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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews, Spring 2020

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Book Reviews of:

Dalsgaard (ed) – *Thomas Pynchon in Context*

Chetwynd, Freer, Maragos (eds) – *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender*

Mogultay – *The Ruins of Urban Modernity: Thomas Pynchon's Against the Day*

Alworth – *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*

Mullins – *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social*

Henry – *New Media and the Transformation of Postmodern American Literature: From Cage to Connection*

den Dulk – *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*

Anderson – *Postmodern Artistry in Medievalist Fiction: An International Study*

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Palleau-Papin (ed) – *Under Fire; William T. Vollmann, The Rifles: A Critical Study*

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**Inger H. Dalsgaard (ed.), *Thomas Pynchon in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). 390pp**

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*Thomas Pynchon in Context* is a thorough collection of forty-four relatively short essays written by a range of scholars, including several of the most recognizable names in Pynchon studies, on a wide variety of contexts and themes in Thomas Pynchon's *oeuvre*. It's also the first volume in Cambridge's well-established "Literature in Context" series to feature a living writer. Unlike many "companion" guides to major writers, which isolate specific novels or a few representative authorial themes, this book is divided into three parts that reframe the notion of "context" as a dynamic, fluid force in relation to Pynchon's writings. The first and most original part, "Times and Places," features a set of thirteen essays (designed to be read together) that analyze specific historical and geographical contexts important not only to Pynchon's writings but also to—what can be pieced together about—his personal life. The second and richest part, "Culture, Politics and Society," is composed of a looser cluster of twenty essays that examine major themes in Pynchon's novels—from well-known, deeply theorized topics such as "Conspiracy and Paranoia" and "War and Power" to previously under-theorized themes such as "Real Estate and the Internet" and "Death and Afterlife." The third and shortest part, "Approaches and Readings," is comprised of eleven essays that survey a variety of methodological approaches that readers can (and, for the most part, already do) utilize to make sense of Pynchon's demanding fiction.

While this tripartite ordering structure may seem arbitrary at first glance, it actually reflects Dalsgaard's ambitious goal—perhaps even too ambitious for one volume, but more on that question below—to appeal to multiple audiences: scholars, undergraduate and graduate students, and general Pynchon readers. "It is to help all such readers and students that *Thomas Pynchon in Context* [has been published],"

Dalsgaard writes in the introduction, emphasizing the sustained, multi-decade appeal of Pynchon's novels inside and outside academia, as this book seeks to provide "the most comprehensive source yet published on the many ways in which his writing engages the wider world" (1).

To fully grasp Dalsgaard's rationale here, the best place to begin, somewhat ironically, is with the book's final chapter: Hanjo Berressem's "Critical Literature Review." Not only does Berressem usefully trace three distinct phases within the scholarly reception history of Pynchon's eight novels over fifty years, but he also indirectly sketches out the dense networks of academic meta-context that *Thomas Pynchon in Context* seeks to compliment and partially build on (without drowning in). In the first embryonic phase of Pynchon studies, Berressem notes, critics and scholars just tried to make sense of Pynchon's fictional labyrinths "by organizing their complexities and convolutions into meaningful patterns," eventually pinpointing what would become the most familiar Pynchonian themes: entropy, information theory, and paranoia (356–57). If this first phase cast Pynchon as a Spenglerian skeptic predicting civilizational decline, the second phase deployed the insights of Derrida and Foucault to shift Pynchon's reputation from "a prophet of doom... into the patron saint of deconstruction and post-modernism" (357). Coinciding with the publication of *Vineland* (1990), the third phase downplayed Pynchon's image as "a master of ironic detachment and playfulness" and reimagined him as a writer of deep "affective intensity" and sociopolitical discernment (358). Although some residual traces of each phase are sprinkled throughout *Thomas Pynchon in Context*, Dalsgaard seems to have structured the book to avoid monumentalizing Pynchon within any one scholarly mode. In this sense, the book is designed to allow different kinds of readers, from the academic specialist to the Pynchon novice, to draw their own conclusions since, as Dalsgaard asserts, "the great appeal to Pynchon's writing lies in how open it is to the world and almost everything in it" (2). One could even say, then, that Dalsgaard structures the book according to an implicit motto about the humbling experience of encountering Pynchon for virtually any reader, which was perhaps best articulated by Jonathan Lethem in his 2013 review of *Bleeding Edge*: "figuring out what it is like to read Pynchon is what it is like to read Pynchon."

As a result, this book's collected essays are, in the aggregate, strong and insightful, but uneven; this unevenness has (crucial caveat) much less to do with quality than with relation to audience. Some chapters seem designed primarily for first-time Pynchon readers, while others seem to exist mostly for scholars and advanced graduate students, and it is difficult to know from the table of contents alone which audience any given chapter will be geared towards.

Take, for example, the chapter "Postmodernism" by Brian McHale, who, of course, laid one of Pynchon Studies' foundation stones with his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale's chapter may be of some interest for the Pynchonian cognoscenti—e.g., his argumentative point toward chapter's end about the persistence of postmodernism in *Bleeding Edge*—but it will more likely be regarded as a refreshing review, an old walk down well-trodden critical paths. On the other hand, for the Pynchon novice tackling *Gravity's Rainbow* for the first time or an undergraduate seeking to understand what Pynchon has to do exactly with postmodernism, this chapter will be deeply useful. After briefly sketching out the definition of postmodernism as a historical periodization term, McHale isolates a cluster of relatively distinct, non-exhaustive features associated with postmodern theory and aesthetics (i.e., incredulity, irony, double-coding, simulation, decentering, ontology, and the spatial turn) and explains each one in a concise paragraph. Immediately following this list, McHale identifies and explains the manifestation of each feature in *Gravity's Rainbow*, producing in just a few pages a succinct double list that serves as an excellent breakdown of Pynchon's fundamental relationship to postmodernism. By contrast, Tore Rye Andersen's "Materialist Readings" chapter will probably be of limited use for first-time Pynchon readers, but of serious interest to many scholars, since Andersen provides a trenchant materialist reading of the para-textual features of various editions of *Gravity's Rainbow*, from the 1973 Viking first edition to the 2006 Penguin Classics Deluxe edition. In the interest of space, I would like to identify just one interpretative payoff of Andersen's materialist hermeneutic; he points out that the seven typographical squares that divide chapters in most editions of *Gravity's Rainbow*—which critics have long read symbolically as the sprocket holes of a film reel in order to make the ambitious claim that the entire novel should be

seen as a movie-like text—were conceived not by Pynchon, but “by Viking’s copy editor Edwin Kennebeck and were meant to represent the holes in ‘censored correspondence from World War II soldiers’” (318). Andersen’s point that something as ostensibly mundane as chapter dividers reveals “how nonverbal bibliographical codes can affect literary interpretation of a work” opens promising scholarly avenues for more materialist readings, a relatively new and valuable departure in Pynchon studies (318).

A significant percentage of the book’s chapters do strike a balance between appealing to specialists and non-specialists, although these pieces tend to be the result of a unique combination of scholarly proficiency and thematic resonance. On “Sex and Gender,” for instance, Ali Chetwynd and Georgios Maragos argue that “Pynchon’s treatment of sex and gender is full of *apparent* simplicities multiply undermined and rewritten,” thereby implicitly resituating debates about sex and gender in Pynchon from the thematic background to the foreground of his core vision vis-à-vis political structures of power (122, emphasis mine). Similarly, in “Ecology and the Environment,” Christopher K. Coffman not only introduces newer readers to Pynchon’s ecological concerns—asserting that the much-quoted passage in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that “*everything is connected, everything in the Creation*” is as much an ecological point as a paranoid political one—but also gestures toward novel scholarly approaches that Pynchon’s late fiction throws into relief, such as “the environmental qualities of digital technologies, which can operate as ecosystems of their own” in *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*. In “Capitalism and Class,” a chapter that skillfully encapsulates the central theme of the “political Pynchon” turn in recent scholarship, Jeffrey Severs interrogates “Pynchon’s canny ability to parse capitalism as a totalizing system,” charting Pynchon’s multi-century analysis of capitalism which stretches from eighteenth century slave-based markets in *Mason & Dixon* to *fin de siècle* imperial markets in *Against the Day* to, finally, neoliberal financial markets in *Bleeding Edge* (195). In “Digital Readings,” Joseph Tabbi does an equally good job of moving between a specialized scholarly discourse (specifically the intersection between Pynchon’s novels and Kittlerian postwar media theory) and a more popular “lit-crit” discourse that examines how Pynchon’s late fiction is able “to engage [so]

forcefully and critically with the by now digitally integrated media that ‘determine our situation’” (327).

Overall, though, this book’s standout section, and the most directly related to context, is the constellation of chapters in part one, “Time and Places,” that examine within Pynchon’s novels their vast span of geographical settings and temporal frames. As Dalsgaard notes in the introduction, while every Pynchonite knows that his novels “cover hundreds of years and almost every continent,” it can be difficult to simultaneously comprehend the true breadth and depth of their *cumulative* achievement. When reading this archipelago of essays together as a set of context-enhancing pieces, then, one begins to feel like Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* as she gazes down into the “ordered swirl of houses and streets” in San Narciso and begins to divine “a general sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate”; essentially, one intuits the sweeping, ambitious pattern in relation to Pynchon’s entire novelistic project: to write something like a near-global “counter-history” of the post-Enlightenment West (*Lot 49* 14). In short, if one wishes to grasp for the first time, or be newly reminded of, the socio-aesthetic significance of Pynchon’s *oeuvre*, these chapters are invaluable.

Considering the scope and purpose of this book, the chapter topics have been chosen well, but if there is one glaring omission, it’s of a standalone chapter on something like “Race and Racism.” As David Witzling has persuasively argued in *Everybody’s America*, Pynchon’s collected writings mark “an attempt to acknowledge the implicit racism in many elements of the dominant and figuratively white American culture and to grapple with the psychological effects of that racism on both white and black Americans” (6). Although many chapters in *Thomas Pynchon in Context* allude in passing to Pynchon’s treatment of race throughout his career, and a few chapters even perform sustained analyses of race (e.g., Michael Harris does a fine job of analyzing the twin themes of colonialism and racism in his chapter on “Africa and Latin America,” and David Cowart usefully explains how Pynchon’s postmodern historiographic approach de-naturalizes the historically racist assumptions of empire in “History and Metahistory”), race tends to appear only as a context for Pynchon’s critiques of colonialism and imperialism. From his major nonfiction essay “Journey

into the Mind of Watts" (1966) to his longest short-story "The Secret Integration" (1964) to his surreal reimagining of the "Homeboy" chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in *Gravity's Rainbow* to his depictions of transatlantic slavery in *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon seems much more attentive to the complexities of racial identity, especially the reified concept of "whiteness" within the history of American racism, than is evidenced in this book.

Although Pynchon studies is a crowded field, and has been for quite a while, as demonstrated by (according to [Vheissu.net](http://Vheissu.net)) the nearly four thousand published items of varying length and kind, *Thomas Pynchon in Context* is a valuable, versatile addition to the "Pyndustry." Novice Pynchon readers can expect many illuminating, largely accessible, accounts of the import of Pynchon's fifty-year writing career. Seasoned Pynchonians can expect not only familiar critical approaches to Pynchon, but also several valuable reassessments of his work in relation to newer scholarly frameworks.



**Ali Chetwynd, Joanna Freer, Georgios Maragos (eds.),  
*Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (University of Georgia  
Press, 2018). xxxviii + 250pp**

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Is Pynchon's work bound to remain an exclusive frat boy club or, in more academic terms, a notorious spawning ground for masculinist fantasies of domination and subordination, hardcore pornography and female objectification? Hot on the heels of the International Pynchon Week held in Athens in 2015, which aimed to "reconsider the outer limits and internal limitations of the whole field of Pynchon studies" after the release of *Bleeding Edge* (2013) (Chetwynd and Maragos 2014), participants came to the conclusion that it was more than high time for a book-length collection of essays to put under scrutiny the divisive issue, prevalently discussed during the conference, of sex and gender in Pynchon's work.

*Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* delivers on the promise to examine this gaping hole in Pynchon studies and to engage with Pynchon's reputation for callously indulging in the fetishization of sexual violence. Acknowledging that Pynchon is often lumped together with other white male peers such as Barth, Gaddis, DeLillo or Wallace, the introduction sets out to open a discussion of Pynchon's novels in which sex and gender are not "isolated" themes but "dynamic determinants of his complex constructive commitments" (xi/xii). Including a compelling bird's-eye survey of the different directions Pynchon gender criticism has taken over the past forty years, the introduction warns against the dangers of periodizing or canonizing a body of work as a postmodern monolithic block incapable of moving; likewise, in its search for variables and constants in Pynchon's attitude towards the broader question of gendered power dynamics, it also warns against the pitfalls of seeking singular turning points in attitude within Pynchon's writing career. Through the entire collection, this reminder is frequently moved close to the spotlight.

