



ISSN: 2044-4095

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Title: Review of Scott McClintock and John Miller (eds), *Pynchon's California*
(Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
Date: 2015
Volume: 1
Issue: 1
URL: <https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/130>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v3.1.130>

Abstract:

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In his 2011 monograph *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*, David Cowart groups *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice* into a single, convenient category of “California novels.” His chapter covering the California novels stitches together previously-published essays on the three novels. The original essays focus on the novels individually. The chapter connects them through common threads. It’s an effective way for Cowart to cover Pynchon’s entire oeuvre in a single monograph. Around the same time, Thomas Schaub grouped the three novels in “*The Crying of Lot 49 and Other California Novels*,” his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. It was a likewise pragmatic means of covering Pynchon’s smaller works in a slim volume. Perhaps because Cowart and Schaub are such compelling scholars, these two chapters illuminated enough paths of inquiry to inspire a collection like *Pynchon's California*.

Editors Scott McClintock and John Miller argue that California is a particularly appropriate setting for Pynchon’s works. It features the sunny landscapes and dark underworld that inspired the chiaroscuro of noir fiction. It contains both the dream factory of Hollywood and the corruption of the LAPD. It tries to bury its long and brutal history of land use, from gentrification to deforestation to a paradise paved under a twelve-lane freeway. It’s the end of the American frontier and the last place clinging to what David Cowart calls the “myth of American promise.” As Miller and McClintock observe, “California’s vast, varied, and open landscape provides a kind of blank slate on which developers and visionaries continue to project new designs” (4). Principle among these visionaries is Thomas Pynchon.

Indeed, for a writer as fond of creating multiple worlds as Pynchon is, the multiple worlds of California provide a compelling canvas. California’s Bay Area stands out as one of the primary places from which the hippie counterculture began, housing both San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury region

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and Berkeley's catalyzing free speech protests. Southern California is also one of the primary places where the neoliberal revolution took hold, providing the launching pads for both Ronald Reagan and Richard M. Nixon. Both of their presidential libraries are still in Southern California, both a short drive from Hollywood. And California is not merely its dichotomies: hippies and neoliberals, sunny days and smoggy skies, majestic redwoods and squat Joshua trees, northern coastal rainforests and southern inland deserts, palm trees with rats living in them, and gated communities over fault lines. It's a state more rich and diverse—with regard to population, history, and geography—than most countries. Pynchon utilizes much of it: the Central Valley farmland where Doc Sportello was born, the shopping malls where Prairie Wheeler learned to lash out at consumer capitalism, the Hollywood blacklist that traumatized Hub and Sasha Gates, the centripetal force of the suburbs from which Oedipa Maas spins loose, the bizarre dropout communities that may well house Thanatoids and ninja sisterhoods and subversive postal conspiracies, the big-money spas and asylums that decorate places like Ojai and Malibu, the pot farms of Humboldt and Mendocino counties that inspire the fictional Vineland, the Manhattan and Redondo Beach communities that serve as a model for San Narciso and Gordita Beach, and so many freeways and surf breaks and conglomerations of smaller cities that make up the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco. When one considers how appropriate California is for Pynchon and Pynchon is for California, a collection of essays focusing on the intersections of the two becomes necessary.

McClintock and Miller do an admirable job of addressing this need in *Pynchon's California*. The nine essays in this collection focus mostly on the California novels—*Inherent Vice*, *Vineland*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*—and they take a variety of approaches to address these novels. Essays explore issues of detective and noir novels, land use, private property, marijuana, religion, spirituality, ecology, power, resistance, and freeways from a variety of theoretical approaches. The contributors constitute a nice balance between usual suspects in Pynchon studies and new voices. Like all essay collections, some of the works are stronger than others, but unlike many collections, all of the contributions to *Pynchon's California* are high quality and worthy of consideration.

