential of much that has been labelled waste. Such a literature proposes a critical revelation and revaluation of the usually hidden wastes of our contemporary capitalist culture, one whose commodity production is predicated upon the invisible trashing of vast extensions of territory, raw materials and human lives.<sup>3</sup> As Michael Thompson presciently foresaw, waste, rubbish, trash or garbage are “value forms,” not inherent characteristics of things or living beings, and hence are “not only representations of social relations but help maintain systems of power and hierarchy” (2017, 8). If “diving into rubbish is essential if we are to understand who we are, how we relate to one another, and what we are really capable of” (Thompson 2017, 13), then Vollmann’s literal submersions into the landscapes, diminishing waterscapes and human and historical geographies of the Coachella, Imperial and Mexicali valleys—accidents of historical and political nomenclature that together constitute the “entity which I call Imperial” (Vollmann 2009, 628)—are an engaged recognition that “the advent of waste is rich with revelation, a thing of pedagogical potential that allows the everyday, the hidden or the unexpected to be suddenly unveiled” (Viney 2014, 30).

Such an ‘unveiling,’ sometimes only intuited, often frustrated in contrast to the arrogant and violent “delineations” that make up the self-evident real, becomes Vollmann’s ultimate purpose in his exploration of marginality and waste, whether material, human or literary. The case of literary waste, for example, is explored through the recurrent textual moments in which the work lays itself bare self-consciously to reflect on its ultimate utility and/or terminal wastefulness. Two examples may suffice here to illustrate Vollmann’s arguably post-postmodern textual self-consciousness, a doubling of self-consciousness that pits textual representation against itself in an attempt to breach its referential dead-ends. Vollmann opts for an asymptotic approach to an “unknown” but not necessarily “unknowable” Imperial County, mimicking the very abstractions or “delineations” that have brought it into empirical existence (for the empiricist ideal, he realizes, is itself an imperial notion in its reductive totalizations):

This book also forms itself as it goes. Fields, hay-walls, towns and fences comprise my thoroughfare; I have no sites to visit in Imperial County or out of it; I’m

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<sup>2</sup> Gay Hawkins usefully spells out the ethical and political consequences of seeing waste in this way: “The shifting and contingent meanings for waste, the innumerable ways in which it can be produced, reveal it not as essentially bad but as subject to relations. What is rubbish in one context is perfectly useful in another. Different classifications, valuing regimes, practices, and uses, enhance or elaborate different material qualities in things and persons—actively producing the distinctions between what will count as natural or cultural, a wasted thing or a valued object” (2006, 20).

<sup>3</sup> “Materially, [including the materiality of human bodies and selves,] garbage represents the shadow object world, the leftover of a life, a world, or a dream, created by the voracious speculations of commodity production and consumption” (Scanlan 2005, 164).



free to chase after white birds in green alfalfa fields as long as the heat fails to discourage me; I don't care that I'll never finish anything; my delineations and subdelineations resemble those severed palm-fronds bleaching in the white sand at the border wall. (162)

Openness and endlessness mark both Imperial's geography and Imperial's textual depictions but what frustrates representational closure may forward ethical responsiveness:

a purely statistical, objectively truer approach, by occluding the humanity of dispossession, and thereby obstructing our grieving, partakes of the worm-ball character of a fallen palm tree's inner flesh; we can touch its complex deadness, know it in a way that a living thing, for instance a woman in a serape, can never be known; the only way to approach knowing that woman in a serape, unless you live with her, is to invent her; but can knowing the dead palm tree profit us as much? I've written that Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness, and so does my task. (175)

Vollmann's *Imperial*, a decade in the making and labelled by Vollmann as his own Moby Dick, a rambling, multifaceted and generically diverse exploration of the Imperial Valley in California straddling the Mexican-American border, seems a shining or blinding example, given the region's searing desert sunlight, of this prototypically American literary urge to "recreate in language the unresolved nature of the place" (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 196).<sup>4</sup> Any place would probably do for such a purpose, but Vollmann's "Imperial," as its name rather brashly proclaims in its naïve unselfconsciousness, stands in for America itself, specifically for the favored materialization of the American dream as the "triumphalist saga of the Ministry of Capital" (Vollmann 2009, 422).<sup>5</sup> In arid America, however, such a materialization

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<sup>4</sup> "Vollmann has reportedly called the book his Moby-Dick and, like the white whale to Ahab, the region practically throbs with monomaniacal meaning. It's an object lesson in American greed, a parable of the arbitrariness of borders, a contact zone between radically different cultures, and a symbol of just about everything" (Anderson, 2). Throughout my text, "Imperial" refers to the Californian county and geographical entity that Vollmann describes; when in italics, "*Imperial*" refers to his published text.