Molly Hite's opening chapter, "When Pynchon was a Boys' Club," sheds light onto her difficult experience teaching Pynchon's early work to young women as "a

product of his era, an era that in many respects he represented satirically but without seriously questioning norms of gender identity and behavior" (3). As she reviews the reasons why Pynchon lorded over the era as the critical poster boy for the overwhelming superiority of male writers, Hite recalls the scarcity of women attending a feminist panel on *Vineland* (1990) at the 1991 MLA convention. She then takes up the argument she made at that panel (subsequently published as "Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*"). She recalls that Pynchon's first post-hiatus novel presents a shift from the way "interiority and agency are attributes that are muted in the depiction of [...] feminine good women" from the first three novels" (5). From these reminiscences of earlier research on a later book, Hite moves back to *V.* (1963) to explore Pynchon's prefeminist attitude at a time when the critical framework for feminist theory had not yet been laid out. Encapsulating *V.* as "a fascinating site for tracking ideologies of gender" bequeathed to Pynchon (6), Hite goes on to examine the midcentury essentialized gender norms that his first novel espouses. Thus, she identifies an underlying tension at work in the writer's construction of gender, poised between parodying and condoning misogyny: while the "good woman" demonstrates her acceptance of objecthood through her "superabundant nurture" and "caretaking nature" (9), Pynchon struggles to imply authorial criticism in his tales of sexual abuse. This scrutiny of the cultural context leads Hite to put forth one of her most compelling arguments: that the mystification around the construct of the female rape victim and the crime of rape itself exposes Pynchon's "good woman" to alignment with a stifling conformity that threatens to oppress the creativity of male writers. Inheriting from Norman Mailer the identification of the act of writing with masculine power, little is it surprising, then, to see Pynchon disparagingly devise his first female novelist character (Mafia Winsome) as one whose words are associated with menstrual periods.

Segueing smoothly from Hite's concerns, the first multi-essay section of the volume's four tackles the issue of gendered norms in Pynchon's fiction. In "From Hard Boiled to Over Easy: Reimagining the Noir Detective in *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*," Jennifer Backman draws on Christopher Breu's reading of masculinity in hard-boiled fiction and pulp magazines to address the interplay of genre and gender in Pynchon's later work. She initially argues that in his reassessment of the noir

detective, “Pynchon presents a challenge to the rigid, confining masculinity in which the genre rests” (19). Such argument follows the precedent set by Brian McHale’s piece on genre-poaching in *Against the Day*, in which he contended that Pynchon appropriates the conventions of genres to bring to light the repressed content of the genre itself. Backman’s understanding of Doc Sportello and Maxine Tarnow as renegotiated variants of gender and agency in classic noir fiction, however, is only a stepping stone in her demonstration. The most appealing part of her study of genre subversion lies in the oft-overlooked characters of Shasta Fay and Nicholas Windust, who she presents as cross-generational variations on the classic femme fatale figure. Pynchon’s revision of this trope, Backman argues, enables him to dramatize the cultural shifts induced by contemporary global capitalism: while Shasta uses her augmented sexuality to force Doc to locate violence within the “overarching systems of authority and control the hippie worldview attempts to resist, [...] making sure that she is not simply a stand-in for the detective’s own anxieties” (24–25), Windust is in turn codified into “a stand-in for paternalistic systems as a whole,” which poses a threat to Maxine’s agency and awareness of her gendered position (30).

The second chapter of this section, “Of ‘Maidens’ and Towers: Oedipa Maas, Maxine Tarnow, and the possibility of resistance” also chooses a comparative approach to Pynchon’s fiction, as Kostas Kaltsas suggests that *Bleeding Edge* offers a concrete point of comparison on which to base assessments of Pynchon’s maturation as a writer amid epochal changes. After dispelling the notion that *Bleeding Edge* should only be envisioned as a cosmetic gloss on *The Crying of Lot 49*, Kaltsas draws our attention to the way the Tristero and DeepArcher eventually fail to serve “as an alternative and antagonist to a commercialized, hypermonitored world, [...] which] carries the potential for some kind of organized resistance” (41). Kaltsas develops an analysis of family and other communities as a viable alternative model to the experience of exitlessness underscored in Pynchon’s novels. As opposed to Oedipa’s mental entrapment in binarities, Maxine’s conception of herself as a mother extends beyond her nuclear household. For Kaltsas, this revision points toward an ordinariness that enables her to cope with the world apparatus outlined by the powerful and the enfranchised of the twenty-first century.

In “Between Sangha and Sex Work: The Karmic Middle Path of *Vineland's* Female Characters,” Christopher Kocela unfolds a seldom-discussed dialogic tension throughout *Vineland*, engaging in a sustained study of both feminism and Buddhism. Kocela provides a fruitful comparison of DL Chastain and Frenesi Gates in light of the general failure of American Buddhism, notoriously marred by accounts of sexual misconduct in the 1980s. He detects in Pynchon’s post-hiatus novel a connection between the renewal of Buddhist spirituality and gender-defying attitudes which “provides a ready framework for introducing the kinds of magical performance found in Mahayana Buddhist structures” (56), as ninja-trained DL Chastain works for the powerless in her very own gendered terms – that is to say by being neither male nor female, a middle path foregrounded in Buddhist arguments about the emptiness of gender. Although Kocela expresses reservations regarding Pynchon’s tone-deaf depiction of DL’s ability to probe the neoliberal nature of the sex slavery she is made to take part to after her assignation at a Japanese whorehouse, these limitations are rather secondary when compared to the model that stands at the other end of the karmic spectrum. While Frenesi’s enthusiasm for mystical oneness reflects the attitude of most American Buddhists in the 1960s, her “bad karma, manifested in her recurring subordination to men in power, is the result of her conditioning by visual media” (63): in the wake of controversies involving Buddhist institutions, Kocela argues that it is a karmic predisposition to sexual subordination which prevents Frenesi, but not DL, from shifting ideological definitions of gender and thus effectively enacting political change against the three poisons – corporate capitalism, the military, and the media – that karma in *Vineland* must overcome.

The volume’s second set of essays, on “Sex Writing,” takes as its springboard the premature consensus achieved by Michael Bérubé when he figured that Pynchon’s pornography should not be regarded “as the locus of transgression and disturbance [...] but as the enactment and exposure of strategies of power, domination and control” (266). Doug Haynes’ “Allons Enfants! Pynchon’s Pornographies” does not deal exclusively with *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), even though the novel is at the heart of its critical endeavor. Haynes writes in that tradition of Pynchon criticism that abundantly looks into epistemological and philosophical concepts in order to elucidate

the texts that are informed by them. His study often leaves Pynchon's novels aside to provide readers with a wide-ranging discussion of pornography as an object of discourse, drawing from Sontag, Deleuze, Bataille, or Foucault. The chapter first uses Pynchon's "How to be a Luddite" to examine how pornography has historically been framed as among the lower "cheap thrill" genres which were, as Haynes paraphrases Pynchon with characteristic wryness, "barred from the canon, due apparently to an official parsimony regarding the sublimation of literary affect" (69). His investigation into the intersection of affect and pornography then further discusses how our "soft bodies are implicated in Pynchon's erotic/pornographic prose" (84). Pynchon's indulgence in sometimes amusing, often transgressive and disturbing sexual activity leads Haynes to examine how the novels suggest sexual economies can be read in relation to capitalist development, most notably with child sexualization manufactured "as another land grab for neoliberalism, another virgin for desire to conquer" (85).

The next chapter, "Queer Sex, Queer Text: S&M in *Gravity's Rainbow*" addresses the scarcity of S/M discussions in the field of Pynchon studies. Marie Franco builds on the theoretical work of Brian McHale and Michel Foucault to revise Bérubé's stance on Pynchon's pornographic writing. She boldly declines to view S/M pleasures as a mere political metaphor for the power dynamics that structure the novel, and thus she challenges the position that S/M perpetuates misogyny and sex crime. Developments in queer theory enable her to articulate the unacknowledged theoretical similarities between postmodernist ontological instability and queer resistances, such as Pudding's coprophagic rituals, revealing the "potential destabilization of or resistance to hegemonic narratives" posed by the "erotic practices that fall outside the dominant hetero-/homo- binary" (89). As she moves on to Gottfried's gender-bending Nazi roleplay, Franco makes a brilliant claim as she integrates into her demonstration the notion of "disidentification" defined by José Esteban Muñoz to look at how those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate majority culture by enacting a simultaneous identification with the masculinity promoted by patriarchal narratives and appropriation of that masculinity for homoerotic ends and interests. Such interiorized passing, she argues, takes on a subversive edge as "Blicero

disidentifies with the Nazi privilege of hypermasculinity while simultaneously using this disidentificatory performance to sexualize and feminize the power associated with his military rank" (98), thus deconstructing the state-defined heteronormative discourses that bind identity.

In "What Would Charlie Do? Narrowing the Possibilities of a Pornographic Redemption in Thomas Pynchon's novels," Richard Moss contextualizes the heyday of the California porn scene in the 1970s in order to demonstrate how the mainstream-ward shift of the adult-entertainment industry instances different politics of resistance in Pynchon's fiction. Drawing from John McClure's *Partial Faiths*, Moss contends that the radical possibilities of pornography are heavily inflected by a post-secular vision that initially promises to break political power and sets in motion a social transformation or "powerful, liberating, and often redemptive" change (109). Throughout his discussion, Moss pits *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Inherent Vice* against one another in a most insightful way, observing a narrowing of the redemptive scope of Pynchon's pornographies. While in *Gravity's Rainbow* "porn is intended to provide redemptive avenues that mirror Pynchon's theology and politics," the transgressive nature of porn withers in *Inherent Vice* into a "homogenized and packaged" market which "has become a huge and exploitative industry in itself" (113). Most importantly, Moss uses this slippage to steer his discussion towards the notion of salvation. Though Pynchon's pornographic writing extensively caters to the male gaze and offers up spiritual possibilities and catharsis to male participants, glimpses of redemption become much scarcer in *Inherent Vice*. Pornography, relentlessly under neoliberal pressure, leads male characters to overlook "given routes out of their oppression, but to spiral further into controlling fetishism, damaging pornographic fantasy and exploitative actions" (119).

"This Set of Holes, Pleasantly Framed': Pynchon the Competent Pornographer and the Female Conduit" inaugurates the third section of the collection, which focuses on the conflation of sex and violence in Pynchon's fiction. Concerned like Moss with the evolution of pornographic mediums, Simon Cook makes a solid case regarding Pynchon's anachronistic representation of porno tropes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *Against the Day*. Cook browses the writer's database of

pornography in order to give a twist to Brian McHale's argument that the novelist appropriates popular genres from the time frame in which his novels are set, contending that Pynchon has kept up with the successive format innovations of the sex industry. The porn-fueled fantasies of *Gravity's Rainbow*, he observes, were written during a certain golden age. However, *Vineland* retreats from the deviations of the previous novel as "the dominant medium is prime-time television scrubbed clean of sexual content at a time when Reaganite neoconservatism united under a flag of convenience with antiporn feminism" (127). This gripping contextualization is further completed as Cook identifies in the sex scenes of *Against the Day* fetish markets common to today's age of streaming, where characters "live within the narrative confines of fin-de-siècle genres but have sex in a twenty-first century vernacular" (139). Then, the chapter seeks to show how Pynchon's narratives capitalize on low-brow pornographic subgenres ranging from gonzo to Nazisploitation films. Cook pores over a detailed roster of perversities to foreground his understanding of Pynchon's evolving strategies for scripting and diagnosing power relations, whereby the female body is used to route interconnection between intelligence services, capitalism, and fascism.

The next chapter, "Representations of Sexualized Children and Child Abuse in Thomas Pynchon's Fiction," expands on Hite's discussion about the limited scope of critical terminology which seemingly prevents Pynchon from addressing sexual violence in a fully satisfying way. The first point that Simon de Bourcier puts forward is that Pynchon's parody of the erotic invites more complicity than scathing critique. De Bourcier frames childhood innocence as a commodity which both incites desire and is ready to be consumed by a post-war culture replete with the explicitly sexual overtones of Shirley Temple movies. Pynchon's fiction, he claims, is steeped in such erotic representations of childhood innocence that seamlessly structure the language in which adults think about other men and women. De Bourcier then summons Judith Herman's reconsideration of father-daughter incest, in which she explores the culture of victim-blaming that still shapes the experience of trauma. This intersection enables him to further argue that Pynchon's inability to disavow the sexualization of children is embedded in discourses that absolve the abuser's guilt by removing blame from the offender and placing it on the victim: just as

Nabokov's Humbert insists that it is Lolita who seduces him, de Bourcier turns to Slothrop's sexual encounter with Bianca and Franz Pökler's incestuous desires to claim that likewise, Pynchon presents us with "the Nabokovian template of seductive daughter" (153). Most notably, this fertile parallel between Pynchon, Nabokov, and Temple spawns an engaging discussion in which de Bourcier goes on to examine intertextual instances of sexualized childhood in *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge*, where Pynchon shows the innocence of child actors either traded on the consumer market or defiled for indoctrination purposes.

In "'Our Women are Free': Slavery, Gender and Representational Bias in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*," Angus McFadzean offers a minute reading in which he frames three different forms of relations underpinned by the master-slave opposition. The first one consists in "characters trapped in a master-slave relation with a higher, abstract, disembodied power" (164): examining overlooked characters such as Lord Clive of the East India Company or Maskelyne of the Royal Society, he considers that even the higher-positioned male characters are not totally immune to being subordinated by elusive powers. The second form of relation exposes the dangers of using rigidly binary categories. McFadzean dwells on fluid master-slave relations in which men either "submit to their female partners" to allow for greater equality or internalize the "patriarchal desire to coerce and co-opt other sexual and gender identities" (167/168): his examination of Dixon's visit to Malay whorehouses or the drunken antics of the crew of the Seahorse provides a valuable insight into the complexity of power relations in the novel, which cannot be narrowed down to a simple masculine-feminine divide. The final relation that McFadzean identifies focuses on gender performance. McFadzean recognizes that most characters fail to register that "gender is the naturalized product of patriarchy" (172). Yet, he also sheds light on two characters that have drawn little critical attention, Captain Zhang and Philip Dimdown, whose emancipation from gender enables them to briefly abandon patriarchally-sanctioned masculine identities, before eventually repressing nonnormative behaviors.

