

*Ecocriticism, Determinism and Imperialism in the Wilderness of:
Heart of Darkness and La vorágine*

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Ecocriticism⁷ has been described by scholars in the field of literary studies as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of nature, environment, and culture. There has been a need to consider the various and possible representations of nature, as well as the different modes of cultural negotiation between humans and the natural world. In his book *Practical Ecocriticism*, Glen Love argues that the more the circumstances of the natural world intrude into the arena of teaching and writing, the more a need to create some sort of connection or dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings. Love states, "Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue, an attempt to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness" (16). However, ecocritics are ready to show that their focus goes beyond mere nature writing. They are concerned about expanding the standards of environmental writing to respond to a broad trend toward globalism and modernity in literary studies.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine*⁸ (1924) dramatize modernity's destructive alienation from the natural world against the ecological collapse and/or degradation suffered by two exploited regions belonging to two Third World countries: the African Congo and the Colombian jungles of the Amazon.

In this essay, I will show how these two novels offer a vision of a wilderness that challenges the colonizing subjects' self-reliance to the point of making them victims of their own imperialistic attitudes; where the conventional colonizing body, represented by the power of men, is portrayed as subjugated, and the colonized body, represented by nature, is regarded as subjugator. To understand this perspective on wilderness, I will initially explore the traditional English representations of nature during the nineteenth century and its manifestations in American literature and culture. In addition, I will discuss the colonizing subject's imperialistic attitudes by taking into account the important role that nineteenth-century European theories, such as that of *determinism*, played in the shaping of human behavior. Finally, I will explore the possible links between the moral and the ecological limits of imperialism, where the abuses against the ecosystem are perceived as an ecological disaster.

In *Practical Ecocriticism*, Glen Love invites us to keep searching for what it really means to be human. He suggests that we examine the complicated but extraordinary world of science, where everything seems to be connected to everything else. Love states that "human behavior is not an empty vessel whose only input will be that provided by culture, but is strongly influenced by

⁷ To understand a little more about the origins of ecocriticism, I suggest a detailed reading of the introduction of *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003) by Glen Love.

⁸ *La vorágine* was translated into English, in 1928, by Earle K. James under the name of *The Vortex*.

genetic orientations that underlie and modify, or are modified by, cultural influences" (6). In other words, it is possible to observe how human behavior can be both an agent and recipient of the changes that can determine, or can be determined by, cultural influences. Therefore, if human behavior is understood as an agent of cultural change, it would not be an exaggeration to assume that individuals should acquire a moral responsibility for their surroundings to prevent what seems to be one of the most pressing concerns in today's world: environmental degradation⁹. Both *Heart of Darkness* and *La voragine* are illustrations of detrimental relations between people and nature. In both novels, the main characters face the challenges imposed by nature in the forms of land, river, jungle, etc. Such challenges will help shape the main characters' behavior and will provide a different look at nature from that of the familiar *nature writing* of the nineteenth century. There is an English tradition that expects the description of nature to be pleasing. This sort of conventional meaning of nature has its origins in the so-called Pastoral Genre, whose main ideology was that of finding lessons of simplicity that could only be found and taught by nature. Love affirms that "In the pastoral world, amid sylvan groves and rural characters-idealized images of country existence-the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the salutary, simple life that will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world of the horizon" (66). However, these nineteenth-century cultural representations to approach nature as "the sublime," "the sentimental," and "the pastoral" have been transformed in American literature, criticism and culture into more enigmatic representations such as that of the "hidden evil". Here one finds a clear obsession with wilderness that originated from an association with the discovery of the New World. Greg Garrard argues that American readings of the pastoral genre point to a sort of "identification with masculine colonial aggression directed against women, indigenes and the land" (49). These American readings of the pastoral have been understood as wilderness narratives, and as Garrard has pointed out, these narratives have in common with English pastoral narratives of the nineteenth century the basic structure in which the main character leaves civilization to encounter a non-human nature, and then returns having experienced some kind of renewal (49). However, the main separation point between these two narratives resides in the representation of the nature, providing a *domesticated* one for the English pastoral as opposed to an *untamed* one for the American pastoral narrative.