<sup>5</sup> Vollmann's "Seven Dreams" series, awaiting publication of its final volume, novelizes in semi-mythical but also in an encyclopedically, if idiosyncratically, documented fashion the historical and oneiric self-fashioning and simultaneous othering of the North American continent. A revisioning of American dreams, the dream of America, from the perspective of those consigned to history's waste bin, it bears out the overhauling of the history of 'imperial' America by recent historians. In parallel with *Imperial's* ambivalently resigned meditations on the ravages of American dreamings, the novel cycle thus concurs with the views of the likes of Adam Burns who, alluding to Thomas Jefferson's own dream of an "Empire for Liberty", asserts that the "idea of the United States as an 'empire' was there from the very beginning" (2017, 9); indeed, the "very founders of the United States had made clear their vision for this new nation. It was to be a transcontinental empire" (25). Similarly, Richard H. Immerman bluntly states that "America is and always has been an empire" (2010, 4), built as such "through either direct conquest or informal control" (6) as he shows in a review of American statesmen





has inevitably become a betrayal of such hopes for if “Imperial is a map of the way to wealth” (422)—and it was a map-making gesture, the fictional tracing of the border after the Mexican-American War that led to the factual divergences on either side of that real fantasy of division—then the “delineations” and “subdelineations” intrinsic to that charting and which Vollmann formally parodies in his own idiosyncratic textual divisions have become the cynically still authoritative yet fading traces of that misguided desire: “the map has sun-bleached back to blankness” (422). Vollmann is fully aware of the power of abstractions, including the abstraction that is his own text given its unavoidable distance from the reality it strives to bring into view. But this textual self-awareness provides him with a sometimes-despairing disengagement from his own text that may open it out to that which it seeks engagement with. In the process, by in some way sabotaging his own representational objectives, his textual ‘wastes’ may enable the confrontation with the wasting of the real that official, unseen abstractions perform: “People say it was miraculous that Christ walked across the water, and yet they don’t think twice when the same is performed by this entity invisible everywhere except in its representations, whose substance is comprised of equal parts imagination, measurement, memory, authority and jurisdiction! Delineation is the merest, absurdest fiction, yet delineation engenders control” (44). As desert territory forcefully irrigated into Edenic abundance, Imperial harbors within it the taint of imminent, if not immanent, paradisaical expulsion in its reckless ransacking of water resources and ongoing depletion of the land’s salubrity. It has become a virtual parody of this particular American dream, this taming of the desert by an imperial self, the hollowness of which it ironically projects into its expanse of waste: “that vast feeling, that dream of emptiness as wholeness” (1181).<sup>6</sup> The inevitable corollary of this imperial notion of divine omnipotence, to make something out of nothing, is the inevitable conversion of something into a no longer utilisable ‘nothing’; that is, into waste.

Just as Vollmann at times envisages his book as a textual analogy of Imperial—“The book’s a little like the Imperial Valley itself: pathless, fascinating, exhausting”

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involved in this quite conscious policy of continental expansion and later overseas influence. Julian Go, in a comparative analysis of British and American imperialisms that questions and ultimately discounts the notion of American exceptionalism, makes the point that “[d]enying empire is simply part of the unique *modus operandi* of American empire itself” (2011, 2).

<sup>6</sup> Adam Burns stresses the inherent expansionism necessary for the ongoing construction of America and intrinsic to any imperial project. Already present in the Founding Fathers’ dreams of an agrarian republic, such territorial depredations really take off with the Mexican-American War of the 1840s, the war that set the current position of the southwestern frontier. It was also the moment that the ideological doctrine of Manifest Destiny comes into its own as a naturalization of territorial greed (Burns 2017, 25). Richard H. Immerman points out that early proponents of this expansionism such as John Quincy Adams already foresaw its dangers, particularly its undermining of that key ideogeme substantiating such territorial claims, ‘liberty’: “Adams foresaw that expansion, the putative savior of the American empire, would become its greatest enemy” (2010, 87). Vollmann’s *Imperial* traces this hollowing-out of the myth and its consequent emptying of the territorial ideal itself within the confines of the aptly named Imperial Valley.

(Rhodes, ed. 2015, 176)—the valley, in turn, seems a geographical condensation of the varied and ambivalent meanings and etymologies of the term “waste” itself. Derived originally from the Latin *vāstus*, the word applied to land that was considered “waste, desert, unoccupied” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). While initially referring to areas that were uncultivated and uninhabited, it gradually took on more negative overtones implying the impossibility of cultivation and habitation, the impression of devastation and ruin and, hence, the worthlessness and profitlessness of investment in such sites. Such connotations were also applied to persons and things, leading to modern conceptions of waste as discarded matter or refuse, including human “dregs.” But the term also refers as a noun to what are considered forms of “useless expenditure or consumption, squandering,” a moralizing acceptance that responds to the dogma of efficiency and the profit motive of a modern, capitalist culture. In this case, waste alludes to a “profusion, lavish abundance of something” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) that remains useless and unexploited in the eyes of instrumental modes of thought. Throughout *Imperial* and through his textual convergences of literary self-consciousness, empirical documentation and empathic projection, Vollmann constantly blends the notions of waste, vastness and the west (America and Imperial as epitome of its self-betraying imperial dreams) into an amalgam that refuses full delineation. Or, rather, it subverts it through its harboring of secrets, the ‘other’ side of what is or can be represented and charted. The ostensible subject of his fluid text, for all its Melvillean aspiration to exhaustiveness, becomes for Vollmann the “center of all secrets and therefore center of the world” (2009, 628). Imperial’s imperviousness to full disclosure is the source of secrecy or, rather, is the secret itself, the secret of the wastes that reality refuses so as to constitute itself in nonsecretive transparency. The waste of the real, real waste, secretly yet openly permeates the delineated grids of what we call reality. There is then a secret to waste or, we might say, waste partakes of the ambivalence of secrecy; like what is secret, it is often an ‘open secret,’ unadmitted and inadmissible public knowledge, apparently fully revealed once acknowledged, yet always retaining a secretiveness in its stubborn yet mute obstruction to representational containment and disclosure. Waste is just waste, that which lies beyond the bounds of any further classification, but, as such, it clogs up classification and representation in its own waste. Perhaps we should see it as a shapeless embodiment of representation’s other, the real itself that cannot be fully enclosed within the conventional bounds of what we call reality.