Perhaps the standout of the collection is Hanjo Berressem's "Life on the Beach: The Natural Elements in Thomas Pynchon's California Trilogy." Berressem blends an ecocritical approach relying heavily on Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear* with Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblages (aggregates of

smaller, interrelated thoughts or particles) to examine the elements (solid, liquid, gas, plasma, and aether) of Pynchon's California novels. "The world," Berressem writes, "consists of infinitely complex material and immaterial assemblages. From within different modes of thought, such as science, art, and philosophy, humans construct patterns from this given complexity" (40). Berressem constructs his own patterns out of the complexity of Pynchon's novels by meditating on the aggregate of the aforementioned elements, on the philosophy of Deleuze, and on the geography of the novels. Each element gets its own section. Earth/Solid takes on the long, sordid history of land use in Pynchon's Southern California. Water/Fluid examines the developers' propensity to enclose chaotic free flowing waters into concrete canals like the Los Angeles River or to simply build chlorinated ponds in the form of suburban swimming pools. Air/Gas explores the smog and its "complex dissolution" (48). Fire/Plasma moves into the light repeatedly referenced in the novels, whether it's illuminating Sloane Wolfmann and TV cop shows or playing tricks on Takeshi and DL or eluding 24 fps or creating pathways into alternate worlds. The Beach becomes an aggregate of water, earth, air, and light, "a liminal space where the elements," Berressem observes, "form a particularly felicitous, free arrangement" (54). He ends his essay with Aether, or more specifically the vibes of these complex assemblages. When Berressem filters these through the Beach Boys on Doc's Vibrasonic, he discovers "all waves of an anonymous community and truly democratic multitude, of the parliament of living things" (58),

Similarly, Henry Veggian takes an unconventional approach into Pynchon's sites for resistance in "Profane Illuminations: Postmodernism, Realism, and the Holytail Marijuana Crop." He begins with Salman Rushdie's review of *Vineland* as a "major political novel" and investigates how, exactly that might be the case. He does this by tabling postmodern approaches in favor of utilizing Lukacs and French realists like Balzac as a point of comparison to *Vineland*. It is a surprising exploration that creates inroads into the economy of *Vineland*. Veggian suggest that the marijuana economy in *Vineland* "suggests not so much a utopian possibility" (153) as an alternative, horizontal, egalitarian possibility that stands in stark contrast to the vertical integration of Golden Fang.

Bill Millard likewise examines resistance and the Golden Fang as a metaphor for capitalism in "Pynchon's Coast: *Inherent Vice* and the Twilight of the Spatially Specific." While his conclusions are similar to Veggian's, he treads different ground to arrive at them. He examines land use in *Inherent Vice*. His argument gains momentum when he reflects upon Doc's parking

space at “what would be the corner of Kaufman and Broad” (*Inherent Vice*, 20). This intersection does not exist in the greater Los Angeles area, but, as Millard reveals, much of the urban sprawl was created by development firms like Kaufman & Broad (better known as KB Homes). This discovery leads to a deeper reflection on the unique nature of Pynchon’s protest. Millard argues, “While mounting a sustained ethical argument against systems that serve greed and arrogance, [Pynchon] also exercises, and often successfully promulgates, a sustained fascination with their workings” (86). Millard shares this fascination. He acknowledges the uncharacteristic didacticism of *Inherent Vice*, yet concludes, “If [Pynchon] regards the potential cautionary effect of an elaborate ecological/developmental parable, a useful and provocative countermyth against the cavalier treatment of irreplaceable places, as more a pressing matter than the furthering of his own reputation for certain kinds of gravity, there are probably worse vices” (90).

Millard’s celebration of the depth in what is sometimes considered Pynchon’s shallowest novel would perhaps have been a better starting point for the collection than Margaret Lynd’s “Situated Fictions: Reading the California Novels against Thomas Pynchon’s Narrative World,” if only because Lynd categorizes Pynchon’s California novels as lesser works. I’m not sure why this devaluation of the novels is necessary. Pynchon scholars tend to be dismissive of New Critical categorizations of high and low literature. Pynchon’s work rejects distinctions between high and low culture, poaching gutter genres like boys’ adventure stories, spy novels, dime westerns, pulp noir, TV movies, monster movies, and perhaps even seventies sexploitation films (because surely all the buxom, miniskirted women of *Inherent Vice* are an intertextual conversation with Russ Meyer movies; a quick glimpse of the trailer for Meyer’s *Cherry, Harry & Raquel* all but confirms this). Further, the recognition that Berressem, Veggian, Millard, Lynd herself, and all the other contributors find deep ideas and perform compelling scholarship in these pages should be enough justification for taking these “lesser” works seriously.

