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Morphing Bodies: Strategies of Embodiment in Contemporary US Cultural Practices

Scott McCLINTOCK, & John MILLER (eds.),
Pynchon's California

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Scott McCLINTOCK, & John MILLER (eds.), *Pynchon's California*

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Scott McCLINTOCK, & John MILLER (eds.), *Pynchon's California*, Iowa City : University of Iowa Press, 2014, 238 pages, ISBN 978-1609382735, paperback, € 40.46/\$ 44.86/£ 41.50.

- ¹ *Pynchon's California* focuses on the author's minor novels, at the very least in terms of length: *The Crying of Lot 49* is 183 pages long, *Vineland* 385 and *Inherent Vice* 369, as compared to the 760 pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or to *Mason & Dixon's* 773 and *Against the Day's* 1085 pages. Critics have also used the adjective "minor"—in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, for example— qualitatively and not only quantitatively when dealing with the novels set in California, as well as similar adjectives such as Kakutani's "Pynchon Lite." In this they have been vindicated by the author's own disparaging comments on *The Crying of Lot 49* in his 1984 introduction to *Slow Learner*. However, as Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd has shown, the word "minor" need not be read disparagingly, given the author's attention to the Preterite and the overlooked. This is the view defended in the collection, and presented especially in the introduction by Scott McClintock and John Miller, and in the first introductory paper by Margaret Lynd, "Situated Fictions: Reading the California Novels against Thomas Pynchon's Narrative World," which sets the tone for the collection. Arguing that the less ambitious California novels can help readers and critics get clearer focus on important Pynchonian concerns, Lynd, following the model of Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges," coins the very useful phrase "situated hopes" to analyze the importance of the minor, i.e. small, personal, grounded acts of kindness whose redeeming nature is increasingly emphasized in Pynchon.
- ² The collection's effort is timely, as it echoes attempts at making sense of the larger novels as a continuous whole, a "Great Global Novel," as Tore Rye Andersen puts it, and it finds a

place between collections or books devoted to a single work and those devoted to the whole career of the novelist. It is quite convincing in vindicating the importance of the California novels, whether the articles treat the trilogy as a whole, as Margaret Lynd, Hanjo Berressem, Scott McClintock and Stephen Hock do, or whether they concentrate on two novels, as Scott McLeod does with *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, or on one, *Vineland* for Henry Veggian or *Inherent Vice* for Bill Millard and Christopher Coffman. While it is to be regretted that Pynchon's article on the 1965 Watts riots "Journey into the Mind of Watts" gets only brief mention and is not the subject of specific study, the attempts at linking the Californian novels to the other novels are particularly welcome. This is done at greater length in Margaret Lynd's article, or in Stephen Hock's, but really to some degree in all articles. The role of California in larger novels is also the explicit subject of one contribution, John Miller's "Reading, Resistance, and the California Turn in Pynchon's Cornucopian Fiction," which concentrates on the role California plays in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*, and more particularly at the end of the novels, where it seems to open possibilities amidst a largely deterministic sense of closure. This is pretty much the view of California developed in the papers in the collection, a pendulum swing against more postmodern, pessimistic readings of the novels, as the introduction insists. The pervasiveness of that reading in the collection is one of its limits, and I will first try to show that the collection could have gained much by dialoguing with dissenting views, and more generally by more firmly anchoring its discourse in current Pynchon criticism. I will conclude on the central place given to the reading experience in the articles, which to me is a very positive step for future directions in Pynchon criticism.

- 3 Let us first note, quite obviously, that the degree of adhesion to each paper will depend on the particular reader, as is bound to happen in such collections. Let us take the example of Christopher Coffman's "Postmodern Sacrality and *Inherent Vice*," which reads the novel as metaphysical noir, an investigation about an unknowable God who can only be approached through the sacralization of grounded acts of "mutual support and pilgrimage" (178). For Justin St. Clair, who reviewed the collection, Coffman's article is "an effort predicated on the existence of something called 'the divine Word,' which counts [him] out" (<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rereading-thomas-pynchon-postmodernism-political-real/>) and which decidedly counts me in. These differences in reactions make for the richness of the collection, and the completely different assessment of one paper, that of Coffman, which I found one of the most rewarding in the collection, does not prevent me from agreeing with the general conclusions drawn by St. Clair.
- 4 Far more telling about the collection than the different points of view each reader can have on particular perspectives offered by some papers are the perspectives that are not to be found, either in Coffman's contribution or in any other. In this respect, even though not all articles are equally enthusiastic about the Californian experiment, the view of California in the sixties, the period most emblematically associated with California in general, and with Pynchon's California in particular, lacks dissenting qualification in the collection. The sixties are somewhat unambiguously presented in a nostalgic light as a Golden Age that has since been lost. However, if California is "America's America"—the introduction to the collection quotes Richard Rodriguez's phrase—, I would argue that, as Pynchon relentlessly looks for the "fork in the road"—the expression is developed upon in *Gravity's Rainbow*—when things started to move in an ominous direction, his going back again and again to the sixties and to California is at least as much a search for the roots of our contemporary predicaments as a nostalgic counterpoint to them. This is true of the

three novels, and is essential to the tonality of the retrospective *Vineland* (1989) and *Inherent Vice* (2009). The absence of comment upon one particular episode in *Inherent Vice* in the collection is symptomatic. None of the articles which focus partly or exclusively on the novel comments upon or even mentions Doc Sportello's burst of violence at the end of the novel, while this episode is essential in complicating the view of the hero, and through him of the whole paradigm of the sixties.