That ambivalence contained within the term ‘waste’ is what Georges Bataille latched onto in his writings on sacrifice and expenditure as rebukes to staid bourgeois culture. Without reaching the extremes of the Bataillean diatribe against the end-oriented, dehumanizing economy that exalts productivity over pleasure—“humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure” (Bataille 1985, 120)<sup>7</sup>—Vollmann does seem

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<sup>7</sup> Fittingly, as one of the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s acceptations of the term shows, “waste” is now seen as the unavoidable product of our ironically productive economy, an economy whose



to participate in the Bataillean attraction to the excessive and the eccentric, to the hidden pleasures of waste, in other words. Like Bataille, his empathetic reflections on desert wastes and the wasted humanity that toils there proclaim that “human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions” (Bataille 1985, 131). One such “closed system” is found in the grid-like delineations of the deceptive agrarian dream that crisscross Imperial, an enclosure undermined by such real-world phenomena as water seepage, Chinese tunnels and illegal border crossings. Such undermining is what draws Vollmann’s interest, for it evinces the unfathomable nature of the real/Imperial that counters its instrumentalizing wastage: “Imperial is a place I’ll never know, a place of other souls than mine; and how can anyone know otherness?” (Vollmann 2009, 114).

Imperial County, for all its corporate wealth—more cynically and realistically, because of its corporate wealth and corporate banishment of the individualist agrarian dream—is now the poorest county in California, still bettering in this its Mexican sister-region across the border that remains the source of its necessary surplus of recurrently unemployed, illegal immigrant labor. In this system, of course, human destitution, waste, and prosperity are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same thing. Indeed, in such a system, prosperity or just plain survival is only possible via what Vollmann provokingly describes as “prostitution,” a phenomenon about which, in its literally sexual version, he proves to be quite knowledgeable. The border itself, he muses, far from being the policed margins of the system, is actually its very center and, in human terms, is embodied for him in the figure of the prostitute: “Capitalist Axiom Number 807: Call girls set the fashion” (2009, 857). The prostitute becomes for him a sacrificial trafficker in waste humanity, a trashing of human agency and possibility but also a redemptive figure in her embodiment of waste, a figure that he mythicizes in troubling fashion.<sup>8</sup> We live, he says, in a “culture of prostitutes” (143) for such is the state of things where “we all do things we would not otherwise do just to survive” (106-107). This is not

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main ‘product’ is waste: “Refuse matter; unserviceable material remaining over from any process of manufacture; the useless by-products of any industrial process; material or manufactured articles so damaged as to be useless or unsaleable.” This trash economy, of course, as Greg Kennedy suggests, relies on an often-planned devaluation of objects that is ultimately also a dehumanization: “the neglect of our worldly needy nature brought about by our carelessness toward things as ultimately the waste of our own complex human being” (2007, 9). The production of waste also produces a wasted humanity. This is precisely Zygmunt Bauman’s point in his explorations of modernity’s, that is, contemporary capitalism’s human costs: “The production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity” (2004, 5).

<sup>8</sup> “The ancient Aztec divinity Tlazoltéotl, Goddess of Filth, could cleanse Her worshippers of coition’s sins, but only by means of such rigorous penances as passing a twig through a hole in the tongue twice a day. I worshipped a Tlazoltéotl Who was filth Herself, a Tlazoltéotl of acceptance, not penance, a living blend, as are all of us, of excrement, sunlight, blood and watermelons. That was one of the reasons that I have loved street prostitutes ever since I was young. And what was the border but another incarnation of Her?” (Vollmann 2009, 1080).



necessarily to belittle through idealization the victimized status of the prostitute by abstracting prostitution into a common human state. Rather, Vollmann strives to exalt the prostitute's agency and responsibility, her very human status, through her conscious complicity with such a system, a complicity shared usually unwittingly and unquestioningly by all he suggests:

The existence of the sad, sad Mexican whore (sadder than I think she would have been in Mexico) in the median strip of Imperial Avenue proves nothing for or against the ejidos or the American family farm or silver dimes exploding from the water farmers' sprinklers. She waits for cars and trucks, hoping to be saved by the ministry of capital. (821)

But it is precisely in the "destitution" of "prostitution" that he will see signs of both the tragedy and the potential of waste and the wasted: as he says of a Mexican prostitute, "she became emblematic to me of Imperial's troubled not to say polluted fertility" (1110).