To understand current conceptions of wilderness, a quick look at the history of this concept would be useful. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, one clearly observes a meaning of wilderness based almost entirely on Judaeo-Christian culture: "The word 'wilderness' derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'wilddeoren', where 'deoren' or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation" (Garrard 60). Therefore, the view of wilderness depended above all on distinctions that derived from an agricultural ideology. Moreover, by the time the Judaic scriptures were written, there was the belief that wilderness was regarded as *threat* and a *place of exile*. The Bible provides a number of examples to support this idea such as the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden: "Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken" (*Concordia Self-Study Bible*, Gen. 3:23). In addition to these previous conceptions of wilderness as threat and as a place of exile, it was also identified with ideas of *freedom* and *escape*. Abraham led his people into the wilderness to establish a great nation, while

⁹ Glen A. Love highlights in his introduction to *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003) what appears to be some of the consequences of environmental degradation: the threat of nuclear annihilation, runaway population growth, loss of wild and natural areas, accelerated species extinctions, and increasing contamination of the earth's air, water, and land (4).

Moses led the people of Israel through it to return to Egypt. Therefore, we could argue that the Judaeo-Christian conception of wilderness combined connotations of danger, freedom, punishment, and threat among others. Both *Heart of Darkness* and *La voragine* make use of some of these elements to show the affects a subjugated nature can have over its subjugator.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad introduces Marlow, the protagonist, as a sailor whose job is to tell a story that is relayed to the reader by another unknown¹⁰ narrator. Apparently, the story is nothing more than a trip to Africa taken by Marlow in search of Kurtz, a sort of commercial agent who has been sending great amounts of ivory back to his trading company. Marlow's expedition can be seen as an odyssey. An old steamboat, a dangerous river, an unbearable heat, and an attack from the natives of the region are some of the perilous things experienced by Marlow and his fellow sailors. In his ongoing search, Marlow builds up a mystified image of Kurtz based on the descriptions provided by other members of the trading company that Marlow has encountered on his journey. Finally, Marlow will find Kurtz, very ill, in a hut surrounded by human heads on stakes, and worshipped by subdued natives whom Kurtz has terrified with his unconventional, drastic methods. This extraordinary character who had been shaping Marlow's imagination reveals himself as a symbol of corruption and ancestral barbarity motivated by an unrestrained desire for power and wealth, immersed in a profound struggle with his own solitude, and defeated by the influence of the wilderness: "But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself that he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude- and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating" (Conrad 48). It is obvious that Marlow's description of the power of wilderness over human behavior matches the "untamed," "hidden evil" characteristics of nature's representation in American pastoral narrative. Marlow delivers a different vision of landscape and in it expresses deep concern about the land's condition in relation to human beings: "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball-an ivory ball; it had caressed him and -lo!-he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (40). This description of Kurtz becoming the wilderness himself provides a look at nature as a human transforming force.

I would argue that through a great part of *Heart of Darkness*, an anthropomorphized figure of nature is offered. The ability of nature to love, to caress, and to embrace suggests a personified image of it; however, what is really alluring is that this descriptive system reverses when Kurtz is seen as entity with nonhuman attributes. Kurtz has been transformed into nature due to his obsession with ivory, the reason for European exploitation. Kurtz' head has turned into an ivory ball and his body has been consumed by the underlying image that resides in the ivory object: greed. In other words, ivory comes to represent both the commodity¹¹ that motivates the profit that can be

¹⁰I believe that the inclusion of the unknown narrator that Conrad uses to present the story adds a concept of "uncertainty" or "unreliability" to almost everything in the text due to the possible manipulation of the events from one narrator to the other.

¹¹In *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*, K. Booker states that for Marx, "a 'commodity' is an article that is produced not for use but for exchange within the market system of capitalism. Because commodities are intended for sale rather than use, they are valued not for their function but for the price they can bring on the open market" (73).

obtained through the process of colonization, and the colonization of nature over the colonizing subject.