Neatly placed in the last section of the collection – which concerns family – "Pynchon and Gender: A View from the Typescript of *V*." explores Hite's earlier



statement that *V.* is heavily steeped in the pervasive sexism of mid-twentieth century U.S. culture. Luc Herman and John M. Krafft offer a substantive discussion of the sitcom scene that Pynchon cut from the original typescript of his first novel, featuring a suburban middle-class family in the 1950s. Foregrounding their work on Pynchon's dissatisfaction with an episode that he deleted and dismissed as an instance of "ponderous Social Commentary," Herman and Krafft first take a closer look at the parody of a domestic architecture structured within definitions of gender. They dispel, however, the notion that the episode might be content only with parodying the overarching normativity of the sitcom genre. While it does verge on heavy-handed didacticism that Pynchon may have wished to edit out, the episode, they argue, intuitively captures the shifting gender roles that sitcoms had actually started to explore, though ultimately undercut by the impulse toward hegemonic consent: "the *V.* typescript echoes these exceptions in that it questions the compatibility of the stereotypical roles, the tensions between which almost result in a crisis; but in the end, the dominant ideology prevails, and order of sorts returns" (184). Cutting this scene from the plot, they show, gives the novel more wiggling room to stay un-didactic as it delves into the mythologizing of the feminine and its degradation.

The next piece, "'Homer is My Role Model': Father-Schlemihls, Sentimental Families and Pynchon's Affinities with *The Simpsons*," offers a much-awaited investigation into the proximity of Pynchon's gender politics with the oppositional credentials of Matt Groening's yellow characters, especially overdue after Pynchon's self-mocking *Simpsons* cameo with a paper bag over his head in 2004. After singling out stylistic and thematic common grounds, ranging from "utterly digressive and farcical plotting, relentless parody, shallow (yet still sharp) characterization, zany reference making" to "a strong distrust of authority" (196/197), Jeffrey Severs turns to a more subtle convergence as he grapples with domestic scenes and parenting issues in Pynchon's post-hiatus work. The most salient argument of his chapter lies in his insight into the seemingly impossible balance between irony and sentimentality in *Bleeding Edge*. Indeed, Severs builds on the novel's allusion to Roger Rosenblatt's disputed assertion that, if one good thing could come out of an event like 9/11, it

would be the bringing about of the end of irony. Severs contends that Rosenblatt's pronouncement did not toll the knell of ironists, as routinely invoked by the novel's intersections with far-from-literal sitcoms. Although he acknowledges that Pynchon's more recent fiction is increasingly concerned with family sentimentalism and pastoral elegies that hark back to narratives that never existed, he is also careful to point out that such sentimentalism does not weaken the pull of irony in Pynchon's novel. If anything both modes "are necessary to a sophisticated and affectively effective response to geopolitical trials" (206).

Catherine Flay's "Conservatism as Radicalism: Family and Antifeminism in *Vineland*" considers the commodification of the counterculture movement, a plastic-wrapped piece of ersatz far removed from its revolutionary roots. Flay sets to follow the roundabout turn to capitalism, "the effect of which is to convert the movement into an image rather than an actuality, rendering it a revolution in style rather than substance, [...] the result of cynical co-optation" (211). In doing so, her paper convincingly surveys Pynchon's representation of economic organizations from the 1970s to the 1990s: while *Gravity's Rainbow* proved a compelling novel at the time it was published because of the vision of global conspiracy it delivered, *Vineland* posits late capitalism as an undeniable force behind a global pyramid racket. Flay argues that oppositional forces have not only been co-opted by capitalist models. The ascendancy of post-countercultural imagery and visual effects, in *Vineland*'s scenes of consuming delight, dovetails with a re-organization of economic structures whereby capitalism is "capable of adopting different and even opposing causes in its zeal to maximize profits" (214). After this foray into post-Fordist capitalism, Flay examines gendered modes of radicalism in *Vineland*. If the family stands against capitalism's individualistic ideology, men and women have it different ways. On the one hand, Flay claims, "Zoyd challenges the model of *homo economicus* through his accession to *homo familiaris*, [...] able to embrace the diversification of gendered behavior championed by the counterculture" (218): it is his fluidity that enables him to map efforts at countercapitalist radicalism. On the other hand, Flay suggests that the very same kind of fluidity limits *women's* capacity for effecting radical change in *Vineland*, thus presenting them with a double blind that

the novel's men do not suffer. Frenesi's understanding of individualism, branded by the countercultural feminist agenda, leads her away from family into complicity with the state and market values.

Fittingly, Inger H. Dalsgaard's contribution "Choice or Life? Deliberations on Motherhood in Late-Period Pynchon" enables this collection to be bookended by a last look at the history of social power structures that shape Pynchon's fiction. More particularly, Dalsgaard seeks to situate Pynchon's response to the shift from second-wave feminist ideologies to the credentialization of motherhood called "New Momism," a choice narrative which delineates "bad" or "good enough" mothering. Though Pynchon's stance on motherhood, she argues, has changed, papers dedicated to the issue have been scant. Dalsgaard identifies three main reasons for that oversight in Pynchonian studies. Firstly, demeaned and submissive women people Pynchon's fiction more densely than strong female characters do, thus inciting fewer feminist readings; secondly, Pynchon's sexism has been perceived as a "complex post-modern writer's arsenal for exposing our own flawed assumptions and expectations" (228); finally, and it is the argument she wishes to put forth, feminists were probably too busy voicing their discontent with more immediate matters than the writings of a male author who did not contribute to their struggle. Dalsgaard moves on to examine Pynchon's depiction of motherhood after *Vineland* inaugurated a series of novels that entrench around the family unit. While fragmented families are sentimentally brought together in late-period Pynchon, in what may appear to be a retrograde fashion, such depictions reflect how Pynchon writes consciously within a contemporary feminist field, thus weaving his gender politics into the individualistic approach of choice feminism. Dalsgaard views the individual choices of more recent female characters as inherently feminist and even empowering, as when Lake Traverse refuses to procreate and to indulge in masochistic sexuality; yet, such choices bring no rewards, especially at a time when "new momism" ideals insist that no woman is complete until she has children. After she remarks upon state encroachment on women's freedom of choice in the last decades, Dalsgaard ironically reads Lake Traverse as a test case for a pronatalist and prolife vision motherhood, as "Pynchon's late writing

contributes to this attempt at integration by sanctifying motherhood and not highlighting acceptable alternatives" (235).

The volume offers an exhaustive answer to the representation of sex and gender in Pynchon's fiction. The contributors go beyond readings that would indulge in recognizing a self-conscious parody of misogynistic representation, with which many commenters had been contented so far. Even more stimulating are the fertile comparisons of novels, such as *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Bleeding Edge*, which commentators dismissively lumped together, or *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*, which confirm the critical intuition that both novels hold a distinct place in the canon, while clarifying Pynchon's stances. The wide-ranging foray into academic discourses (disidentification, sincerity and irony) and cultural contexts (the porn industry, American Buddhism, New Momism) never loses sight of the text either. With more and more commentators raising the question of whether it is still legitimate to classify Pynchon as a postmodern author, this volume confirms that Pynchon studies have launched a revolution of their own in the past decade, thereby inviting readers to reassess the writer's fiction anew: while it is necessary to commend this collection for creating new inroads into Pynchon's work, it also proves most valuable for constantly showing that from the dawn of the writer's career, Pynchon has been as much the product of an era as Pynchon studies are the product of theirs.

**Utku Mogultay, *The Ruins of Urban Modernity: Thomas Pynchon's Against the Day* (Bloomsbury, 2018). 240pp**

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Utku Mogultay's *The Ruins of Urban Modernity* begins with an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*: halfway through *Against the Day* we encounter the fictional town of "Wall o' Death" constructed around the remnants of a carnival modeled after the Chicago World's Fair. Mogultay argues that Wall o' Death "is built on the ruins of the city of tomorrow" (1), as the so-called White City was meant to establish a new urban template for future cities. He observes that Wall o' Death, superseding that template, reflects "the wider transformation of the postwar American urban landscape" (2).

Taking his cue from this symbolic scene, Mogultay argues that *Against the Day* calls into question "received notions of modernity" and challenges "the present by rewriting the past" (4). What is most novel about his analysis is the focus on urbanity in one Pynchon novel, at a book-length scale. Digging into the geographies of fin-de-siècle modernity, Mogultay investigates how Pynchon's novel reimagines the classical understanding of the modern metropolis as we know it, that is, the industrial city of capitalism thriving at the turn of the twentieth century. He observes that, by imagining a past narrative of projected development, *Against the Day* foreshadows "the urban condition diagnosed about a century later" (4); the novel's narrative strategy, operating within the technique of "genre poaching" (McHale 18), shows the changing structure of the contemporary postmodern metropolis by challenging the conventional model of the modern city.

Expounding on the Wall o' Death episode, Mogultay argues that it represents "the decline of a classical urban order" as a result of a postmodern place-making process through which "the urban core" is eviscerated "by the centrifugal force of suburbanization" (3). As such, it sheds light on our immediate contemporary urban condition; the experience of postmodern urbanism that Mogultay understands in terms of challenging the accuracy of modern cartographic representation and the

idea of the map as the mirror of a preexisting reality. Although there is no consensus on how to define this contemporary form of “postmodern urbanism,” Mogultay uses Nan Ellin’s book of that title as a reference point. Drawing on her model, which seeks “inspiration” from cities of the past “to accommodate a post-industrial society” (Ellin 80), *The Ruins* posits how Pynchon’s text interrogates the modernist notion of a certain, linear spatiality in terms of cartographic discourse.

Through the structure of the book, one can see a progression between the chapters as they speak to the commodification of cityspace in America as a result of capitalist urbanization. The odd chapters deal with the way the experience of urban modernity contributed to the “striation” of America’s open space into a homogenized landscape (Deleuze and Guattari 479). The change in the structure of American cities, in turn, functions as a pretext for the emergence of the postmodern metropolis after WWII. The even chapters portray the cityscapes of major cities, such as Los Angeles, as representatively postmodern urban structures.

Chapter two depicts the transformation of Venice into a possible “postmodern city” through the character Dahlia Rideout’s projection of images from the future (15), based on the White City’s vision, onto its cityscape. One can consider such a presentation in terms of Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra: the concatenation of images produces a “hyperreality” (22), resulting in a centerless metropolis that is nostalgic for its past as a “thriving city-republic” (15). An intriguing characteristic of Mogultay’s book is its continuous engagement with architecture. He provides a longshot-closeup analysis of the urban space through The Chums of Chance’s view of Venice’s cityscape. The Chums are balloonists whose view of the urban landscape oscillates between the aerial and the ground perspectives. Mogultay’s analysis offers a dual vision of Venice, as depicted in the novel: the macroscopic place-myth image of the island-city and the microscopic reality at odds with that mythical metropolis.

The architectural organization of the Venetian cityscape interacts with Dahlia’s life in the novel. Mogultay’s attention to her fate, alternating between the dream-like memory of the White City and Venice, through a flaneur-like presentation of the streets, results in a Jamesonian “cognitive mapping” of the city. Working as a street performer, she draws her own map of Venice instead of “looking up to

uncommiserating walls for names of alleyways" (728), or relying on the city's official modern cartography.

Observing that the White City was historically designed as a utopian model for America's urban future, in chapter four Mogultay posits that its planners failed to render their idea of the neoclassical model city in practice. *Against the Day* indicates this failure through the spatial organization of the White City: Mogultay argues that the novel depicts it as "typify[ing] a forerunner of postmodern urbanism" (113) insofar as it demonstrated that the future of America's architecture "belonged to the consolidated force of capital" (Lears 168). What is striking about Mogultay's analysis is that it usefully shows how Pynchon's novel heralds that the White City might have introduced "the emergence of a postmodern urbanism" in stark aesthetic contrast to the surrounding modern industrial city of Chicago (97).

Chapter five addresses the issue of the urban frontier in the way the metropolis-frontier dichotomy is negotiated in the novel. Mogultay observes that the character Webb's antiurban attitude owes to the role of the city in "upholding a system of exploitative labor" (121). He argues that the frontier relies on the metropolis for capital investment. He goes on to contend that although Webb does not give up on the myth of the frontier, what his trajectory illustrates "is how the frontier myth rationalizes economic and geographical expansion" and becomes part of a capitalist system which brought about the urbanization of the frontier. More importantly, however, Mogultay seems to suggest that resistance to the force of urbanization prepared the ground for urban planners to target the frontier. His analysis offers a new perspective into the postwar urbanization of suburbia that has been described as "regional urbanization" (Soja 9).

The sixth chapter turns to the modern metropolis as a realm depicting "the ambivalence of urban modernity as both rational and dreamlike" (16). It deals with the way the fictionalization of popular spaces in urban modernity served the spectacle of consumer capitalism to outdo its tedious reality. Mogultay suggests that urban spectacle is still very much part of "themed environments in the postmodern city" (141). Although he touches on this issue implicitly, it is significant in the structure of the book insofar as it connects this chapter to chapters two and four where the theme of the postmodern metropolis is more strongly present. Mogultay concludes

the chapter by bespeaking that Pynchon's Benjaminian depiction of urban modernity can be understood as "mirroring the aesthetics of postmodern urbanism" (160).

Chapter seven depicts the genre of detective fiction as an outgrowth of urban modernity. Analyzing three urban scenarios, from Chicago in the 1890s to London in the 1900s and Los Angeles in the 1920s, Mogultay shows how Pynchon connects "the urban epistemology underlying classic detective fiction to the genre poetics of postmodern detective fiction" (162). Through the character Lew and his "ambulatory" exploration of Chicago (163), the possibility of knowing the city in an absolutely practical manner is challenged. Contrary to classical detective stories, where the protagonist renders the idea that the urban space can be turned into an authentic text, the postmodern detective fiction questions the assumption that the figure of the detective can offer transparent representations of metropolitan space. Drawing on the Los Angeles storyline, Mogultay wisely concludes that *Against the Day's* dream-like depiction of the urban atmosphere of 1920s Los Angeles offers an apotheosis of "the postmodern city" (187).