*Imperial* traces this "polluted fertility" of waste in its multiple modes, literal, human and literary. We do literally find on the Mexican side of the border what we expect to find, the "no make-believe" of "shanties and shacks" (697), the waste populations that fertilize the empty, anonymously productive fields of the other side and that receive on home soil the polluting effluents of this imperial enterprise: "*We're the garbage can of the United States*" (1079, italics in original). This is the border system that passes off environmental ravaging as economic advance for all. As Sarah Hill succinctly summarizes it in a study of its environmental impact, in 1966 "the Border Industrialization Program opened the border region as a free trade zone where U.S. firms were welcomed to build export-processing factories (maquiladoras), pay minimal taxes and export their finished goods and profits" (2001, 162), in the process consciously creating "this contrast (between the gleaming 'First World' domain of production and the squalid, 'Third World' domain of social reproduction built up around the toxic by-products of industry)" (64). Navigating the New River that meanders sluggishly back and forth across the border, Vollmann personally experiences through exposure to its pollutants and rank sewage the environmental racism of such a "system of delineation" (2009, 998). Admitting the unavoidable but asymmetrical complicities in the border economy's systemic production of waste, human and environmental, he also reveals the essential porousness of this border division:

Maybe the New River wasn't anybody's fault, either. People need to defecate, and if they are poor, they cannot afford to process their sewage. People need to eat, and so they work in the maquiladoras—factories owned by foreign polluters. The polluters pollute to save money; then we buy their inexpensive and perhaps well-made tractor parts, fertilizers, pesticides. It is doubly difficult to get out. And it's all ghastly. (89)

The economies of waste and productivity the border inaugurates rely on the very fact of division and the asymmetrical exchanges that separation promotes. Yet,



despite such divisions, the border inevitably both “borders”—limits, confines and adjoins—and “borders on”—figuratively, as the *OED* attests, it approaches closely in character, resembles closely, verges on. In this light, discontinuity contains a barely suppressed continuity: “Imperial is the continuum between Mexico and America” (50). Unwittingly perhaps, Vollmann broaches border realities and representational oppositions in a near-deconstructionist vein. Thus, what limits and excludes is necessarily also what opens and liberates, even if in secretive, marginal and socially-castigated modes. In this light, waste, in whatever form, is in essence a ‘border’ reality in its insistent and resistant presence: it is the other side of what excludes and produces it and, as such, in true deconstructionist fashion, is actually what can invert the relation in the hopes of acquiring a nondichotomous view of the real. Rather than saying that current industrial and social practice produces waste, one could assert that, rightly viewed from below, waste produces and characterizes our current social and economic structures. The true product and object of our ‘imperial’ ambitions is waste. To transcend the dichotomy would be to envisage the truly productive uses of waste, not just the now stereotyped visions of environmental caretaking through recycling and so on, but the possibilities within the currently discarded refuse of humanity and its embodiment of other, less wasteful ways of living. A recycling that does not break the cycle that produces such humanly and socially lethal structures would be and is truly useless. The self-enclosed, ultimately entropic cycle must become a spiral opening onto other realities. This is what Vollmann seems to project onto Tijuana, San Diego’s Mexican alter-ego, for example, in certain passages. He blends textually both the literal border city and the science-fictional version imagined by Philip K. Dick, both of them burgeoning with a possibility that stops at and is conditioned by the border wall: “Imperial is constraint indeed. Therefore, Imperial is possibility, and within Imperial it is Tijuana where possibility gets reified above all. You could obtain anything, do anything, you wanted” (698). Vollmann will end his “investigation” of the “maquiladoras” with a reminiscence from Tijuana:

I just heard...

Why not end here, with one more instance of disputed fact? We’ll each believe what we wish. This almost perfectly incomplete portrait of the maquiladoras ends, as every honest investigation should, in midair. (Let’s face it, Bill. Investigative reporting is not really your strong suit.) It is ever so difficult to begin to comprehend maquiladoras as they are, with their chemicals, fences and secrets; as for the future, well, from Tijuana I remember a tiny square of mostly unbuilt freeway, high in the air, souvenir of a broken bridge; and at the very end of it, lording it over empty space, a huge handmade cross with scraps of white plastic bag fluttering in the brown wind. (922)

The directionless impulse of capitalist exploitation appropriately ends in this religiously charged emblem of waste, sign both of unsubstantiated hope and desire, and of the “broken bridge” of the profit-driven future. The “secrets” harbored here are actually out in the open, literally “in midair,” strewn throughout the “empty space” of this contemporary wasteland. Vollmann’s “investigative reporting” ironically succeeds in its failed inefficiency, its empirical wastefulness, by foregrounding the



“disputed fact” of reality itself. What counts here is not so much the fact, only ever an interpretive invention, something made like the commodities put out by the maquiladoras, as the ideological dispute over the very factuality of that “fact” and its costs. Waste imposes a different recounting of the “disputed fact.”