In a world obsessed with the exchange value of things, ivory is seen as a commodity and the wilderness is regarded as the place to take it from. In *The Ecology of Heart of Darkness*, a symbolic use of ivory proposed by Jeffrey Myers is offered: "a symbol for the commodification of African ecology" (McCarthy 623). It is possible to assume that Kurtz has become "ivory", because his exploration can be seen as a sort of identification with the interior of the African Congo. Kurtz can be seen as someone who has transferred himself into an African tribal society, but also, and due to his relation to ivory, he can be seen as someone who has transformed himself into wilderness. In the scene that anticipates the culminating events of his life, the figure of Kurtz as shaped from ivory is highlighted again: "I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror-of an intense and hopeless despair" (58). Although Kurtz' first motive for the land of Congo was that of exploitation, his transformation into ivory can be understood as the image of human beings becoming part of the environment or natural world they inhabit. J. Andrew Hubbell in his essay *A Question of Nature* describes two terms that are very common in contemporary eco-criticism: wandering and dwelling. The term wandering views the exploiter-colonist with a sort of tourist's mentality to regard the land as a means to an end: "resources to be exploited or landscape to be enjoyed aesthetically" (14). On the other hand, the term dwelling means "to embed oneself within the texture of one's place, thereby opening oneself to an empirical understanding of the inter-workings of the environment as a system" (14). When applying these two terms to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we could affirm that Kurtz' first assignment can be understood as that of the wandering tourist mentality whose desire for the exploitation of the African land led him to establish a dialogical action between the physical place of Congo and his own identity; therefore, attaining the category of dwelling. Kurtz, in his long time spent in the African Congo, developed a connection to nature, almost a metaphysical one, to the extreme of embedding himself into it and becoming part of it as it can be demonstrated one more time in the following passage: "I tried to break the spell- the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness - that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts..." (55). It would be safe to assume that the longer time a person spends in a given place, the broader the dialogical action would be as well as the implications of one over the other.

On the other hand, Hubbell's eco-critical conception of the term wandering could be applied to José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine*. This novel describes the immensity of tropical nature where the exploiter-colonist's goal is that of viewing the land as an end where resources are to be exploited as a form of commodification. In this novel, Rivera introduces Arturo Cova, its main character, an arrogant, proud chauvinist and his lover Alicia, as they elope from Bogotá through the *llanos* (flatlands) and later, escaping from certain dangerous circumstances, they arrive in the tropical *selvas* (jungles) of Colombia. Rivera uses Arturo Cova's journey as a way to describe the magical environment of these regions, as well as the lifestyle of the inhabitants. However, one of the main objectives of Cova's descriptions is to reveal the appalling conditions suffered by the

workers in rubber factories¹². *La vorágine* provides an image of the unbearable circumstances that individuals have to endure due to the challenging and adverse conditions of the jungle. Rivera is emphatic in communicating this idea when declaring, in the last phrase of the novel, the unknown location of Arturo Cova and Alicia: "*Los devoró la selva*" (They were devoured by the jungle¹³) (240).

La vorágine has been grouped among the novels identified as *novelas de la selva* or Telluric Novels. This group of works flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued into the 1950s. As in *Heart of Darkness*, the jungle in the *novela de la selva* is not the terrestrial paradise described by early modern travelers of the nineteenth century. Instead, these representations of nature appear as "undomesticated" terrain, or the wilderness of the American pastoral narratives, that seeks to avenge the abuses perpetrated against it by "unwelcomed" visitors. Lesley Wylei argues that the *novela de la selva* writers have a vision of the jungle as "antihumana". They see it as "an enormous heart of voracious vegetation and lurking evil, ready to engulf the unwary traveler" (2). This representation of the jungle as merciless, in *La vorágine*, exceeds the horrors of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for it is not only full of miserable and dying rubber workers, but it also provides descriptions of fire ant armies, lethal swamps, and whirlpools that build up an image of "imprisonment" as fate suffered by those who attempt to defy and confront its domains. The idea of "imprisonment" could be reinforced by that of "slavery" where the jungle is presented as the *cárcel* (prison) which exercises control over the subjugated individuals, and where the *sanguijuelas* (leeches) are seen as the chains that adhere firmly to the ankles of those whose freedom is being denied. Rivera addresses this concern in the following passage:

Esclavo, no te quejes de las fatigas; preso, no te duelas de tu prisión; ignoráis la tortura de vagar sueltos en una cárcel como la selva, cuyas bóvedas verdes tienen por fosos ríos inmensos. ¡No sabéis del suplicio de las penumbras, viendo al sol que ilumina la playa opuesta, adonde nunca lograremos ir! ¡La cadena que muerde vuestros tobillos es más piadosa que las sanguijuelas de estos pantanos; el carcelero que os atormenta no es tan adusto como estos árboles, que nos vigilan sin hablar! (163)