Mirroring the introduction, the last chapter starts with Dante's *Inferno*: "I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY" (154). The question becomes whether "the postmodern dreamscape" might be where "the dream of a just city is laid to rest" (187). Mogultay suggests that Dante's infernal city, referring to an episode in the novel depicting the destruction of New York, hints at "the fragility of the capitalist metropolis" (190). This postapocalyptic depiction of New York shows "urban anxiety and vulnerability" as issues which affect the city life of citizens in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (192). Pynchon's depiction of the cataclysmic events in New York illustrates it as a city "fraught with dangers," not a postmetropolis symbolizing the purported triumph over nature by urban modernity. Thus, does the cityscape of postmodern urbanism offer any redemption in the lifeworlds of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In Mogultay's opinion, *Against the Day* suggests that the transition en route to postmodern urbanism has "fostered antiurban tendencies" (206).

Mogultay's book offers substantial insights into the "underrepresented subject" of urban setting in Pynchon scholarship (5), and promises further investigation into Pynchon's urban imagination in terms of city structure. For example, I myself, drawing on Edward Soja's study of the Los Angeles region, have pursued Mogultay's



work by investigating the transition from the modern industrial city to the postmodern metropolis in Pynchon's California trilogy.<sup>1</sup> In Mogultay's wake, other models and schools of urbanism than Ellin's alone might also help to analyze Pynchon's treatments of urban process. Ellin's own later conception of "Integral Urbanism," intended to "incite a better human habitat" and enhance "the places we live in" in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century metropolis (Ellin 2006, xxxv, 15), might especially illuminate the issue of urban fragility and anxiety in Pynchon's novel, addressed by Mogultay in chapter eight. Such an analysis could offer up a new avenue of research regarding Pynchon's later fiction. For instance, the cyberspaces of the Deep Web and the program DeepArcher in *Bleeding Edge* can be examined with relation to the urban space of New York through, among other models, the lens of "Integral Urbanism." A possible result of this sort of urban analysis might be alternative solutions as far as the theme of metropolitan frenzy and insecurity in the novel, not least in the post-9/11 era, is concerned.

Mogultay thus opens up a useful field for future work. Considering *The Ruins'* interdisciplinary approach, the focus on theme of the city in Pynchon's fiction offers a new critical path to Pynchon readers, including those without preexisting interest in urban studies. Investigating Pynchon's conceptualization of urban spaces over the course of his career and across his novels' settings would throw light on the social, cultural, historical, economic, and political issues throughout his fiction. This could also benefit urbanists in better understanding and situating certain recent urban processes, such as the "postmetropolitan transition" (Soja 140), through literary lenses.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dehdarirad, 2020.

**David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton University Press, 2015). 224pp**

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David Alworth's *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*, is among the most dynamic works of literary criticism I've read in the past several years. At once theoretically dense and yet easy to read, *Site Reading* takes up the familiar topic of setting—so familiar it has attracted a relative dearth of sustained critical attention—to ask: “how does literary fiction theorize social experience?” (2). The notion that literature interrogates social experience isn't unconventional; the particularity of Alworth's book emerges from his productive engagement with *sites*, which he defines “as dynamic networks of *actants* in Bruno Latour's sense, exercising a kind of agency with and through their human and nonhuman constituents” (2). Sites extend from the spaces where we live, shop, and drive, to the ruins that loom as bearers of our cultural past. His book is dedicated to understanding how literary fiction transposes five different sites—supermarkets, dumps, roads, ruins, and asylums—“into narrative settings and thereby [renders] them operative, as figures in and of collective life” (2). Part of the appeal of the book is the productive methodological framework that Alworth develops: “I always begin,” he writes, “with a site and then trace a cultural network that emanates from it, which is really to say that I understand sites as actants in two senses: as determinants of sociality that invite sustained attention from novelists and as material environments that give rise to constellations of cultural artifacts” (20). Alworth's methodology opens up exciting lines of inquiry for future scholars who are interested in understanding the sociological value of literary texts and other aesthetic artifacts: how does art both form and formulate social experience? How does literature imagine collective life? How do sites theorize the social?

The originality here stems from Alworth's efforts to bring Latour's Actor-Network-Theory to bear on a postcritical reading of novelistic setting. Situating himself against the backdrop of environmental criticism and textual-materialist

approaches, Alworth models a mode of critical engagement he terms “site reading,” which means “abandoning the notion of setting as a static framework for narrative action” and “accepting the porous and dynamic boundary between setting and character” (19). “To perform a site reading,” Alworth writes, “is to scrutinize an assemblage of humans and nonhumans in the story world with an eye on how the interaction of such figures simultaneously models and theorizes social experience” (19). Following Latour (and literary critics such as Rita Felski), Alworth reads “the social” not as an ontologically distinct container of social experience, but rather as an assemblage of actants, human and nonhuman, that are consistently negotiating their relationships to one another. “Society is not presupposed as a cause,” he summarizes, “but understood as the effect of how actors assemble, disassemble, and reassemble anew” (12). Building on Latour’s dynamic notion of sociality, as well as his interest in sites (the laboratory, the supermarket), Alworth demonstrates how “the ‘terra incognita’ of setting contains vivid and valuable insights about the experience of collectivity” (4).

*Site Reading* offers a model of interdisciplinary scholarship, reading literary authors alongside their contemporaries in sculpture, photography, and conceptual art without digressing into a conventional study of aesthetic influence. Visual art offers Alworth the opportunity to “[trace] a network of literary and cultural objects that emanates from a certain generic site [...] whose force as a cultural actant manifests in the array of specific and specifying responses that it has engendered from authors, artists, intellectuals, and other figures” (23). His first chapter, “Supermarket Sociology,” reads DeLillo’s *White Noise* alongside Andy Warhol’s fascination with supermarkets, most evident in his *Campbell’s Soup Cans* and *Brillo Boxes*. Chapter two, “Dumps,” pairs William S. Burroughs (especially *Naked Lunch*) with the artist-activist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (currently artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation). The chapter titled “Roads” explores the writings of Jack Kerouac and Joan Didion, alongside the sculpture of John Chamberlain, much of which is constructed out of discarded car parts. “Ruins” places Thomas Pynchon alongside sculptor and land-artist Robert Smithson, and the final full-length chapter, “Asylums,” reads Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* with photographers Gordon Parks and Jeff Wall, both of whom staged photographs inspired by Ellison’s novel. The

Afterword, "Site Unseen," provides a brief discussion of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as well as the photography of Richard Ross.

While Alworth encourages us to adopt *site reading* as a literary-sociological approach to texts from a wide array of literary history, he posits that the methodology "seems a *necessary* way of accounting for a broad range of literary and artistic phenomena in the United States after World War II" (22, emphasis mine). Site-specific art installations, Alworth points out, rose to prominence in the decades after the war; in 1967, Robert Smithson argued in *Artforum* that "[t]he unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists" (qtd. in Alworth 22). Here Alworth could define more clearly what he means by "necessary." He isn't entirely persuasive in his justification for writing (almost) exclusively about American authors and artists (the "Asylums" chapter contains a few paragraphs on the Canadian-born photographer Jeff Wall; Alworth doesn't mention that Wall is Canadian). The site, for Alworth, is primarily "an investigation of social form," and site-specificity "can be understood as paving the way for the 'social turn' of so much contemporary art" (22; 23). I don't think Alworth would deny that this is equally true—and, significantly, true in different ways—of artists from outside the United States.

Readers of *Orbit* will be especially interested in Alworth's "Ruins" chapter on Pynchon and Smithson. There are persuasive reasons to read Pynchon with Smithson: they were born within a year of each other (1937 and 1938, respectively), they each recognized T. S. Eliot and Norbert Wiener as influences, and they both "drew inspiration from the paradigm shifts that we now recognize as emergent poststructuralism and the linguistic turn" (98). But Alworth's point isn't merely to list overlapping biographical details; rather, he develops a framework through which we might understand the complex interplay between temporality and history in Pynchon, and how the author's persistent fascination with *ruins* is bound up with his "celebrated critique of conventional historiography" (97). Alworth provides a reading of *V.* that "seeks to explain how and why ruins came to matter within what might be called Pynchon's sociological imagination" (98). Adapting Smithson's dialectic of site versus nonsite—the site is Malta, and the nonsite is Pynchon's *V.*, which "arrogate[s] the logic of the real, material site to which it refers"—Alworth asks a series of critically

productive questions about “the *limits* of the social” in Pynchon’s novel: “Where does the social end? Where does it begin? Can social relations be understood as diachronic, to extend through a very long stretch of time, such that someone who lived, say, five thousand years ago might be viewed as your associate?” (119; 98).

Alworth builds on and extends “what Latour calls a ‘trail of *associations*’ that span both space and time” to argue that Malta becomes the nexus of Pynchon’s interest in temporality, history, and the social (119; emphasis original). Pynchon writes, “It must be an alien passion in Malta where all history seemed simultaneously present, where all streets were strait with ghosts [...]. History there was the record of an evolution. One-way and ongoing. Monuments, buildings, plaques were remembrances only; but in Valletta remembrances seemed to live” (V. 534). For Alworth, then, “the ruin [of Malta] makes several centuries ‘simultaneously present,’ while revealing a causal, developmental narrative in the form of a sequence of construction” (115). Crucially, Malta isn’t just a narrative device through which Pynchon can explore the past; it also provides a model for him to develop a theory of the social that transgresses temporal boundaries: “This tension between *succession* and *simultaneity* structures much of the novel, for *V.* narrates a causal sequence of events, yet also makes distinct epochs seem simultaneous” (115). “Thus,” Alworth argues, “even as Pynchon represents a society in ruins, detailing the decimation of Malta, he also explores something like the opposite dynamic throughout the novel: the *emergence* of cliques, collectives, and societies” (119). Within the context of *V.*, the ruins of Ħaġar Qim (which Pynchon spells Hagar Qim) “[exemplify] how sites sustain sociality, shoring up an entire society against its ruins” (120).

If I have one critique of the book, it’s in the relative absence of an extended discussion of how sites figure prominently in the formation of political identities. Despite his attention to sociological lines of inquiry, Alworth remains largely silent on questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Part of this, of course, is due to the fact that he’s interested in steering the critical conversation away from the identities of characters to understand, instead, how the social gets constructed through myriad interactions between humans, nonhumans, and the sites they inhabit. But we shouldn’t ignore the ways in which spaces themselves, as actants in a dense network

of social agents, take on particular gendered and racialized identities: one thinks of the masculinized space of Barney Kiernan's pub in *Ulysses*, or of the feminized domestic spaces in Marilynne Robinson (Alworth mentions both authors). Alworth's reticence on these issues is particularly notable in the chapter on *Invisible Man*, since Ellison writes so cogently about the distinctly black space of Harlem (and, conversely, the white spaces downtown). This isn't to say that Alworth is entirely inattentive to the racial dynamics of Ellison's writing; he notes that, for Ellison, the slums of Harlem had a significant impact on the formation of black social identity, and writes that "*Invisible Man* dramatizes the friction between identity and environment that comprises the central theme of [Ellison's essay] 'Harlem is Nowhere'" (141). But I'd like a more sustained treatment of how *spaces themselves* begin to take on the politically charged characteristics of an identity, and how, in turn, space comes to inform the identity of its inhabitants.

Still, it's a minor complaint about what is a terrific book. As a nuanced and distinctive methodology of critical inquiry, "site reading" opens up a host of possibilities for future research. "Site reading," Alworth concludes, "reveals the social and political claim that inheres in [the] depiction of setting" (155). Adapting Alworth's method would encourage scholars to understand the sociological impetus behind Zadie Smith's (or Virginia Woolf's) London; or the social milieu of the American South in Faulkner, Walker Percy, or Flannery O'Connor; or the relationship between sociality and geography in the postcolonial spaces of Chinua Achebe, Tsitsi Dangarembga, or Brian Chikwava.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Alworth makes a compelling case for the place of literature in our twenty-first century world: in Alworth's telling, novelistic form, with its dedication to positioning characters against their settings in the construction of the social, becomes an important method of understanding how we gather collectively. His book, he writes, "is not a cultural history but an experiment in literary criticism whose hypothesis is that writing a novel is a way of knowing about collective life" (21). Alworth relays that when he started work on *Site Reading*, he thought his project was to historicize the postwar US novel. He soon found, however, that the texts he was writing about "began to push back against the ways I wanted

to understand them. Their treatments of sites caused me to wonder whether the historicist procedure of contextualizing literature in relation to a *specific* sociohistorical context (postwar America or postmodernity) had foreclosed the more fundamental question of how literature imagines sociality as such" (22, emphasis original). This argument allows Alworth to reposition the novel: rather than applying Latour and ANT "as an interpretive framework for literature," his goal is to understand how novelists "define particular zones of action and interaction" (48). *Site Reading* thus treats "the novel as a sociological endeavor in its own right" (27). Writing literature, and writing about literature, then, both have significant epistemological stakes: to engage with a novel isn't solely to indulge in aesthetic inquiry, it is also to develop our sociological imagination, which is ultimately about coming to see more clearly the forces that propel the social dynamics of our lives.

**Matthew Mullins, *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social* (Oxford University Press, 2016). 248pp**

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Matthew Mullins's engaging new study meaningfully contributes to two recent literary-critical conversations. Mullins dedicates most of his pages to revising the consensus on postmodern fiction: he engages readers to think of postmodernism as driven by a desire to unveil and sometimes contribute to ongoing social processes, rather than simply deconstruct them. This demands that we think of postmodernism as neither suspicious nor endlessly playful but *materialist*, attentive to particular things, actions, and operations that comprise social existence. This attention to material mechanics, in Mullins's account, means that postmodernist fiction is not defined by any unified set of stylistic hallmarks. Without an aesthetic dominant such as irony to characterize it, he asserts, postmodernist fiction marks the end of traditional periodization itself, the end of "isms" in literary history.