It works both ways, of course, for the border is a bridge, not “broken” but dotted with fissures, a bridge whose separations and divisions are also internal to either side. Both the famed “Chinese tunnels” built by illegal Chinese immigrants on the Mexican side as a refuge from the oppressive prejudice of the Mexicans themselves and the example of the “maquiladoras,” with their secretive environmental impacts and their relatively less exploited Mexican workforces by comparison to life in the campo, make this clear, again in asymmetrical fashion. The tunnels explicitly and the “maquiladoras” implicitly are both refuges for refuse and the refused, the immigrant populations they shelter and exploit as well as the refuse their labor produces as a matter of course, the waste that underlies that labor and that cynically enables it. Both become examples for the complicities and submerged possibilities of (human) waste. The “maquiladoras” enact the dehumanizing consequences of the profit motif. As producers of undead waste, a terminal waste that negates the “polluted fertility” (1110) Vollmann associates with the discards and discarded of an instrumentalizing mindset, the maquiladoras project a human and material landscape of potential annihilation. The best and eeriest example, couched in imagery of the infernal, is the abandoned “Metales and Derivados” factory, “this monument to human selfishness” (872) that sinisterly presages the holocaust of the human itself, not just the gutting of an industrial site:

Inside the great shed, which felt like the focal point just as the restored gas chamber feels like the focal point of Auschwitz (and isn't this simile overwrought, even unfair? But I have visited Auschwitz, and I remember the heavy darkness of the gas chamber, much heavier than here, to be sure; but that memory visited me unbidden as I stood there feeling sickish in several ways, wondering how many children down there in Chilpancingo were enjoying the benefits of lead poisoning; Metales y Derivados felt like a wicked, dangerous place, I can tell you; by comparison, those barracks for the campesinos in Ejido Tabasco began to seem attractive), several huge rusty drumlike apparatus were trained like cannons at the barrio below. What were they, those red-cruled hulks? They had wheel-gears on them. I stared at them with my burning eyes; I smelled the sour-metal smell. And those square pits in the concrete floor, those pipes going down, down into the reddish earth, what did they signify? (873)

But if “maquiladoras” such as this abandoned, wasted one are an epitome of the “sickness of capitalism, the American sickness” (875), they are also an example of “the Mexican sickness which allows them to flourish” (875), a national flaw defined somewhat lamely by Vollmann as the tendency to “cut corners and do what's easiest even when it's not what's best” (875). This might seem a withdrawal from engaging in serious political and ideological analysis, a failing common not only to Vollmann but many other American writers who find refuge from such quandaries in generalizations over human nature that are only ever universalizing abstractions



that fly in the face of their own expressed objectives in paying empathic attention to the real. As Vollmann has said in an interview, “[t]he longer I live, the more I like individual people, and the more pessimistic I become about groups and institutions and humanity in general” (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 305), an attitude more attuned to American conceptions of the absolute value of individualism rather than a nuanced view of the social context within which individualism of any kind is constituted. This leads sometimes to an ingenuously and even shockingly naïve view of labor conditions and the workers’ own consciousness of them:

I do think that the *maquiladoras* sometimes show a shocking disregard for people’s health; the subtle effects of chemical exposure over time and the generally low level of education among *maquiladora* laborers conspire together to be accomplices in the endangerment of human beings for the sake of a few extra pesos.

The *maquiladoras* are a necessary evil, and perhaps not even as evil as I believe. But if their windows were less dark and their gates guarded less unilaterally, if button cameras became unnecessary as a means of verification, they would definitely be better places. (Vollmann 2009, 915)

Vollmann, however, who is not writing as a social or political analyst, though that does not necessarily excuse political naïvety, but as an avowedly “hack journalist” (88)—“Let’s face it, Bill. Investigative reporting is not really your strong suit” (922)—is savingly contradicted, of course, by his inclusion of the workers’ actual preconceptions and unstated views as elicited through the gaps and absences in his own interviews. Remaining true to his ethically grounded belief in personal agency and responsibility, a belief that exalts the inherent dignity of the wasted human subjects he is attracted to, this perhaps naïve belief in the powers of self-awareness and the ambiguities of active complicity is untainted by the traces of a self-undermining resignation on the part of those forced to participate in such conditions of environmentally-poisoned exploitation. This seems to be a case where empathy has become self-deceptive in its denial here not of the other but of the self’s critical view of the other as a self that intentionally can blind itself ideologically. One can recall here Slavoj Žižek’s view of postmodern cynical ideology where the ideological victim is fully aware of the false consciousness he or she willingly espouses,<sup>9</sup> something revealed in these interviews in the reiterated ambivalence of the responses to the human and economic value of the “*maquiladoras*”:

Are *maquiladoras* good or bad for Mexicans?