Lynd introduces her criticism by stating, “Few could disagree that if Pynchon had written only the three California novels, he would be considered a talented but minor figure in the world of American letters” (16) and she ends it by referring to *Inherent Vice* as “the least of the novels by any measure” (32). Both of these are specious claims. How, for instance, could one enter that subjunctive world of a three-novel Thomas Pynchon? And, in that world, would Jonathan Lethem exist like he does in this one, treading similar ground to Pynchon, becoming a major figure in American letters, and

not writing anything that rivals *Inherent Vice* for depth, breadth, or even entertainment value?

Luckily, Lynd moves well beyond this assertion. She expands her justification to arguing that perhaps scholars should view Pynchon's works as an oeuvre, each text in conversation with previous and subsequent texts, a conversation most valuable as a whole. She does exactly that in her essay, mining the depth of each of the California novels, raising their value for her readers if not necessarily for herself.

One of the shortcomings of the essays as a collection is the predominant focus on the California novels instead of Pynchon's California as a whole. John Miller perhaps employs the editor's prerogative in his own contribution to the collection by reconciling this absence somewhat. In his essay "Reading, Resistance, and the California Turn in Pynchon's Cornucopian Fiction," he explores more deeply the California elements at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*. While only a scant few paragraphs cover these novels in earlier essays, Miller focuses much of his essay on the "California turns" (181) Pynchon takes at the end of these large works. He argues that California becomes a place of "wild hope" (199) for Pynchon at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*. Blending this notion with Lynd's idea that Pynchon's works should be read as an oeuvre, a scholar gains one more lens through which she can view the California novels.

As mentioned previously, all of the essays in this collection are strong. All of them are worthy of inclusion. In "The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State of California in Pynchon's Fiction," Scott McClintock utilizes the "antipsychiatry" (110) of Deleuze and Guattari to build a frame that situates Pynchon's California novels with iconic works of Southern California like *Mildred Pierce*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *Chinatown* and examines the changing shape of paranoia from the Tristero system to the Golden Fang. Scott Macleod ("Playgrounds of Detection: The Californian Private Eye in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*") employs the long literary history of California *noir* to read Pynchon's use of the detective genre as a means of wrestling with conspiracies and highlighting political and social anxieties. Christopher K. Coffman ("Postmodern Sacrality and *Inherent Vice*") examines the sacred and the profane in Pynchon's California novels. He focuses most of his analysis on *Inherent Vice* and demonstrates that Doc's inconclusive journey through incoherence—even more than Oedipa's or Prairie's—builds a practice for ongoing spiritual investigation. And finally, in what may be the most enjoyable read in the collection, "Maybe He'd Have to Just Keep Driving, or Pynchon on the Freeway", Stephen Hock explores the buried secrets of

the Southern California freeway system and uses them to map a complex metaphor with off ramps leading to desolation, promise, and a world that may not be our own, but could be with one or two adjustments. When put together, these nine essays form a solid collection.

Nonetheless, *Pynchon's California* does have one glaring absence. There is no real discussion of gender in the collection. *The Crying of Lot 49* has a female protagonist. *Vineland* arguably also has a female protagonist and all the events are triggered by her search for her absent mother. *Inherent Vice* builds a pastiche off a genre that has done perhaps more to construct American cultural definitions of masculinity than any other genre. Surely, somewhere in all of this raw material is an essay on gender in the California novels waiting to happen. *Pynchon's California* would have been stronger if it had included that essay. Even so, this collection belongs on shelves next to Geoffrey Greene's *The Vineland Papers* and Thomas Schaub's *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*. Like both of those books, *Pynchon's California* features excellent scholarship on underrepresented works.

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