For the body of established criticism Mullins argues against, postmodernist fiction's demystifying impulse revealed that naturalized categories and hierarchies were in fact social constructions. While Mullins agrees that postmodernism "serves as a useful umbrella" for those methods and thinkers who have a "preoccupation" with social construction, he believes postmodernism does more than simply note the contingent nature of our norms. It charts *how* those contingencies solidify and operate, pursuing Mullins's question about socially constructed categories: "constructed out of what?" (5). He repeats, then answers this question in the first chapter: "The answer is the social is constructed out of things, people, stuff" (30). Postmodernist fiction can then be seen as a mapping of the procedures that produce human identity categories and social hierarchies rather than a dismissal of their meaningfulness or a hapless registration of their enduring power.

This emphasis on the process of construction of course recalls Bruno Latour, and Mullins aligns his approach with what he calls "the neomaterialisms of our current



critical climate, including posthumanism, thing theory, Actor-Network-Theory, and object-oriented philosophy" (3). Drawing on the thinking common in these fields, he sees postmodern fiction's investment in "flat ontolog[ies]"—ones where objects and words often have as much significance as humans—as a "privileging of the particular, or the material, over the general, or the ideal" (8). A mode of representation that thus flattens the hierarchy of causal forces allows attention to the wide field of interacting cogs in generative Latourian actor-networks. As a result, Mullins sees postmodernist fiction not continually reifying "vague and ethereal forces that shape the way events unfold" but instead designating all social forces as "products of events and entities" themselves (185). These particular events and entities engage in material chains of operation, presenting "the seemingly irreducible categories that govern our existence" as "processual" (27).

This rejection of "vague and ethereal forces" extends to postmodernity itself. We cannot say, along with Frederic Jameson, that *Ragtime's* (1975) lack of historical consciousness results from its being postmodern: doing so would treat postmodernism as "a conceptual paradigm... [that can] be used to explain [postmodern] texts." Instead "postmodernism is what must be explained by the texts" (25). Mullins's complicated suggestion here is that we must not consider "postmodernism" as exempt from the demystifying that, he argues, postmodern fiction utilizes as part of its broader emphasis on process. He quite persuasively suggests that "postmodernism is less a self-contained, distinctive aesthetic/historical marker and more a signifier," one whose definition is constantly under construction (27). Thus for Mullins other literary periods have unifying characteristics, while postmodernist fiction is a name for a more wide-ranging set of approaches linked by a common materialist emphasis. The chapters that follow Mullins's introduction—which offers a lucid, efficient overview of neo-materialist perspectives—analyze well-known texts of the last fifty years, attentive to the way these works draw attention to process and creation.

In the first analytical chapter, Mullins focuses on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), asking us to consider how the text undermines the categories often used to classify it. Mullins begins by reviewing the constructivist/essentialist and form/politics debates of the 1990s and 2000s—W. Lawrence Hogue's "two modes of

postmodernism,” Amy Elias’s “metafictional and social stages,” or Wendy Steiner and Jeremy Green’s differing takes on the value of political work and formal innovation, respectively (Mullins 36–37). Mullins sees these positions exacerbating a dubious critical binary between writers committed to revealing that race, ethnicity, and other forms of identity are social constructions and others who focus on the lived experience of marginalized identities. Mullins asks of this antagonism, following in some ways from the question I quoted above: “what if constructed and essential are not incongruous?” (39). Mullins cogently reviews criticism of the novel that tends to flatten Native identity by making it essentialist, rather than recognizing its meanings as shifting through an ongoing history. His reading shows that both Native and White identities are dynamic, and characters who mistake either for static wind up misled. To support this claim, he looks at the role of objects in a key healing ceremony, noting that these entities come from both cultures, as well as other scenes that reveal the “materialization of social construction” through behaviors, events, and objects that contribute to the identities the novel explores (61).

Chapter 2, “Flattening Nature and Culture,” situates analysis of three novels—Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), and Jonathan Lethem’s *Fortress of Solitude* (2003)—in a discussion of “scientific naturalism and social constructivism” that builds nicely from the previous chapter’s reflection of constructivist and essentialist takes on identity categories (66). Mullins extends his discussion of “flat ontologies” here, stating that the two scientific camps he sets up both overstate the significance of human action and interpretation in understanding the world (a point he sets up with reference to Ian Bogost). Postmodernist fiction’s “radical decentering of humans as the loci of social networks...lays the groundwork for rethinking the nature of larger collectives” (70). Recognizing the central importance of rings in all three novels enables readers to see the necessity of viewing the breadth of Latourian actants that play significant roles in social life rather than relying on reified abstractions to explain behavior. Critics of Lethem’s novel, for instance, often fall into the trap of assuming that racially segregated outcomes in the novel are a necessary byproduct of racist structures in the United States. If we notice that the ring in the book confers magic powers to both

black and white characters and enables positive black-white interactions, we see that Lethem attends to entities that undermine the indelibility of racial distinction. For Lethem's characters as well as the novel's critics, race and other "taxonomies of everyday life...have so overwritten their more fundamental constituents that they have come to appear irreducible and thus inevitable" (95). If we see how nonhuman entities are part and parcel of "assembling a new social collective[s]" in *Fortress* and these other novels (84), we can understand that the abstractions we use to explain social life are in fact ever-changing, which means the relations structured by those abstractions can change as well.

The third chapter draws on Ferdinand de Saussure, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Andreas Huyssen and Marianne DeKoven, to mention a few, to set up an argument about language in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and David Foster Wallace's *Girl with the Curious Hair* (1989). These authors and texts have often been criticized for emptying language of meaning, but for Mullins, Barth and Wallace do not insist that "word and world [are] two separate realms" but rather simply show them to be "two different things" (108). Mullins's materialism demands that we consider language as a thing, an equal component within social life that causes events to happen and bodies to move: "postmodern fiction's obsession with language can be read as a preoccupation with the actors that shape the social, and not just a mediation on the impossibility of meaning" (121). He points to Barth's requirement that his readers actually reshape the pages in "Frame-Tale" and to how "signifiers themselves" motivate behavior in "Ambrose His Mark." In Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Makes its Way," language is a "facilitator of connections between actors," including the narrator and reader (or implied author and implied audience) (123). He acknowledges that his take might seem "something of a stretch," but he nonetheless urges readers to "theorize the possibilities of language, beyond the gravitational pull of human significance": if we stop thinking about what words mean and focus on what they do, we can eschew the emptiness readers often locate in these texts (133).

The last chapter draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's influential idea of an "unoperative society" as a way of considering postmodernism's treatment of otherness. Mullins argues that the danger in "conceiv[ing] of the social as grounded in otherness alone...

is to risk assuming that the categories being differentiated from one another are, at some point, not in-process" (138–139). Looking at otherness in this way reveals a Nancyian "inclination," in which individuals and authors are drawn toward one another, creating relationships and defining them on a rolling basis. That is, focusing on differences and separations (or absences, in the readings Mullins pushes against in the Barth/Wallace chapter) keeps us from realizing that these texts are "clearing space that draws actors together," and the key authors in the chapter, Don DeLillo and Julia Alvarez, "use narrative structures to gather communities of actors, including their readers, into unexpected societies" (143). The baseball in DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) brings together a wide number of characters, and a tin drum in Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) is the figure for containing a set of differing concerns and social identities.

Mullins's conclusion expands on this spatializing point. Here, as elsewhere, he places himself in conversation with canonical thinkers—as in his criticism of Jameson's dismissive take on postmodernist historical fiction: if "the concept of the postmodern acts as a crucible, a rubric to which all literary production must be subject," we overlook "the dynamism" any grouping of literary texts, much less any historical period, is obviously going to display (185). These claims link back to his introduction, where Mullins argues that "the distinctiveness that stands as the key feature of any *ism* is a subordinate characteristic of postmodernism itself...for fiction to be *postmodern* is for it to be after modern ways of thinking about literature, after demystification, after suspicion, after *isms*" (27). Postmodernism is then not "distinctive" in the way other periods are: "[i]f postmodernism is anything, positively speaking, it is a recognition of the space actors require to swerve, connect, and act" (177) as well as a provider of that space. Such a framing relies on a retroactive characterization of modernism as bound by stylistic hallmarks, including those that might normally read as postmodernist (which era owns demystification and suspicion?): it would have been helpful to see Mullins discuss his take on modernism in more detail. Further, one might quibble with the wideness of the definitions Mullins spins through in this last chapter, as the "recognition of the space actors require" does not obviously first require a period of "demystification."

The more salient observation regarding periodization that emerges in Mullins's conclusion is his proposal that postmodernism's status as the "ism" that lacks "a clear set of aesthetic criteria" (176) might mean the end to a literary-historical narrative of "isms." We can, then, consider the struggle to name a successor to "postmodernism" differently after this excellent suggestion—perhaps we've been looking for an *ism* of "aesthetic criteria" when we might instead consider whether contemporary fiction has a new or substantially different "recognition of space" than we see in postmodernist texts.

Mullins then offers us an opportunity to think about postmodernist fiction as driven by different impulses than the poststructuralist and deconstructive methods of criticism that also emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (which he notes are often tied together). What if postmodernist fiction anticipated neomaterialism? What if it, in some ways, makes neomaterialism more thinkable? In addition to making these questions possible, Mullins's rich book provides us with a lens for analyzing postmodernism's "flat ontology" without thinking that the flatness is necessarily nihilistic, without assuming that its demystification is dismissal.

**Casey Michael Henry, *New Media and the Transformation of Postmodern American Literature: From Cage to Connection* (Bloomsbury, 2019). 216pp**

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In *New Media and the Transformation of Postmodern American Literature: From Cage to Connection*, Casey Michael Henry charts a new genealogy of the “post-post-modern” through four postwar writers: William Gaddis, William T. Vollmann, Bret Easton Ellis, and David Foster Wallace. Of these it is usually the last, Wallace, to whom critics turn to for an idea of what might come after postmodernism. However, Henry convincingly argues that an old-guard maximalist like Gaddis, the persistent oddity that is Vollmann, or a brat-pack veteran such as Ellis all predict and exemplify the ruptures that Wallace would instigate from the mid-1990s onwards. By trying to re-orientate our understanding of *literary* post-postmodernism, moreover, Henry analyses this group of writers in relation to mediums that actually beat them to the punch: on the one hand, early internet chat bots and chat rooms, and on the other hand, new media and video art by Bill Viola, Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol, and Stelarc. For Henry, the underlying connection between video art, new media, and postmodern literature is their response to the demise of affect in postmodern culture, most famously articulated by Fredric Jameson in his 1984 essay “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” In Henry’s words, “if one considers the relative wealth of new-media and video art’s attempt at transcendence, anti-irony, and emotional maturation during the 1980s, analyzing video art’s paralleled track to postmodernism, and [its] role in informing post-postmodernism, becomes essential” (16–17). Henry argues that video art and developments in digital media were “able to more directly facilitate an emotional connection that was absent from postmodernism” in the literary realm (2). This related but non-literary timeline of post-postmodernism, therefore, would reveal how the innovations of Wallace and his peers are “a delayed attempt to replicate in

print what new media was able to do through digital and televisual technology – that is, ‘connect’ to its users” (2).

This argument rests heavily on how well Henry is able to define a few keywords, especially “post-postmodern” and “connection.” Despite the former being “an unwieldy term” Henry sticks with it “as the moniker most consistently used to discuss the movement’s most paradigmatic figure and self-reflexive analyser, David Foster Wallace” (1–2). Wallace indeed casts a long shadow over *From Cage to Connection*. His famous essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” –speculating on the emergence of a new wave of writers, who would move beyond postmodern irony and write sentimentally instead – provides the impetus for Henry’s central line of enquiry: “how does one account for this stark arrival of post-postmodern ‘feeling’ [...] where did this submerged sense of identification, vulnerability, and deeply felt connection arise from, absent as it was from postmodern ancestors?” (2). Henry’s “Connection” too depends on recapitulating Wallace’s tendentious reading of earlier postmodern literature as lacking a connective affectivity that he and other post-postmodern writers could provide. Henry uses the term “in an idiosyncratic sense to indicate a degree of immediate outreach and felt directness with an art object – obviously easier in media where one literally ‘plugs in’” (3). How convinced one is by the connection rubric, then, will depend on how much credence one is willing to give to Wallace’s rather hoary interpretation of postmodernism. From here, Henry launches his main gambit concerning “the little-mentioned constraint, pressure, and sense of inadequacy felt by postmodern authors trapped within the ‘cage’ of print” (3). In other words, the inadequacy that post-postmodern writers like Wallace feel when trying to create connections with readers stems from their sense that their medium hampers the “felt directness” that is, apparently, readily available in digital and televisual media (3).

Henry organises his study into three chapters, which unfold chronologically in accordance with the writers under consideration; or, more precisely, with what he considers to be their major works. The first chapter looks at Gaddis’s *J R* (1975) and *Carpenter’s Gothic* (1985) in relation to the aforementioned new media artists and digital technologies. Henry’s overriding point here is that Gaddis’s movement from

the encyclopaedic *J R* to the much shorter *Carpenter's Gothic*, both of which consist overwhelmingly of unattributed dialogue, “evinces the failure, and exhaustion, of the postmodern novel to replicate mimetically the digital and new-media strategies that so fervently surround it by the mid-1980s” (43). By looking at Gaddis’s under-examined treatment of sexuality, as well as his better canvassed preoccupation with waste, Henry explores how his conversation novels simultaneously emulate and push against concurrent developments in communication technology. Gaddis may write books that are formally similar to chat rooms, in other words, but he shies away from the “subjectivity-transforming” (57) implications these digital spaces might have – such as the “potential cyber-chat-based corporeal looseness and freedom” that Henry suggests became possible after the emergence of ELIZA, the “founding model of the chat bot” programmed by Joseph Weizenbaum in the mid-1960s (52, 37). One has to wait a while for this analysis, as Henry spends much of this first chapter exploring the history of new media art. That said, readers will be hard-pressed to find a more concise and informative account of the medium’s development. Furthermore, Henry’s considerations of pieces like Viola’s *Passage*, Burden’s *Through the Night Softly*, or Warhol’s *Shadows*—as reflecting an evolution from sardonic self-reference to affective connection—lay the grounds for his later arguments about the course of post-postmodern literature.