For work they’re good, because we need work.

Translation: *Here there’s life*. [...] exploitation in the *campo* may be worse than exploitation in the *maquiladora*. (867)

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek’s vision of ideology is detailed in his first English-language book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008). See also his introductory essay to his edited collection, *Mapping Ideology* (1994).



Are the *maquiladoras* good or bad for Mexico?  
Well, said Lourdes, more or less, the thing is—we have to work.  
So they're good?  
More or less, she said in what I believe to have been quiet fury. (910)

The “Chinese tunnels,” on the other hand, illustrate the potential of a living, rather than undead waste, even if they contain remnants of a now absent past of racial oppression.<sup>10</sup> Much like the omnipresence of waste, the tunnels do not officially exist yet underlie official reality itself. As paths that literally undermine surface appearances, possibly even traversing the border in their underground invisibility, they are a waste reality that is emblematic of the other side of official, ideal reality. Division's exclusions, its waste, is especially exemplified in the urban legend of Mexicali's “Chinese tunnels,” supposedly built by its now reduced Chinese immigrant community in response to its own internal exclusion within Mexican society. Reputedly extending underground as far as Mexicali's American sister city, its anagrammatic partner, Calexico, the “tunnels don't exist” yet Vollmann “kept going into tunnels” (465). The tunnels are a submerged and, now, a literally waste-filled deconstruction of the border itself, both a miming and an undermining of its very function, a separation which secretly connects. Tunnels and border are both fact and fiction. Indeed, the tunnels arose as a hidden contestation of that official abstraction, their very hiddenness leading to the proliferation of tales and fictions that almost smothers their actual existence: “I was beginning to see that the tale of the tunnels was not only the tale of myths and dreams, but it was also the story of how and why one world, which was dominant, hot and bright, forced the creation of another, which was subterranean and secret” (453). Their very resistance to revelation, to proper “delineation,” maintains a fertile secretiveness and imperviousness to representation that characterizes such “waste” realities:

But then she said something which revealed the extent of that vanished universe for me, revealed it in the same eerie, half-illusory sense as a flashlight-gleam upon black water in a Chinese tunnel shows something; what has been shown? It's opaque; its feculence hinders us; we know neither its depth nor its extent, but the yellow play of light on that black water brings us into the recognition of a previously unknown realm—about which we still know nothing. (433)

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<sup>10</sup> This ambivalence in the conception of waste is echoed in Kennedy's distinction between ‘trash’ and ‘waste.’ By ‘trash’ Kennedy refers not just to material refuse but to an attitude of refusal, to “a manner of physically relating to other beings,” “a mode of comportment, treating things without care, negatively, and destructively” in a “throwaway society” that “violently negates beings rather than takes care of them” (2007, xvii). This attitude is directly the product of the instrumentalized notion of technology that permeates our culture, producing ‘waste’ as an absolute devaluation of beings, material and human: technology “dissolves the problem of waste by fixating and absolutizing its inherent ambiguity. Technology replaces waste, a creature of value, with trash. Whereas waste results from a relative, subjective devaluation, technological objectification, that is, unconditional, absolute devaluation, engenders trash” (10). To borrow from Vollmann, for Kennedy waste is feculent and fertile, trash is privation and death.



In this, the tunnels approach figuratively the “secret” nature of Imperial itself and, by implication, the creative, openly fictionalizing realism of Vollmann’s text. Practicing his own textual version of ‘tunnelling,’ the myth-making Vollmann encounters in his search for the tunnels is akin to the myth-making that made Imperial and which is debunked by the waste realities intrinsic to the same enterprise. But it is only through his own inventive textual quest that he can approach this stubbornly inapprehensible reality and acknowledge the “something beautiful, stinking, empty and infinitely rich” (481) contained in its wastes. In this light, Imperial becomes a sort of ambivalently heterotopian site, replete with potential and catastrophe in almost equal amounts, a site of liminality that both excludes and includes, that is both resistantly real and devastatingly fictional. Even the children’s games on the Mexican side of the border, a telling example of the child’s unconscious awareness of the fictiveness of the real and of the dogmatic imposition of reality’s ‘fantasy,’ echo the border subject’s knowledge of the divisive yet revelatory potential of life in liminality. Vollmann converts the scene into an ambivalent ethical lesson for the reader or, rather, an experience of the ethics of ambivalence:

Their entire hillside was dirt of a parchment color resembling old map-flesh, and when the children scratched game-lines into it with dead sticks, that place became a map of itself, its delineation as real and eternal as any other even if it got scuffed out a minute later; and if you consider me frivolous, please tell me what and why a boundary is, or tell me how illegality is. Why must they live here, and not in your house? (52)