Slave, do not complain about your fatigue; prisoner, do not complain about your prison; you ignore the torture of wandering alone in a prison like the one jungle represents, whose green caves lie in the abyss of large rivers. Don't you know about the tormented nights which glance at the sun in search of the illuminated land, where we will never get to go! The chain that bites our ankles has more mercy than the leeches of these swamps; the jailor who torments you is not as ruthless as these trees; which watch us in silence!¹⁴

¹² I believe that many of the experiences that José Eustasio Rivera gained while taking part in a committee in charge of studying the borderline affairs between Colombia and Venezuela helped him to develop a clear understanding of life in the vast rubber factories, where workers struggle for their survival in a hostile, wild and mysterious jungle.

¹³ The translation is mine.

¹⁴ To facilitate the understanding of the quotation for non-Spanish speakers, I am including my translation of the text.

Lesley Wylie suggests that "the lack of a point of safe return in Rivera's text injects new meaning into the imperial trope of telluric horror. The dystopian landscape is no longer just another hurdle on the traveler's quest to self-fulfillment — a dusty and harmless rhetorical figure — but a prettifying and possibly insurmountable threat" (5). In the previous passage, the jungle evokes a sense of claustrophobia with references to green caves and swamps that reinforce the idea of the *cárcel verde* (green prison), but also, there is a sense of pessimism for those who have fallen into its domain, and who see no escape from it. This look of the jungle provides a representation which is particularly dystopian and threatening; and therefore, adverse to the conventional English tradition of nature.

Heart of Darkness and *La vorágine* are remarkably similar both thematically and stylistically. Both could be read as fictional autobiographies, where the protagonists are challenged by the mysterious forces of nature, and where there is an intentional preoccupation with the consequences of ecological imperialism. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that José Eustasio Rivera had actually read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; however, the series of coincidences between the two novels could be understood as what Wylie has believed "to be more than any conscious imitation, the collective impulses of postcolonial writing, which aspire, as Edward Said affirms, to 'revised visions of the past tending towards a new future'" (4). In this sense, both novels could be understood as studies of the relation between modern Europe's knowledge of nature, and a new understanding of nature wherein human beings are looking to be repositioned and where they are viewed as a possible product of this nature.

There was a nineteenth-century Realist belief that material things, basically absorbed from the environment, could shape men and make them what they were. Writers of this literary movement tried to make their imaginary world credible to their readers by including as many material details as possible. Many writers also adopted the strategy of presenting their narratives as "authentic" documents such as diaries or letters. Maurice Larkin argues that despite the desire to involve the readers in the writer's imaginary world, what appeared as the strongest motive of the nineteenth-century Realism "was the great concern for material reality as a sharper of Man" (2). Due to this notion, new concepts such as environment, heredity, and determinism were adopted to characterize the relationship between man and his surroundings. I will concentrate my attention on the role that determinism played in the shaping of human behavior in the nineteenth century and its implications on the two novels that are the object of this study. To avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to indicate at this point how determinism was regarded in the context of nineteenth-century Realism.

In *Man and Society in Nineteenth-Century Realism*, Larkin highlights two aspects that appeared as the most relevant factors to determinist writers. The first one addresses the belief that "the individual had an identity that was separate from the influences acting upon him" (2). The second aspect viewed and "accepted that the individual made active choices between alternative courses of action" (2). These two conceptions of determinism had their roots in the traditional Christian thinking of the mid-eighteenth century wherein there was a very small awareness of the possible dependence of the mind on external influences. Christians believed that God granted individuals the ability to distinguish "good" from "evil": "This concept assumed that Man was provided with certain basic moral equipment that was largely independent of outside influences"