The second chapter, on William T. Vollmann’s *The Rainbow Stories* (1989) and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), is the boldest of Henry’s revisions of established narratives of post-postmodern literature. For here he asserts the importance of transgressive fiction in the rise of post-postmodernism. This, with its alternative designation as “blank fiction,” is a genre that, for many critics, epitomises emotional numbness rather than a renewal of affect. But stating that “critics of transgressive fiction have for the most part been stymied by subject matter alone” (65), Henry suggests that the “obscenity of transgressive content may be seen as a misdirected attempt to feel, to pierce a stifling surface and façade. The other end of this violent outreach may be the ‘connecting’ reader” (66). Drawing on the work of Sade, Barthes, Bataille, and Tom LeClair’s account of the “systems novel,” Henry theorises a model of “systematic transgression” (105), whereby the circulation and repetition of



shocking subject material gestures towards “a new ‘hypothetical’ space beyond anhedonic characters and stylistic flatness that will be the directed aim of ‘connection’” (66). Henry begins by considering Vollmann’s attempt to devise a moral calculus for the use of violence in his seven volume project *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003), before arguing that *The Rainbow Stories* constructs a similar systematic investigation of “feeling” in relation to its narrator’s encounters with prostitutes. The highlight of this chapter, though, is Henry’s analysis of *American Psycho*, in which he reappraises Ellis’s novel in the footsteps of early critic Elizabeth Young. Henry shows how the serial killer-cum-investment banker, Patrick Bateman, is more than just a gothic monster, struggling as he does for interiority and self-expression in an environment that inhibits such. Reading Bateman in this way establishes Ellis’s importance in the “attempt to find a heart, or empathetic core, within postmodern tropes and techniques. This ‘core’ will then allow a connective anchor for the supercharged feeling that typifies post-postmodernism” (103).

Henry’s final chapter is in many respects the goal towards which he has been moving all along. Here he argues that Wallace offers the most compelling examples of the post-postmodern connection that Gaddis, Vollmann, and Ellis have in their different ways striven for. The idea that Wallace tries to “connect” with readers will seem like an old chestnut. However, Henry’s approach is refreshingly new. Reading Wallace in light of the transgressives’ attempt to “pierce a stifling surface and façade” through types of “violent outreach” (66), he argues that Wallace creates moments of connection through his use of the epiphany: a device that is “tritely old in a realist sense, [but] transgressive in its potential for a dubiously shaded moment of revelatory violence, and implying moments of aporia while granting characters subjectivity to choose” (113). To make this point Henry examines key instances of character epiphany in *Infinite Jest* (1996), particularly concerning the characters Randy Lenz and Don Gately, as well as Wallace’s treatment of sexuality in selected stories from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). At times Henry’s analysis becomes a bit too bound up with the minutia of existing scholarship – his reading of “Octet”, for instance, turns on a complex if not convoluted amalgamation of readings put forth by Lee Konstantinou, Adam Kelly, and Zadie Smith. By

drawing overdue scholarly attention to Wallace's penchant for darker subject matters, though, Henry's signal achievement in this chapter is to spotlight "Wallace's rejection of the 'twee' or saccharine qualities" evident in post-postmodern compatriots such as Dave Eggers and Jonathan Franzen (121). As a result, he deepens our understanding of the complex, morally fraught pathways that Wallace takes to author-reader connection.

Henry informs these arguments with details gleaned from Wallace's draft materials held at the Harry Ransom Center, and at times this makes for some striking conclusions. For example, on the long-debated question of whether or not *Infinite Jest's* Don Gately resists taking pain-killing drugs for a gunshot wound, Henry answers that the draft materials offer definitive proof that he does not (131). This will irk some Wallace scholars, but perhaps general readers more so, given Henry's willingness to accord Wallace such a place of honour throughout. After all, one *can* discuss post-postmodernism without reference to Wallace, as critics of contemporary literature like Ralph Clare, Kasia Boddy, and Alexander Moran do in a 2019 special issue of *Textual Practice* (Savvas and Coffman, eds, 2019). There is also a regrettably androcentric bias to Henry's study, absent as it is of any women writers. He registers this absence in the Introduction, suggesting that the narrow demographics of his case studies are indicative of the male dominated nature of the kind of fiction he examines (4–5). Yet this does not explain why all of the new media artists he considers are also male. Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, and Carolee Schneeman are just a few whose work could have lent itself to Henry's analysis. To make this objection is not to simply score a populist progressive point as, to take one example, Henry might have framed his reading of prostitution in *The Rainbow Stories* a lot differently had he conducted it in light of feminist new media art like Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* or Ono's *Cut Piece*. Encouragingly, Henry states that he will "pursue the racial, gender, and sexual implications" of his research in a future study, and mentions Kathy Acker and Shelly Jackson as two artists who will take centre stage (5).

*From Cage to Connection* also suffers conceptually as a result of Henry's decision to concentrate his account of video art and new media at the start of Chapter One. The close readings that follow are engaging and original, but readers may lose track

of how and why Gaddis, Vollmann, Ellis and Wallace are responding to developments in this adjacent, non-literary art-form. Occasional comments to the effect that Ellis offers a “Chris Burden-like [...] burst of confrontation” (90), or that Wallace conveys a character’s unease as being “ballooned in Stelarcian fashion” (126), are far too glancing. A tighter comparative approach to video art, digital media and literature, though it might pose problems for the timelines Henry traces, would allow for a richer consideration of how these mediums relate to and inform one another. It would also help Henry to address a key assumption that he generally leaves undeveloped: what is it about print that makes it a cage, beyond the well-worn complaint (which Henry touches upon in relation to Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* [5]) that new media poses a threat to the novel? By the same token, why is it “obviously easier” (3) to find emotional connection in digital platforms?

With all this said, one can still admire how effectively Henry weaves together disparate theoretical threads (particularly in Chapter Two), as well as his willingness to tinker with critical orthodoxies. In this regard his study does push the field forwards, but more as the result of his compelling close readings than his ideas about literature’s relationship to experimental visual media. Hence when Henry ends by wondering how writers could respond to the “cartoonish positivity of a Candy Crush bauble, the supercharged animacy of a Vine star, or the myriad identities of a Tumblr blog” (163), one hopes that any future study of his that investigates these links will prioritise textual analysis. Nonetheless, the question of a possible lineage between the work of Burden, Wallace, and Candy Crush is an intriguing and perhaps subversive one to ask. Henry’s eagerness to make these connections speaks to the intellectual daring on display in this book. If he can harness this to a more rigorously structured argument, and maintain his high levels of textual analysis, then his next publication should more than fulfil the promise of *From Cage to Connection*.

**Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2014). 288pp**

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The title of Allard den Dulk's study comes more or less direct from David Foster Wallace's mouth: a call, in an interview, for "some very, very mild form of Camus-like existentialist engagement" (qtd. in den Dulk 17). Contrasting the popular perception of existentialism as an individualist, isolating philosophy (as in Sartre's famous dictum, "Hell is – other people"), den Dulk reads the existentialist tradition (and, by extension, his titular *Wallace, Eggers, and Foer*) as emphasizing community. If, as existentialist thought broadly suggests, "*Becoming* a self is the *task* of human life" (16, emphasis original)—"the process of developing a self" involves "integrat[ing] his individual limitations and possibilities into a unified existence" (16)—then community is central to addressing and overcoming loneliness and meaninglessness.

Proceeding along these lines, den Dulk's stated purpose in *Existentialist Engagement* is to read his authors through an existentialist heuristic framed by Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard and later Wittgenstein. Doing so, den Dulk suggests, helps articulate what he sees as Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Safran Foer's diagnoses of contemporary ills (what he terms hyperreflexivity and endless irony) as well as their solution, by way of community, but also of sincerity and what he terms reality-commitment. The monograph is deeply researched and immaculately organized, tracing its thesis in lucid prose and step-by-step fashion—pausing frequently to reiterate key points and clarify complex ideas; a particular strength is den Dulk's attempt to reconcile potential contradictions in the philosophy on which he draws (as when he explores Sartre's inconsistent conceptualization of "bad faith"—the retreat from the challenges of human existence—as a reflective or pre-reflective process [50–51]). Since *Existentialist Engagement's* publication, Wallace Studies as a field has shifted in directions that already make some of its less illuminating tendencies

seem dated, but it nevertheless contributes significant insights and precision to our understanding of Wallace's central preoccupations.

den Dulk's focus on irony, hyperreflexivity, and sincerity-as-corrective may not strike readers (especially Wallace scholars) as novel; he draws heavily, after all, on the expected slate of Wallace essays and interviews ("*E Unibus Plurum*," the 1992 interview with Larry McCaffery, etc.). An interlude addressing the trends against which Wallace et al. are working similarly covers familiar ground: the maximalist postmodern metafiction of John Barth, the nihilistic postmodern minimalism of Bret Easton Ellis. den Dulk relies, further, on a Wallace favourite—Wittgenstein—to establish the possibilities for "engaged" fiction. His own rigorous philosophical framework still takes its cues from Adam Kelly's work on "The New Sincerity" in American letters and Marshall Boswell's early work on Wallace's philosophical sources: *Existentialist Engagement* thus belongs firmly to a tradition of first-wave Wallace Studies that has tended to read Wallace through the lens of Wallace himself; since its publication the field has begun moving away from this tendency and toward, for example, the feminist and critical race studies readings encouraged by the International David Foster Wallace Society's new *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* or Lucas Thompson's context-widening in *Global Wallace* (2016).

Nor, relatedly, does den Dulk fully warrant his choice of Eggers and Foer to complement Wallace; den Dulk cites a number of scholars listing Eggers and Foer among Wallace's most prominent literary progeny, and he theorizes that Eggers and Foer "build on the preliminary work" of Wallace (8), but this latter idea is never returned to in more than passing depth. Eggers and Foer certainly make sense within den Dulk's existentialist-Wallace framework (though it is disappointing that den Dulk never deals with the elephant in the room—Eggers's original, scathing review of *Infinite Jest* published ten years before his fawning tenth-anniversary foreword), but left unmentioned are many others whose inclusion might have enriched or usefully complicated the study (Michael Chabon, George Saunders, and Jonathan Franzen come to mind); unacknowledged, too, is the uniting whiteness of the selected authors and the racial coding (and racial exclusion) of "sincerity" as

a movement or set of principles (as sceptically challenged in *Orbit* by Joel Roberts and Edward Jackson).

Two dimensions, however, *do* set den Dulk's monograph apart from first-wave Wallace scholarship's other benchmarks. One is the attempt to more systematically and rigorously define a notion of sincerity he feels is undertheorized (8–9). The other, more subtle, is the ambitious through-line, frequently noticeable but largely implicit until the book's conclusion, of an almost Nussbaumian argument for the imbrication of literature and philosophy: that literature might, through deep description, help us understand or conceptualize more abstruse philosophical concerns. When it comes to hyperreflexivity and irony, for example, den Dulk notes that “a proper investigation of these problems simply cannot do without the kind of detailed descriptions provided by the novels” (263). Where else but in fiction, he asks, can we see *convincingly* dramatized the “apparently contradictory assertion, made by many philosophers, ... that a constant focus on the self leads to a loss of self?” (263). Novels, he continues, “give access to the experience and consciousness of ... complicated, many-sided and contradictory processes” (263). Indeed, part of den Dulk's reliance on Wittgenstein in framing his theory of engagement is making the case that literature is “a fundamental activity within a community of language users” (160).

The book makes these overarching cases through a structure divided into three discrete sections: den Dulk begins with diagnosis, pairing each of the aforementioned cultural concerns with an existentialist philosopher and a close reading of Wallace, Eggers and/or Foer. Thus, the “Analysis-Paralysis” discussed by Alcoholics Anonymous members in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* becomes an instantiation of what den Dulk calls hyperreflexivity, best understood through the lens of Sartre's view of consciousness: self-reflection turns consciousness into a “thing,” objectifying and thereby alienating the non-thing-like nature of consciousness (59). The endless irony decried by Wallace and his contemporaries is, in turn, read by den Dulk as Kierkegaardian “aesthetic irony” (71), “through which the individual avoids all commitment, all responsibility, and retains his negative freedom at all cost” (72). Such a view, den Dulk contends, “leads to the disintegration of the self” (78), a

disintegration dramatized in the widespread anhedonia of *Infinite Jest's* multitudinous cast of characters.

At this point, den Dulk takes a step back, to the aforementioned discussion of Barth and Easton Ellis. Though this section, dedicated to what he calls “problematic fiction” (87), reiterates much of what has already been written in *Wallace Studies* previously (linking Barth with Derridean deconstruction; acknowledging Wallace’s “rewriting” of Barth and Easton Ellis), the central purpose is nevertheless well taken: as den Dulk takes great pains to point out, works by Wallace, Eggers, and Foer are not merely critiquing irony and hyperreflexivity on a cultural level or within the “existential” context of their story-worlds, but on a theoretical one as well, challenging views of fiction (postmodern metafiction and postmodern minimalism) that they saw as being, den Dulk writes, “unable to give meaning to the world we live in” (87). Thus, den Dulk, as others before him have (see Boswell 78–81; 102–115), takes Barth and Easton Ellis as two sides of the same postmodern coin against which Wallace and his contemporaries saw themselves as writing: fiction that is either reduced to the affirmation of its own artificiality or fiction that *sees* no difference between fiction and reality, reduced as it is reduced to surface and appearance.