Delineation is both exclusion and the hoarding of privilege, the creation of subaltern communities and their ravaging by economies of waste. Like any limit applied to human realities, the border is both a not so subtly dehumanizing delimitation and a hint of the secretive resistance of border or waste communities to that very delimitation. In his privileged crisscrossing of the border, Vollmann ruefully acknowledges the true, if not politically ‘real,’ deconstruction of the exclusionary dream intrinsic to any such, perhaps administratively necessary, separation. The utopia of unacknowledged privilege borders on the heterotopia of waste. Such a heterotopia of waste—and aren’t all heterotopian landscapes also landscapes of waste in the sense that they are chaos-strewn sites that sabotage the possibilities of univocal categorization?—such a landscape can perhaps only be presented, liberated rather than captured, through a mode of representation that resists delimiting delineation, even the flexible delineations of conventional literary forms. The representation or textualization of waste requires a waste textuality. Imperial, seen through such a necessarily self-conscious literary mode, becomes the inarticulate Real itself that, in our current projections, we wastefully delineate into a productive ‘reality,’ a reality of waste conjured up by these very fantasies of delineation, whether they be literary tracings or the irrigation ditches that initially brought fertility but ultimately will bring a saline death to the Imperial Valley: “We irrigate our mental fields with the liquid of our choice. And the reclamation of ‘reality’ is the largest irrigation enterprise in the nation!” (153).



Vollmann evinces a self-critical but saving awareness of his own failed delineations. He counters the imperialist dream of control through a sort of questioning self-consciousness (postmodernism) and the meandering narrative of his actual, non-textual experience (post-postmodernism). In breaking the bounds of the conventionally 'delineated' text, he both courts failure and embraces ethically the 'value' of waste:

Now in the year 2007 as I finish this chapter, my dinghy-ride down the New River with the first Jose Lopez haunts me sweetly. I had expected nothing but filthiness and frightfulness; I'd wanted to "expose," to "investigate," to sound the alarm, in other words, to wallow self-righteously in the excrement of what was supposed to be the most polluted waterway in North America. And I had gotten my fill of that, the bad taste that would not leave my mouth; but I had also, as had this fine Jose Lopez, played at the game of Lewis-and-Clark; and I remember sunlight, tamarisks, spewing pipes, silence, and befouled but un-destroyed wildness. And when Zulema said of Mexicali, the city that I cannot stop loving, that it is filthy like something being abused, when Yolanda said, we're the garbage can of the United States, when Calexicans who smelled the New River complained that they were the toilet of Mexico, I became all the more faithful to Mexicali, third-largest of the border cities, after Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, to Mexicali, home of maquiladoras and ejidos alike, Mexicali the hot, slow, sunny, spicy, stinking place, whose most precious jewel is her tranquillity. (1080)

Like an inversion of Emily Dickinson's rueful allegory of failure—"success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (1975, poem 67)—Vollmann traces, arguably successfully, the success of failure and the failed, the melancholy 'success,' to turn to the etymology of the term, of that which 'suc-ceeds,' that which goes on below, under the surface, that which just happens. What has failed is an idea, an idea of empire, an imperial, reality-denying idea. It has been overwhelmed by the literal 'vastness' of waste itself, the inhuman outrunning of whatever reality is humanly constituted. Imperial thus becomes an ultimate denial of empire itself, empire understood in almost transcendent fashion as the 'delineated realities' with which we believe we have tamed the real itself. This idea of empire, an idea that in American history has consistently denied its imperial connotations, could be aligned with Richard Slotkin's analysis of the mythology of the frontier as that

complex of traditional ideas that had accumulated around the idea of the "Frontier" since colonial times, including the concept of pioneering as a defining national mission, a "Manifest Destiny," and the vision of the westward settlements as a refuge from tyranny and corruption, a safety valve for metropolitan discontents, a land of golden opportunity for enterprising individualists, and an inexhaustible reservoir of natural wealth on which a future of limitless prosperity could be based. (1998, 38)

What Vollmann reveals through his own 'delineations' is how the official implementations of that ideal make of the open frontier a closed 'border,' a rationalizing delineation that both undermines the frontier ideal and uncovers its exclusionary violence. Yet, ironically, the border 'borders' and, thus, its porous



adjoining of supposedly opposed realities subverts the frontier's false embrace of openness for all. This is empire "imperiled," as Vollmann goes on to put it, by its own imperial dreams (2009, 1121). But the real of Imperial itself, unearthed by Vollmann's haphazard, rambling research, cannot fail. The 'American idea' fails, has failed, will fail; the American 'reality,' encompassing what contradicts the ideal, cannot:

Nothing can touch this marriage of land and sky, of heat and salt, this hammer and anvil, this procreating couple whose only child is a plain which unlike a rainforest, an empire or a work of art can outlast anything the planet itself can, anything, even human beings, even water or waterlessness; and if, God forbid, Imperial does someday get riddled with cities, its character will remain almost unaffected; it will go on and on, true to itself, long after such temporary superficialities as "the U.S.A." and "Mexico" have become as washed out as old neon hotel signs in the searing daylight of Indio. (1120)