(Larkin 17). In addition, Larkin highlights the belief that God would never let any individual be tempted beyond his strength or resistance, and if the individual was defeated by the temptation he would be morally guilty. These notions opened different views to the understanding of determinism from which the so-called *materialist determinism* emerged. Thomas Hobbes was one of the most prominent proponents of this conception who saw destiny as part of a material reality where all forms of knowledge were acquired through the senses. Hobbes claimed that "what a man thought and did depended on what his senses encountered, and that different milieu made different men" (Larkin 19). Drawing on Hobbes's conception of determinism, both *Heart of Darkness* and *La voragine* could be characterized as deterministic novels since they can be framed under the scope of a material reality: *wilderness*. Both Kurtz and Cova have sensed and established a relationship with their environment that could be understood as a form of place-attachment¹⁵, where there is a process of identification between the occupied space and the individuals that dwell in it. Lawrence Buell suggests a vision of places as a material reality that challenges the attitudes of those who interact with it: "A place is seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, revered" (63). Everything that Kurtz and Cova saw and experienced as part of their dialogical action with the wilderness influenced their behavior to the point of making them find a new way to reposition themselves within this challenging environment. Both Kurtz and Cova renounced going back to their native lands, and stayed in the wilderness ignoring that their destiny had already been determined by the adverse conditions of a nature that claimed the protagonists' physical embedment into the wilderness: Kurtz has become wilderness in his process of identification with ivory, and Cova has gotten lost or "swallowed" by the mysterious density of the Colombian jungle. In their encounter with the jungle, the rivers, the sicknesses, and more importantly with their own destructive behavior, Kurtz and Cova were both transformed and absorbed by the opposing, and self-protective forces of nature.

Buell offers a look at the Kantian subject in the world where "in order to be able to assert a truth, the actual subject must in the first place have a world or be in the world" (65). Both Kurtz and Cova somehow chose their "own" world to rule over and to subjugate it to their greediest desires. They both followed their senses to find their own truth in the midst of a land that progressively "devoured" not only their souls, but also their bodies. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's description following Kurtz' passing away sums up this search for the truth which is nothing more than the imperceptible knowledge that resides within a person's own self: "And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all the truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible" (59). For Kurtz and Cova, finding their own truth relates to what Buell has addressed as "deprivileging of the human subject" (10); both of them have suffered the consequences of losing their freedom, their sanity, and more importantly their moral integrity to exert a measure of control over their surroundings. From this perspective, human subjects are portrayed as victims of their own imperialistic attitudes, and they are stripped, by wilderness, from their conventional colonizing power of *subjugator* to be given the one of *subjugated*.

¹⁵ For further reading on this concept, see chapter 3, "Space, Place, and Imagination" in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* by Lawrence Buell.

This disruption of the conventional hierarchy of the colonizing body over the colonized one could be studied as a possible case of *carnivalization*, since carnival has been understood in Bakhtinian's terms as a "time when normal rules and hierarchies are suspended, when boundaries are transgressed, and when the energies of life erupt without regard for conventional decorum" (Booker 106). Some critics have understood Bakhtin's carnival as revolutionary and/or emancipatory because of its subversion of conventions. Based on this representation of *carnivalization*, I would argue that ecocritics can find in Bakhtin's interpretation of carnival an important tool, a new "voice", to express their dissatisfaction with the way the ecological world has been mistreated by the colonizing, capitalistic mentality of perceiving the ecosystem as a source of commodification.

Both *Heart of Darkness* and *La voragine* can be read as novels that show a link between the moral and the ecological limits of imperialism due to greediness that resided in the hearts of those who sought economic profit. The figures of *ivory* and *rubber* transformed the nature of these two Third World countries into spaces of human exploitation, and ecological catastrophe.

Edward Said argues that in *Heart of Darkness*, "Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz's great looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa" (23). Conrad shows us a Kurtz who is obsessed with accumulating tons of ivory that will be shipped back to Europe. However, Kurtz's obsession with ivory did not only follow a personal desire, but the desire of a European system that saw in ivory a form of economic income. The exploitation and demand for ivory conformed to a form of life that controlled Europe's late nineteenth and early twentieth century. McCarthy points out that "From 1875 to 1905, Europeans extracted 70,000 tons of ivory from the Congo every year. It decorated Victorian life from the billiard balls and walking sticks at the club, to the piano keys and chess pieces in the parlor, to the combs and crucifixes in the bedroom" (621). In other words, ivory made it into the everyday manifestations of Europeans' life style, and Conrad is clear in making us aware of this sort of invasion of ivory to the point of regarding it as a godly presence: "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it" (18). However, Conrad fails to communicate to his readers that the vast production of ivory was leaving behind a massive destruction of life: *elephants*. It is clear that elephants represent the source of ivory, and that the latter would not exist without the presence of the former. While Kurtz is interested in collecting, and stacking loads of ivory, an abused, exploited nature suffers the extermination of one of its permanent occupants.