It is the third section of den Dulk’s work, however, that offers the richest analysis, locating correctives to cultural problems via existentialist thought, again pairing each of the guiding concepts—sincerity, reality-commitment, community—with an existentialist philosopher before probing for their presence in the works of the titular authors. Sincerity, for den Dulk, becomes an existentialist virtue, “the opening-up of the self, the connection of inner and outer” (165), consistent with a model of Sartrean “good faith” that recognizes one’s self is formed through one’s actions, by being responsible for them, and that this process is never complete” (179). den Dulk’s discussion of “reality-commitment” turns to Kierkegaard, contrasting the ironic aesthetic life-view with an ethical life-view: the not-choosing of endless irony replaced here by the endless repetition of choice, the choice *to* choose, to relate past and future in the process of becoming a self. This Kierkegaardian repetition embraces responsibility, disavows boredom, and commits to transcendence; to commit to choice is to commit to continue choosing, to not dread its recurrence.

That commitment, in turn, leads den Dulk to a definition of community derived from Camus's themes of absurdity and rebellion. If absurdity arises, on the one hand, from the tension between our attempts to give meaning to our lives and the world which refuses to grant that meaning, then rebellion marks a first moment of community where we share the experience of the absurd with another: this end to the experience of individual loneliness also "forms the basis of meaningful individual action" (238); the natural analogue here becomes Wallace's famous Kenyon College commencement speech, its repeated refrain of "this is water" a call to "attend to others" (den Dulk 242).

Reading *Existentialist Engagement* cover-to-cover can be something of a fatiguing experience; the negative consequence of den Dulk's organizational and taxonomical acumen (subsections of each chapter cordon the existentialist terminology from accompanying analysis, with further subdivisions neatly partitioning the work of each titular author—a decision that assists in clarity but forestalls serendipitous cross-pollination) is the sense of an author at times losing track of his selected heuristic's original motivation, turning instead to a philosophical-literary scavenger hunt: observing parallels for the sake of doing so. If, as the old saying goes, when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, then the analogue here might be that den Dulk has the existentialists in his toolkit and everything in contemporary American letters looks like an existentialist struggle—though curiously, the visible nail of Barth's or Bellow's or other mid-twentieth century writers' *explicit* engagements with existentialist thought is something that *does* go un-hammered.

Yet I do not want to undervalue the usefulness of the heuristic den Dulk develops. He not only provides a more systematic and rigorous underpinning for the familiar beats of first-wave Wallace scholarship, but in doing so forms the basis of at least two particularly meaningful interventions beyond that first wave.

In the first, by framing Wallace and Eggers's use of irony in terms of Kierkegaardian "aesthetic" versus "ethical" life-views, den Dulk is able to craft a conceptual language to describe Wallace's relationship to irony—in lieu of coinages like "post-irony," "eclectic irony" or "reverent irony," and without uncritically reading Wallace's call for



sincerity as a self-description, den Dulk bypasses criticisms of Wallace's own ironic impulses by adopting Kierkegaard's distinction between irony as a figure of speech and irony as an "*attitude toward existence*" (den Dulk 62)—what he characterizes as irony *all the way down*. As den Dulk reminds us, Kierkegaard understood that "no genuinely human life is possible without irony" (qtd. in den Dulk 67); the problem is not verbal irony or irony as ambiguity. The problem, rather, is an ironic relation to reality that "places the totality of existence under negation" (63). For den Dulk, those Wallace scholars critical of his use of irony have fundamentally misunderstood this difference between verbal and existential irony.

The second particularly novel element of den Dulk's thesis is a (to my knowledge) unique against-the-grain reading of the opening section of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. This scene, which takes place chronologically one year after the novel's main action, features the central character Hal Incandenza rendered literally speechless in a university-admissions interview, his attempts to converse perceived by those around him as "*Subanimalistic noises and sounds*" (14). Conventionally read as either a manifestation of Incandenza's solipsism or depression, a side effect of marijuana withdrawal, or the byproduct of a powerful psychoactive drug, den Dulk takes a different tack by arguing that the problem in this scene is not with Hal—the problem is with the culture in which Hal finds himself. Hal is fine, den Dulk suggests; it is merely that his shift from hyperreflexivity to openness and vulnerability over the course of the novel has rendered him incoherent to those around him: interlocutors are unfamiliar with the Wittgensteinian "language-game" of his newfound sincere, outward disposition (191–94).

Thus, concerns aside, *Existentialist Engagement* remains a welcome addition to the body of Wallace Studies, as much for its articulacy and insights as for the questions it raises about what comes next. After all, Wallace's call for community and connection with which we began—a "very, very mild form of Camus"—raises a new host of questions to ponder in light of what den Dulk acknowledges is a gap between the individual, seemingly apolitical reflection of Wallace, and Camus's literal and overtly political notion of rebellion (230n2).

**Earl R. Anderson, *Postmodern Artistry in Medievalist Fiction: An International Study* (McFarland, 2018).  
vii + 236pp**

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Take medievalist fiction first. At levels ranging from high culture to pop, Earl Anderson identifies a magnificent array of novels that set their action in the Middle Ages. He argues that they make up a “robust contemporary genre in which authors who employ postmodern artistry write better fictions than authors who don’t” (2). As for “postmodern artistry,” Anderson identifies the genre’s source origins in novels by Calvino, Fuentes, Eco, and others. Many but not all of the stories have non-realistic elements and some use postmodern narrative strategies. A more accurate category descriptor might just be “recent” or “contemporary,” since roughly sixty of the texts discussed appeared after 1990 but do not necessarily present their material in postmodern fashion. Anderson’s sweep is extremely broad: many are Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian as well as Anglophone, while in addition to European settings, some explore the cultural interactions in the Muslim Near East during the Crusades, the clashing cultures of Spain and the Aztecs in the New World, and one, the Mongols. Very few readers will know more than a handful of these works, so anyone interested in novelistic explorations of pre-modern civilizations will find many possible new pleasures.

I myself had not realized that medievalist fiction was so large a cultural concern, bringing together all the implications and questions that arise when those who live in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries try to picture this distant past. Above all, Anderson highlights the novels’ cumulative treatment of the problems of resistance to excessive power, since those cultures of the past seem to us too oppressive, and we worry about how to resist such controlling forces in our own. His focus throughout is more on “artistry” than on the social implications of these themes. He describes medievalism as relying on “good stories with iconic characters and settings,” “tangible

idealism," "desire for origins," and the "paradox of familiarity and otherness" (3–4). He writes about the rhetorical structure of these tales and offers this approach as a tool for literary history. His concern, he says, is "description, not persuasion; artistry, not doctrine" (2).

The focus on rhetoric is unusual. He starts by establishing certain narrative conceits, genre plurality, intertextuality and other foundational concepts. He then explores deconstructive modes, paradox, equillopence and skepticism, disappointment, and postmodern negation. The final "hard problems" that his analysis promises to illuminate are subjectivity, intentional semiotics, steganography, and the End of the Middle Ages. No matter whether written for a popular or intellectual audience, he shows that these novels generally share these rhetorical structures and concerns. When it comes to his case for others to adopt his methods, he admits that his approach is more modernist than postmodernist but feels that it promises real novelty, since using rhetoric lets one apply close reading techniques to long narratives, whereas its previous successes were mostly confined to short poems.

The book repays your effort to read it, but the author gives you no help. Many titles and some terms are just given in their original languages, and terms, at least, are not always helpfully defined. Equillopence appears on page one, but Googling the word only refers you to this book, so I take it to be quite obscure. We finally hit the definition on page 100 as a paradox that splits into contradictory propositions (a Cretan saying all Cretans are liars). Hypallage (transposition of two elements—I wave my despairing hands), steganography (encoding a text or image within a text or image), *adynata* (hyperbole taken to impossible extremes), villanesco (story of a rustic who triumphs over power): these and other arcana pepper the text, with noting their presence often treated as an end in itself. The terms may well be better known to rhetoricians than to literary scholars, but technical jargon does not communicate well beyond a narrow knowledge community in any intellectual field. On page 93, Anderson remarks that "critics who dismiss paradox and oxymoron as superficialities" make him "wonder why they bother with literature" – an attitude that suggests contempt for readers who do not share his technical knowledge or critical values. Nor does he allow for possible ignorance of the medieval text(s) that he says a given

novel may draw from or allude to. Fairly frequently, I could not tell whether he was referring in his own voice to a real medieval text or referring to a medieval text mentioned in the novel, or to a fictional medieval text within the novel, or just to the level of action within the novel. I would have enjoyed the book far more if he were more adept at communicating with a broader audience, and I speak as a former medievalist who has worked on contemporary fiction for many years.

Anderson's application of rhetorical analysis to a whole newly identified genre of novels suggests that more might usefully be done along these lines with other groups that share topical concerns: romance novels, picaresque tales, fantasies of various kinds, not to mention novels featuring various ethnic, racial, and gendered concerns. Others have worked on rhetorical themes across such groupings, but not making as detailed a case for what the group owes to the favored rhetorical devices. I, at least, did not see anything peculiar to the medievalist texts that made them uniquely suitable to this approach. This application of rhetoric to any group of novels might be of considerable interest in a graduate seminar; students studying either rhetoric or literature could find new applications for their intellectual tools.

In his Postscript, Anderson says that one reader remarked that he had not supplied a conclusion. That is all too true, and the Postscript does not remedy the absence. As he insisted in the introduction, he wishes to describe and appreciate the novels, not prescribe or produce literary-critical doctrine. He gives us no further applications or implications, and no grander generic map of medievalist fiction. Given the many themes and techniques attributed to the novels, I would have welcomed more analysis of what techniques made these postmodern, though some of that comes through in his interest in narrative strategies. I do wish he had summarized a conclusive generic structure or definition, but he prefers to leave that to the reader.

**Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (Columbia University Press, 2014). xiv + 309pp**

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Heather Houser asks that we lay aside our cultural and scientific assumptions based on causality. Causality has characterized ecocriticism to the present, but it oversimplifies the problems and apparently does not help us enact solutions. Instead, we should *experience* the interrelationships between human sickness and ecological damage by means of narrative affect. Affect produces in readers both cognitive and embodied or emotional results. As Houser puts it, “the texts that comprise this project have a broader aim: to approach scientific research as an avowedly shifting foundation for knowledge and to promote alternative epistemologies of emotion and of narration” (7). The texts that Houser identifies as exemplifying her non-causal approach she calls ecosickness narratives. They expose a variety of non-linear connections between human health and our natural surrounds. To the authors she discusses, she attributes the view that

*narrative illiteracy is no longer an option for the environmental and biomedical citizens we are called to be. Apprehending planetary and physiological sickness requires literary and more broadly humanistic knowledge.... This literature brings body and earth together through narrative affect to illuminate how emotion rather than empiricism alone ... conducts individuals from information to awareness and ethics (7).*

The readings in each chapter admirably explore the novels' core ideas, often tracing several stages of alternating and even contradictory implications. Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2006), for instance, starts with Capgras Syndrome and its devastating way of changing one's perspective by destroying affect. For those whose brains are so injured, the syndrome causes loved ones to be seen as imposters because the

sufferer feels no affect, no connection, no familiarity with them even if they look recognizable. Houser then shows how a variety of changes that promote growth or loss of affect influence other characters as they consider the problem of the construction site that will destroy the sandhill cranes' stopping place on the riverbank and thereby destroy one segment of that crane population. What should the enlightened characters do? They are not going to be able to stop the development; capitalism will have its way. Self-renunciation, the solution of the journalist turned nursing-aide, does not solve anything and for protecting the cranes would be just an abdication of responsibility. In a further turn in her argument, Houser points out that "wonder competes with pessimism as its extreme form risks paranoia" (116). Only if all of us can truly feel the wonder is any solution remotely likely. Throughout the various texts, Houser points to arguments leading to despair, others that proffer at least guarded and limited hope, and those that urge action, though such actions sometimes have unintended negative consequences. As she shows with Powers' novel, he is not providing templates for action, but exposing what it means to sense interdependence between humans and their surrounds. Her readings of the various novels are important not so much for providing revisionary thematic takes as for attending to their affective workings without trying to force out of them a single or clear message. In trying to show the complexity, these authors can and indeed need to be contradictory. Houser wants us to *feel* the force of such contradictions, because only when enlightened by feeling can scientific or political answers gain any traction in the world of everyday human affairs.

Other novels explore different affects. AIDS memoirs rethink the value of discord, and *Infinite Jest* presents disgust as an environmental affect. To me, the most impressive chapter was that on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Both respond to anxieties over biotechnologies. Piercy shows such technologies applied to a poor Chicana woman in a mental hospital—drugs and devices embedded in her brain to make her submit to the white, male behavioral definitions of sane behavior. Counterbalancing this anxiety, however, are Connie's trips into a future in which biotechnology is used to

equalize class and gender, redistribute labor, and produce a utopian alternative way of living, one in which babies are hatched from artificial wombs and breast-feeding is shared by the non-biological parents of both sexes. These two approaches, however, get undermined by the possibility that the trips to the future are just hallucinations. Connie gives up meaningful life in the hopes of turning the world in the utopian direction, but her attempt to poison her doctors does not fully succeed, so the world may miss the chance to take a better path. As readers, we hover between a positive attitude generated by hope and idealism and a cynical view of a very dystopian future that seems much more plausible.