As a melancholy acknowledgement that the true victim of environmental violence will be man himself, the ecology of the human, the true 'waste' here is not the arid desert, the 'vast' wasteland of useless, uncultivated, nonurbanized territory, but the supposedly improved, salvaged "human artifact" of "verdancy" brought into existence through the exploitative and ultimately destructive harnessing of water resources elsewhere. The "concretions of humanity" will become so many future fossilizations of embodied greed. Yet, Vollmann's accompanying acknowledgement that "like most human records, this account essentially recounts failure" (905), ambivalently manifests representational skepticism while at the same time proffering his own counter-delineations. Paradoxically, this is what ensures the ultimate success of this literary 'recounting' of failure and/or waste. This account's—or literature's in general—failure to fully account for the reality it strives to depict is not a representational failure at all but a textual indictment of the functionalist, instrumentalizing and totalizing mentality behind efficient, productive categorical representation. As Susan Morrison has argued, literature and waste are intimately related in that the non-transparent figurations of the literary are both a rebuke to the "futile codification" (2015, 33) that sets out to differentiate and categorize the real, and a reaffirmation of what such codification must discard to exist as such: "waste is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second). Without the material that is discarded, we cannot enter the realm of the metaphoric, of literature, and of the imagination. Waste is literal and literary" (23). Countering such an implicitly essentialist ranking, however, what this implies is that it is only through entering the "realm of the metaphoric" that we can begin to perceive and be aware of the literal; literality is nothing but reality to the letter, to the '*littera*.' Or perhaps we should say there is no humanly inhabited and humanly evaluated reality *avant la lettre*. Lacking any conventionally validated notions of efficiency, instrumentality and functionality (what is the use of such a text?), literature's wastefulness reveals itself to be an ideal, perhaps the only means of not discounting the human value of waste, even if it be the value of the discarded and discounted. Practical failure



becomes literary success as literature's wastefulness encounters the human vastness of waste, good or bad.

There is, then, an explicit paradox within Vollmann's representational proposal as the inevitable 'failure' of what he nevertheless goes on to do intentionally manifests the ambivalence of the literary effort itself. Literature here becomes the intentionally wasteful endeavour to give presence to what cannot be re-presented successfully, waste itself, human and material. But in a sort of self-mirroring spiral, the waste which is literary representation, given its inevitable shortcomings, becomes the best way of acknowledging and even empathizing with that which echoes back literature's own wastefulness, the waste of the world, the world's wastes. What results is an unruly 'catalogue,' now ethically rather than empirically grounded in any arrogantly totalizing manner, of what is usually lumped together namelessly and silently outside the bounds of any conventional catalogue.<sup>11</sup> Vollmann even mocks his own cataloguing with his "Imperial Reprise" chapter sections and their mock index of noteworthy sayings and slogans that have dotted the Imperial(ist) enterprise. They provide a formal analogy for the text's conscious literary 'wastefulness,' its intertextual shuttling between myriad perspectives and registers in its attempt to capture the 'secret' of Imperial itself. Through a conglomeration of quotations from earlier passages, the very juxtaposition of which establishes surprising, sometimes comic and always sardonically critical *aperçus* onto the anarchic yet hierarchically contained realities of the "imaginary entity" called Imperial, Vollmann strives to textually transcend the representational limitations imposed by a 'waste(d)' real, the real that stubbornly refuses complete delineation and improvement. This implies both acknowledging the terminal waste of such a regimentation of reality and the proliferating, "feculent" yet fertile wastes of what it discards or banishes as a matter of course, the commercial course of a capitalist empire. To recapitulate through such textual 'reprises' becomes a textual and typographically varied exercise mocking the endless, empty cycle of wasteful recapitalization and recirculation, whether of money or of water, both irrigating the increasingly fallow fields of the Imperial Valley.

Failure might not be waste, then, in such an ethically charged literary endeavour, but a revelation of waste's riches. The resistant real, Imperial's secret nothingness that wavers into perception like a desert mirage, can only be apprehended through the 'waste' textuality of something like literature, the literature of the factual that Vollmann has forged here and elsewhere in his voluminous oeuvre. For in literature as in nature, as Vollmann's closing transhuman reflections suggest, 'nothing is wasted,' in the literal and metaphorical senses of this assertion. The wasted nothingness of Imperial's environmental and human landscape, the obverse of the American idea, contains, to use a Pynchonian term, the 'preterite' realities of what

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<sup>11</sup> The etymology of the term reminds us of the implicit ethical choice, rather than impersonal scientific necessity, involved in the making of a catalogue: < French catalogue, and < late Latin catalogus, < Greek κατάλογος register, list, catalogue, < καταλέγειν to choose, pick out, enlist, enroll, reckon in a list, etc., < κατά down + λέγειν to pick, choose, reckon up, etc.



the idea, the ideal, must discard and deny. Waste not, want not. But if one truly wants, if one lacks and desires at once, then look at, look in, look for the waste. There, as Vollmann shows us in despairing equanimity, nothing is ever truly wasted.

Reviews sent to the author: 29/09/2022

Revised paper accepted for publication: 06/11/2022



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