As readers, we can infer from Marlow's description of ivory management that we are in front of an economic enterprise that will use up its ivory supply in a very limited production time due to the collapse of elephant herds. McCarthy affirms, "In the actual Congo where Conrad worked for eight months in 1890, the ivory trade was already beginning to expire. Traders turned to digging for fossil ivory, and the ambitious were forced ever deeper into wild areas to find elephants" (621). Besides the destruction of animal life, Kurtz also exerts abuse over nature itself. In one of his first encounters with the African land, Marlow describes what seems to be one of the main ecological concerns of today's world: environmental degradation. In Marlow's description, readers can see how nature is being depicted as a run-down sort of *dump*, and how it is being displaced by what socio-economic critics see as the powerful discourse of *modernization*:

The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. (...) A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No changed appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. (12)

The railway construction is just one more piece in the long chain of events that seek to transform anything "natural" into an object of commodification. Glen Love describes how the "Wise Use" movement sees nature in constant change, "to the point where there is nothing 'natural' left" (21), and where "there is no reason to consider nature as anything but another venue for doing what we do: control it, change it, use it up" (21). There is no doubt in my mind that attitudes like the one of the "Wise Use" movement, which tries to favor big industries and development interests, are causing irreversible damage to the environment. Some of this damage is present in today's world in the form of global warming, radiation and chemical poisoning, destruction of the ozone layer, extinction of plants and animals.

However, the extermination of elephants and the abuses against nature are not the only forms of ecological disaster that take place in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. If ecology has been understood as "the branch of biology that deals with the relations between living organisms and their environment" ("Ecology," def. 429e), I would affirm that human beings play a key role in this relationship. Kurtz's exploitation and extermination of the native people of Africa can also be regarded as a form of ecological disaster following the same logic of the exploitation of nature. Kurtz has been consumed by the imperialistic attitude of economic power, and has broken all moral limitations to pursue his enterprise. He had been sent to do a job, but instead, he had betrayed the Company's methods to use his own- methods that were observed, by Marlow and others, as unnecessary and without limitations: "I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts..." (48). The heads on the stakes that "decorate" Kurtz's dwelling are, to my opinion, the worst case of human degradation. Kurtz's desire for wealth has made him lose all moral judgment to the point of making him incapable of finding value in human life. He has lost the battle of moral limitations against the imperialistic attitudes of exploitation in all forms.

On the other hand, *La vorágine* denounces the ecological disaster suffered by the Amazon jungle in Colombia, which appears recorded in the history of this country as *La fiebre del caucho amazónico* ("The Amazon Rubber Fever"¹⁶). The name comes to signify not only all the zeal that originated due to the exploitation of rubber at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also the risky situations (thirst, mosquitoes, and high fever) that surrounded Arturo Cova in his relationship with the jungle.

¹⁶ The translation is mine.

La vorágine has its roots in the myth of El Dorado,¹⁷ a promise of infinite richness, where tons of gold could be found in a golden city, governed by a legendary golden king, and that motivated the quest for wealth of many Spanish conquistadors of the time. As in *Heart of Darkness*, *La vorágine* depicts the presence of Europeans performing imperialistic acts, but now the "devastated space" has moved from Africa to South America. Mejías-López argues that Rivera progressively states the different stages of a long exploiting genealogy starting with the Christian missionaries, "A El Dorado y las Amazonas, le sigue la labor evangelizadora y destructora de los misioneros," (374), followed by scientists and explorers, "...científicos y exploradores en múltiples viajes de reconocimiento," (374), and ending with the powerful, and corrupted administrative system of the Colombian government influenced by foreign power, "...continúa con la participación de los mecanismos reguladores y administrativos del estado, tanto en la figura de visitantes e inspectores que dejan pasar por alto los abusos, como en la sucesión de oficinas y consulados que aparecen en el texto" (374). I believe Rivera is trying to show us that behind the imperialistic machinery lies an obscure, well-structured system that embraces different sectors of society, both nationally and internationally. Because of this, borders are broken, and the power of authority is no other than the one imposed within the *caucherías* or rubber factories. This communication or interrelation between nations is what we have come to understand in today's world as *globalization*. Mejías-López points out that Marx and Engels had already anticipated this phenomenon: "In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations" (375). What is clear at this point is that everything that occurs in the *selva* is linked to the exploitation of both nature and human life, and that the implications of a system like the one of globalization can bring devastating results if nations do not adopt proper operation measurements.