The initial hostility to biotechnology in *Almanac of the Dead* is more pervasive and more grotesque. We see, though, eco-terrorist acts such as exploding a major dam to let the water flow as intended by nature. Throughout, we are forcefully assured that the aboriginal tribes know how to live in harmony with nature, so something ideal is possible. Things get a bit gnarly thereafter. A lot of eco-thought espoused by white culture is shown to be tainted by white racism; whites create natural preserves and keep out the humans who have lived there in harmony. The novel imagines eugenic experiments to protect pure whites from brown, yellow, and black skinned races. However, Silko does not fully face what amounts to her own cultural exclusionism, namely that only Native Americans deserve to live here, and if Euro-Americans recoil from their technological society, they can never form a true relationship to the land and can only win oneness with it by killing themselves in eco-terrorist acts. Given the wide-spread and highly imaginative biotechnological companies that Silko imagines, one would say she is much the more pessimistic of the two authors. However, she insists on the possibility of positive outcome for the mass revolt of the indigenes towards which the novel builds. She furthermore presents as alternatively acceptable the outcome where humanity destroys itself totally, since Earth will abide, grow, change, and restore itself in the long run. These are two different and contradictory optimisms. Houser is at her most interesting when teasing out the contradictory possibilities embedded in both books regarding agency, potential for improvement, individuality, and the like.

By identifying ecosickness narratives as separate from other forms of ecoliterature, Houser calls attention to the need for emotional involvement as we face the problems we have brought upon ourselves and Earth. Science alone will not change our actions. Neither will political argument. She makes the case for literature as an important way of creating affective unease and desire to change. While Houser emphasizes the novels' many possible and contradictory answers to our ecological problems, she insists that these "writers are by no means universally optimistic, but they propose that this inseparability [of soma and earth] is the key to any possible hope." (223) Their contradictions goad us to think and feel and make choices. She explores, how emotion can "carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions, nations, and the planet." (223)



**The Necessity of William T. Vollmann**  
**Françoise Palleau-Papin (ed.), *Under Fire; William T. Vollmann, The Rifles: A Critical Study* (Peter Lang, 2016). 186pp**

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Although William T. Vollmann's career as a published author began more than two decades ago, his works remain to many readers more the rumored accomplishment of an idiosyncratic reputation than volumes actually read. For this reason, criticism devoted to his writing is especially valuable, especially when, as with the essays gathered here by Françoise Palleau-Papin, that criticism attends closely to the many facets of an individual work, describing in detail its particular strengths and shortcomings. This sort of critical effort shows that the prospective reader will find much to celebrate in Vollmann's oeuvre: an incisive mind grappling with many of our moment's most pressing issues; an effort to produce texts that suspend judgment until all the facts are in; a sincere attempt to avoid naiveté without sacrificing a purposive devotion to such values as truth, moral equality, aesthetic beauty, and humble wisdom; a truly global scope; and, a tendency to stylistic and formal innovation in service of maximalist exuberance.

In addition to its own virtues, to which I shall turn below, Palleau-Papin's collection helps one to recognize three intriguing but otherwise less-appreciable aspects of Vollmann criticism as a field. First, book-length Vollmann criticism has so far emerged in two clusters, initially between 2009 and 2012, and now with a new wave of collections and monographs (including some still forthcoming as of this writing) in 2019 and 2020. The gap was filled by only two essay-collections: *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (which I co-edited with Daniel Lukes for the University of Delaware Press, 2015) and the volume under review here, which is the English translation of a 2011 French original, revised and retitled.<sup>2</sup> As an

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<sup>2</sup> Setting aside the pseudo-scholarly books of the late, and much missed, Michael Hemming-

intermediary between the earliest and most recent Vollmann criticism, Palleau-Papin's book solidifies readings missing or only merely hinted at in some of the earliest studies, and, together with the several essays devoted to Vollmann's historical fiction in the *Critical Companion*, helps delineate the terms on which that dimension of Vollmann scholarship can further unfold. The book's table of contents reveals its second implication for the field: from its introduction, chapter, and postface by the editor, as well as five chapters by other scholars, all but one of the authors are women. This is especially pleasing given that some less perceptive reviewers seem to have little to say about Vollmann beyond the observation that the more sensational aspects of his books may be read as misogynistic. A relatively equitable gender distribution remains more or less the case among Vollmann's major critics: Lukes, Marco Malvestio, and Giuseppe Carrera (as well as Larry McCaffery) may be men, but Palleau-Papin, Qian Cheng, and İşil Ozcan are not. Finally, the new edition and translation of Palleau-Papin's book performs an important task in bringing what was originally non-Anglophone scholarship to American readers. Perhaps it is due to Vollmann's own globetrotting and dizzyingly international projects, but whatever the cause, the majority of scholars who have produced significant work on Vollmann are not his compatriots: beyond the few Americans, there are Qian (Chinese), Palleau-Papin (French), Lukes and Michael Mellor (British), Malvestio and Carrera (Italian), and Ozcan (Turkish). This matters: while the international nature of the field may hinder the development of a body of critical work within the American academy, it does provide opportunities to approach Vollmann's writing outside local

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son (*William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* [McFarland, 2009] and *William T. Vollmann: An Annotated Bibliography* [Scarecrow, 2012]), one finds among the earlier criticism the French version of Palleau-Papin's collection (*The Rifles, William T. Vollmann; Le roman historique en question: Une étude de The Rifles* (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011)) and Cheng Qian's monograph *A Study on William Vollmann: Transgression in the Postmodern Context* (Xiamen University Press, 2012). The more recent major publications are a special issue of the journal *Enthymema* devoted to Vollmann (no. 23, 2019, edited by Marco Malvestio and Giuseppe Carrera) and İşil Ozcan's *Understanding William T. Vollmann* (University of South Carolina Press, 2019). A forward glance (as of this writing) reveals that Lukes, having co-edited our *Critical Companion*, has prepared *Conversations with William T. Vollmann* for the University Press of Mississippi, while Michael Mellor is composing *William T. Vollmann: Writing America's Other Histories* for the Manchester University Press series "Contemporary American and Canadian Writers."

trends. In this regard, Vollmann is reminiscent of Poe, whose works have found at several historical moments a more sympathetic reception abroad than at home.

This is not at all to say that Palleau-Papin's collection is more important for its place in the history of Vollmann criticism than for its arguments, the local significances of which depend on some familiarity with *The Rifles*. This 1994 novel, part of Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* series of historical fiction, is a contender for his best. It unites the strongest qualities of his historical fiction, his metafictional inclinations, and the gritty realism for which he is perhaps best known. Too, it does so in a relatively compact 411 pages, demonstrating that he has some capacity for concision when the project at hand recommends it. At the heart of *The Rifles* are two narratives that become increasingly intertwined as the novel progresses. One relates the adventures of "Captain Subzero," an autofictional character who finds in the extreme Canadian North challenges of physical fortitude (significantly based on Vollmann's own solo trip to the magnetic North Pole); a troubled erotic relationship with Reepah, a chemically-dependent, suicidal, and cognitively challenged young Inuk; and, evidence of the degree to which Euro-American technological (firearms) and structural (political, economic, juridical) forces have decimated traditional Inuit culture. The other narrative thread concerns Sir John Franklin's efforts to find a Northwest Passage during several expeditions, including the ruinous final one that saw captain and crew suffering from lead poisoning and the cold, his ships lost, and some of his men resorting to cannibalism before their deaths. The relations between the two narratives are several, but among them is the surreal, phantasmagoric blending of the identities of the two protagonists. These intersections allow not only a postcolonial salvo directed at a famed nineteenth-century adventurer, but also unveil and stage for critique Subzero's (and thus Vollmann's) own neocolonial motivations.

Each of the essays examines a different aspect of *The Rifles*, but it is a testament to Vollmann's complex interweaving of the novel's many threads and to Palleau-Papin's editorial wisdom that the essays are mutually supportive to an exceptional degree, revealing much more when read in combination than alone. In the strongest contribution, Catherine Lanone reads *The Rifles* as "EcoGothic Metafiction," demonstrating

how Vollmann's pastiche of primary sources undermines the authority of the historical record even as he employs gothic tropes to present the gendered and racial terms of colonialism's real past and symbolic valences. Perhaps most valuably, Lanone's argument makes evident the degree to which Vollmann demands the engagement of his readers, who cannot escape the text without feeling the horrors that colonial appetites imposed on the Inuit. Vincent Bucher's chapter, which follows Lanone's and serves well in a conceptual pairing with it, reads *The Rifles* in terms of its interrogations of the viability of political commitment in relation to the reliability of historical discourse. As Bucher explains, Vollmann presents a variety of challenges to readers who would approach his text in terms of either traditional historical enquiry or literary exercise. Vollmann's complex and extensive use of paratexts, resistance to formal closure, and overlaying of fiction and autobiography, among other features, all undermine the authority of the sort of justifications on which historiographic exercise relies. "In this way, *The Rifles* stands, Bucher argues, as a refutation not only of the grand narratives of European exploration and colonization, but also of attempts to redeem Western history critically, through traditional historical modes.

Palleau-Papin's own chapter offers illuminating close readings of several passages from *The Rifles*, to the end of illustrating how the novel's resistance to conventional form works in tandem with its autofictional elements. Together, these dimensions of the text, Palleau-Papin argues, both challenge duplicitously facile resolutions of historical complexity, and foreground the author's role in advancing and orchestrating the terms of critique. The latter quality of the text, in particular, is a means to reach the audience, bringing them into the role of composer, sharing with Vollmann the task of making meaning from out of fragments of the past. Sophie Chapuis's chapter, which follows Palleau-Papin's, considers a different aspect of meaning-making: how Vollmann's treatment of narrative temporality and voice foreground Reepah as an interpretive key to the novel. As a character who is able to move between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives, and who stands as an embodiment of colonial desire in the former and postcolonial woes in the second, Reepah is both erotic and thanatic (Reepah = reaper). Her voice, Chapuis convincingly demonstrates, joins

those of Franklin, Subzero, and Vollmann himself in controlling the text. Perhaps most importantly, her powerful presence effectively gives her control over the novel, framing its tales of masculine ambition with a feminine perspective both terrifying and playful, one resistant to histories that would try to subsume her.

In the Fifth Chapter, Madeleine Laurencin joins Chapuis in focusing on the novel's female characters. While she also discusses Reepah, her remarks offer space as well to Lady Jane Franklin (the wife of John), Greenstockings, and Sedna. Laurencin contends that Reepah and Lady Jane serve as poles on a spectrum, opposed in terms of ethnicity and community, but connected by their more fundamental role as personifications of unknowability to male characters and suffering as a result of colonialism. While Vollmann's use of the fertility goddess Sedna as a third character in this triad is sometimes ironical, her presence ultimately serves, Laurencin argues, to indicate a feminine openness persisting alongside the legacy of colonialism's patriarchal restriction and destruction. Although one might pause at the idea that Vollmann's rather bleak novel allows even the cautiously optimistic note Laurencin finds in Sedna's figure, this perspective is reinforced by the collection's final essay, by Christine Lorre-Johnston. Lorre-Johnston is primarily concerned with the manner in which Vollmann's text undermines the hermeticity of genre, combining as it does fragments of fictional, anthropological, historical, and travel narratives. Drawing on a wide array of other texts relevant to the Franklin expedition, including works in all of the aforementioned genres, Lorre-Johnston makes clear that the disruptions of generic coherence provide a hybrid text that models a means to resist unjust narrative closure. In her postface to the collection, Palleau-Papin compares the whiteness of Vollmann's arctic landscape to that of Herman Melville's whale. Vollmann's book, she asserts, "speaks the language of the permafrost: a language that flattens out its sources, mixing history and narrative, characters and voices, as so many fragmentary reflections of a self without any image, which might well look like the Other" (168). This concluding point, like most great insights, is at once familiar and surprisingly new, and it not only summarizes the collective lesson of the book's chapters, but eloquently expresses a key dimension of *The Rifles*.

The many topics covered in these essays are all fundamental to more recent criticism of Vollmann. The *Seven Dreams*, for instance, are the subject of the culminating chapter of Ozcan's book, and of an article by Filippo Pennacchio in the recent special issue of *Enthymema* devoted to Vollmann. The analysis of Reepah as a both a narratological function and a comment on gender in relation to social justice occupies a place alongside Malvestio's writing on sex workers in the works of Vollmann and Michel Houellebecq. Too, the complications of fictional authorial personae, as explored in the *The Rifles*, return in a new guise in critical pieces like Lukes' introduction to the interview collection, which focuses on the ways Vollmann invents himself as author.

While the harmony and critical prescience of the arguments presented in Palleau-Papin's book are agreeable, I remain somewhat alarmed by Vollmann's relative absence in assessments of the contemporary American canon. This neglect is perhaps even more the case for international Vollmann *criticism*: Qian's and Palleau-Papin's valuable works have not been cited overmuch by Anglophone critics. These shortfalls are especially evident now, when the exigency for careful study of probing critiques of social injustice in an international context—Vollmann's endless project—has rarely been greater. And, although Vollmann's commitment to such unfashionable values as truth and beauty may seem insufficiently sophisticated to some, they are nothing less than essential to thinking seriously about our political moment. Furthermore, to the extent that American critics drawn to a post-critique model are sometimes insufficiently cautious about how a retreat from cultural critique can slide into a defensible position for suppression of it, the work of scholars such as Palleau-Papin and her contributors, which so capably mediates between critique and aesthetic analysis, is indispensable. In terms of our understanding of Vollmann's achievement, books like *Under Fire* model a way to appreciate that he is an engaged author without submitting his work to a reductive politicking. For these reasons, Palleau-Papin's book serves admirably as signpost for ongoing critical efforts, modeling how we may approach Vollmann's other books while remaining sensitive to the trends that are already shaping his critical reception.

## Competing Interests

“Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender” was edited by two members of Orbit’s editorial team including book reviews editor Ali Chetwynd. The review here was handled by another member of the Orbit team uninvolved with the book. All of Orbit’s editorial team contributed to “Thomas Pynchon in Context” so handling by an uninvolved editor was impossible: the review of this book was handled as usual by the book reviews editor.

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