- 5 Thus on occasions the articles fail to address episodes that would put to the test and thus qualify and enrich some of their conclusions, an essential endeavour for the less pessimistic view on Pynchon vindicated in the collection not to fall under accusations of sentimentalism. The articles would also often have gained by more consistent confrontation with both Pynchon criticism and criticism on California or more generally the West, as California is "west of the West," to recall Theodore Roosevelt's words, which are quoted in the introduction. Only a few articles base their analysis on part of the immense body of theoretical work which over the years has tried to define the Californian experience or the Western experience, and these contributions deserve mention. In one of the most convincing articles in the collection, "Life on the Beach: The Natural Elements in Thomas Pynchon's California Trilogy," Hanjo Berressem studies the natural elements in the trilogy following the template offered by Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear*. Bill Millard, in another strong paper, "Pynchon's Coast: *Inherent Vice* and the Twilight of the Spatially Specific," which had been available and remarked on the Internet for some time before the collection came out, reads Pynchon's distorted rendering of California's topography and toponymy in light of academic studies devoted to the development of the suburbs, especially in their Californian avatars. The other articles in the collection would have gained much by grounding more of their comments in criticism devoted to the very subject of the collection.
- 6 They also would have benefited from more extensive use of Pynchon criticism, as I will try to illustrate with some examples. Scott Mc Clintock's article, "The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State of California in Pynchon's Fiction," surprisingly but interestingly and convincingly enriches the obvious generic reference of the California novels, that of detective fiction, by studying its links with the melodrama. But certainly any article mentioning "private property" in its title and concentrating in part on *Vineland* would gain by quoting William Clarke's "'It's My Job, I Can't Back Out': The 'House' and Coercive Property Relations in Pynchon's *Vineland*," in the 2010 collection of essays *Against the Grain*. This might seem to be nit-picking, and maybe it is, but it is only a singular instance of frustration that could be felt more than once while reading the articles. Articles from *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* are quoted quite a few times, but occasions are missed to relate the discourse to other important articles relevant to the subject at hand. Some comments are surprising, such as when McClintock asserts that the ending of *Vineland* has been "more or less neglected by the more serious criticism"(98), whereas in a single collection of essays, *The Vineland Papers*, half the papers, unsurprisingly, mention the ending, and at least three deal with it at some length. Christopher Coffman, whose essay again I found very convincing, announces that his argument runs counter to the most part of "a survey of more recent secondary publications" (166), the detail of which will not be given, not even John McClure's *Partial Faiths*, while it would have been the occasion to take stock and to place the study more firmly in an essential—again, to me—field of Pynchon criticism, which I am sure will quote and borrow from Coffman.

- 7 Part of Coffman's rationale is that most criticism in the survey he fails to detail can be read as taking sides in a discussion of the sacred and the profane initiated by Edward Mendelson and Thomas Schaub in 1975 and 1976, which he does delineate. Even more explicitly, John Miller's article defends its own going back to *Mindful Pleasures* (1976) by a need to go back to the reader's experience after some years of insistence on the political and historical. The history of Pynchon criticism is made of such swings, and I do agree with the legitimacy of this particular one—in fact I welcome it—, but only inasmuch as it takes stock of the legacy of the last forty years of Pynchon criticism. I think this swing absolutely needs to anchor itself in a precise network of references to more contemporary criticism, even in a confrontational mode, if it is to turn into something constructive and not regressive, and to avoid self-defeatingly losing what is new in the outlook of each article into what is not new.
- 8 And a lot is indeed new in this attention to the reader's experience, which is acknowledged in the title to Lynd's and to Miller's essays, and developed upon in a number of essays. In "Profane Illuminations: Postmodernism, Realism, and the Holytail Marijuana Crop in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*," Henry Veggian's definition of "stoner realism" works less as a recuperation of Pynchon as a realist—except perhaps if *Naked Lunch* is also a realist novel— but then the term might prove to be a bit too extensive to be really useful, rather than as a description of the reader's experience. Two trends emerge, both quite telling as to the shift in direction, and as to its as yet limited scope. The first is the emphasis on the question of genre, for example with the detective story in Scott McLeod's "Playgrounds of Detection: The Californian Private Eye in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*." This generic approach is most fruitful in the collection when the complexity of Pynchon's generic affiliations is echoed in the sometimes paradoxical mingling together of two genres, in Veggian's oxymoronic "stoner realism," in Coffman's metaphysical noir or in the links between the melodrama and the noir in an enlightening part of Scott McClintock's essay.
- 9 The articles that most closely scrutinize the detail of the text are also those which take an avowedly thematic line, in the form of Berressem's attention to the elements or in Stephen Hock's "Maybe He'd Have to Just Keep Driving, or Pynchon on the Freeway," which analyses the ambivalence of the theme of the freeway in the California novels and in the larger novels. In both cases the chosen themes lead the theoretical concerns to be linked to the analysis of specific quotations in the text. In these and in most of the articles devoted to the question of genre, efforts are made to quote not just the expected passages, even though the "hieroglyphic streets" of *The Crying of Lot 49* and the ending of *Inherent Vice* do pop up regularly, but also to try to come to terms with other long passages, more representative of the diversity of the reader's experience. Of course good Pynchon criticism over the years has always done that, but the explicit efforts at placing this approach at the center is the most positive element in this uneven collection, which would have benefited from more anchorage in Pynchon criticism, but which proposes a step in the right direction to address a question not often spelled out although it might be essential to why we all love Pynchon finally: how do his sentences make our hearts sing?

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