Rivera seems to be as concerned about revealing the doubtful relationships that exist among missionaries, state inspectors, company owners, and government corruption, as he is about denouncing the abuses against the environment, done by the *caucheros* (people that work in the rubber factories) under the orders of the company's owner, where millions of trees are destroyed every year in Colombia: "Los caucheros que hay en Colombia destruyen anualmente millones de árboles" (170). Rivera, unlike Conrad, directly criticizes the lack of concern or indifference of those who could do something to stop this problem, and do nothing; and at the same time, in Cova's words, Rivera promotes an insurgent attitude of the jungle to recover its sovereignty: "Pero yo no compadezco a quien no protesta. Un temblor de ramas no es rebeldía que me inspire afecto, ¿Por qué no ruge la selva y nos aplasta como reptiles para castigar la explotación vil?" (163) ("But I do not pity those who do not protest. A tremor of some tree branches is not an example of rebellion that I identify with, why does not the jungle roar and crush us like reptiles to punish this vile exploitation?").¹⁸

What catches my attention is how Rivera uses Cova, a writer, and eminent example of a "civilized" man, to reflect about and condemn the moral violence that the globalized enterprises of civilization and progress carry out. It is ironic to see how a representative of the civilized world

¹⁷ I can clearly observe that Conrad was very familiar with this myth by introducing, in his novel, an expedition that carried this name: *Eldorado Expedition*.

¹⁸ The translation is mine.

finds guilt in civilized men, and portrays them as "paladins" of destruction: "No obstante, es el hombre civilizado el paladín de la destrucción" (169). If Rivera's affirmation is correct, I cannot avoid wondering about the future of our environment, and therefore the future of our humanity placed in the hands of those who claim to have the knowledge and the will to serve us well.

As demonstrated in this essay, the visions of wilderness offered in *Heart of Darkness* and *La Vorágine* correspond to that of a threatening, challenging, and devouring nature that reverses the conventional ways of understanding colonization. This look of wilderness defies the traditional representations of nature with a natural world that is anything, but comforting. Here, the wilderness, as a material reality, exerts a deterministic control over the human colonizing subjects to the point of making them victims of their own imperialistic attitudes. It is interesting, and at the same time alarming to see how writers present a look at nature as a material force that claims its place in the ecological world; a look that ecocritics have understood as a wakeup call for action. Hopefully, with the great incursion of the term *ecocriticism* in literature, and culture, as well as the inspiring contributions of ecocritical writers such as Glen Love, a global awareness will develop to help stop the increasing threats that the natural world is facing nowadays, and at the same time will contribute to better the interrelationships between human beings and their environment. Glen Love states that "In a real world of increasing ecological crisis and political decision making, to exclude nature except for its cultural determination or linguistic construction is also to accept the continuing degradation of a natural world that is in most need of active human recognition and engagement" (8). An active and vital response is expected from everyone to participate in the future of a more preserved, and safe environment.

Heart of Darkness and *La vorágine* could, then, be read as ecological or environmental novels since both are set in places and time of ecological disasters and at the same time both novels can be linked to the ecologically destructive practices of Imperialism. In addition, these novels perform an act of denunciation of the colonizing enterprises carried out in the African Congo, and the Colombian jungles of the Amazon by European imperialists whose attitudes "disguise" themselves under the figure of *modernization* and *globalization* to make profit of regions that historically have suffered the consequences of having being labeled as Third World countries. It seems to me that today's mentality is focusing more on what McCarthy sees as an individual form of imperialism where "Imperialism prospers within a positive tradition that makes each subject the ruler of all natural objects" (636).

Finally, I find fascinating how different critics have tried to come up with possible explanations to interpret the underlying meaning in the last words pronounced by Kurtz before his death. I cannot stop wondering if they were meant to describe the demoralizing condition of humanity in the face of the irreversible damage perpetrated against the environment they inhabit: "The horror! The horror!" (58).

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