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Abstract:

The *Bleeding Edge* excerpt provided in the Fall 2013 Penguin Press catalogue notes that "[u]nhoused people sleep in doorways," but by the time the Advanced Reading Copy had reached reviewers, "unhoused" had been changed to "unsheltered" (2), an edit that remained in place, even after other changes to the text, a couple of months later when the book became available for general readers. We might ask: what significance is there to the edit? And from whose perspective are we seeing Maxine's neighborhood in the opening of the novel? The edit actually distances the text from the only characters in the scene to whom we might attribute the perception of unsheltered people, Maxine and her children.

A Note on *Bleeding Edge*'s "Unsheltered"

Albert Rolls

As Maxine walks her children, Otis and Ziggy, to school in the opening pages of *Bleeding Edge* (2013), the narrator catalogues, among other things, the morning residents of Maxine's Upper West Side neighborhood. The catalogue itself comes across as somewhat glib, including as it does cops suffering from "bagel deficiencies,"¹ but it was thought about carefully, something evidenced by the fact that Pynchon worked on its diction until very late in the editorial process. The *Bleeding Edge* excerpt provided in the Fall 2013 Penguin Press catalogue notes that "[u]nhoused people sleep in doorways,"² but by the time the Advanced Reading Copy had reached reviewers, "unhoused" had been changed to "unsheltered" (2), an edit that remained in place, even after other changes to the text, a couple of months later when the book became available for general readers. The diction, both before and after the edit, is unusual in a way. "Unsheltered" and "unhoused" may be used—synonymously in fact—in the literature on homelessness to refer to those among the homeless who lack not just permanent residences but also beds in temporary government shelters.³ The colloquial term that New Yorkers most often use to talk about those asleep in doorways, on subway cars, on park benches, or in any other unsanctioned sleeping areas, however, is the word Maxine and Otis's friend Fiona use—that is, "homeless" (34)—when they discuss the moral implications of killing someone for eating unpaid-for produce from the fresh-fruit display outside of a supermarket in the first-person shooter that Lucas, one of the programmers behind DeepArcher, designed.⁴

"Unsheltered" stands out still more because in other passages in which the narrator describes scenes from Maxine's perspective that reference homeless people, he employs the term "unhoused" (51 and 439), suggesting that that word is the one that comes to mind when Maxine sees those who have nowhere to go. We might ask: what significance is there to the edit? Could Pynchon be asking us to make a distinction between the "unhoused"

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and the "unsheltered," between those who are without homes and those who are without beds in shelters and hence as far outside the system as it is possible to get in the city? If so, neither Maxine nor any other character in the book acknowledges such a distinction, though, to be honest, they have little reason to do so. A more pertinent question, one that does not deny the possibility that the first one is relevant, might be: from whose perspective are we seeing Maxine's neighborhood in the opening of the novel? Or—to put it in terms of what Martin Eve has most recently pointed out is a long standing question asked of Pynchon's texts, particularly of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)—who is speaking through the narrator?⁵ The edit actually distances the text from the only characters in the scene to whom we might attribute the perception of unsheltered people, Maxine and her children. We are thus faced with an enigma, a character who is simultaneously absent and present and through whose eyes we are asked to see the city, the "suspect," to cite *Bleeding Edge's* epigraph, "who knows the real story but isn't going to tell it." New York, which is almost exclusively presented through Maxine's eyes, emerges as a character—one whose voice seems to be integrated into the narrator's enigmatic diction—that shows the reader, at least here, what the novel's other characters, and their real-world counterparts, have not yet learned to perceive.

Moments in which the diction of the novel exposes a disconnect between the characters within a scene and its narrative voice appear so infrequently as to seem as inconsequential to the novel as whether or not one should distinguish between the unsheltered and the unhoused among the homeless. The lack of many such moments, however, has significance: New York, despite all we see of it, rarely achieves independence beyond the skewed perceptions of those within it. Maxine's friend Heidi is an exemplary New Yorker in this respect. She sees Latinas—in another dig at V.'s representation of New York—through the lens of *West Side Story*⁶: "her idea of the echt Latina" is Natalie Wood, despite Maxine's reminding her again and again, that Wood was "born Natalia Nikolaevna Zacharenko [. . .] and her accent in the picture is possibly closer to Russian than to *Boricua*" (27). Indeed, the city's surface space—even those elements of it that characters view with realistic eyes—is, or soon will be, little more than a reflection of the vision of those who have the power to impose their fantasies on New Yorkers, as developers tighten their "Noose of Horror, multiplexes and malls and big-box stores," and build "a born again imitation of their own American heartland" (51), a complement to landlords' pushing to transform residential space into co-ops and condos for "yups with more money than brains" (115), as March Kelleher puts it.

If there is a New York outside the communal projections filtered through individuals and the corporate fictions imposed upon the cityscape, that city is under or beyond the surface—in, for example, “the sinister and labyrinthine sewers of greed that run beneath all real-estate dealings in this town” (42); in the space from which Marvin, with his apt and timely messages, comes from, the now-folded Kozmo.com, a business that takes its name from *kosmos*, which, as Angus Fletcher informs us, is an ornamental figure, chiefly allegorical, for which “the part implies the whole and the whole the part”⁷; and in the windows of slowly passing subway cars that reveal Tarot-like panels with “the day’s messengers from whatever the Beyond has for a Third World” (439). Or that city is in the residue of other eras—such as the century-old building that hwwgaahwgh had occupied, a building, the architecture of which, interestingly, avoids the excesses of its period (42), and Maxine’s memories of Time Square, filled as they are with now pushed-out “unkempt and unhoused and unspoken-for” (51) elements. Or that city has been relegated to the margins—in “graffiti, uncontrolled utterances, bad dreamers who sleep in public and scream in their sleep” (322), as Heidi notes, and in the Fresh Kills landfill coupled with the Island of Meadows, which reminds Maxine of DeepArcher: “As if you could reach into the looming and prophetic landfill, that perfect negative of the city in its seething foul incoherence, and find a set of invisible links to click on and be crossfaded at last to unexpected refuge, a piece of the ancient estuary exempt from what happened, what has gone on happening, to the rest of it” (167).

The homeless are frequently present in the text that points toward the New York that lies outside the ordinary city. The placement of “unsheltered” in the opening pages—especially as the word lacks a clear place within the diction of the characters within the scene—therefore aptly captures the duality of the New York Pynchon has created, not the duality between the wealthy or elect and the poor or preterite—a division that, although occasionally relevant, is as much a part of the hidden, as it is of the surface, New York⁸—but the duality of the city that is at home within the conventions that fashion the order we perceive and the city that lies outside, or is unsheltered by, those conventions, the real city, to adapt Maxine’s guru Shawn’s Zen formula, “the ‘face before the face’” that is occasionally spotted through the illusion but to which one is likely to “attach some more familiar face” (200).

End notes

1. Pynchon, *BE*, 2.
2. Pynchon [Catalogue], 32.

3. See, for instance, Shumsky, 258.
4. The episode was itself revised very late, the part of the dialogue in which Maxine asks, "And what's the name of this?" and Fiona answers, "If Looks Could Kill" (*BE ARC*, 34) was removed from the final text.
5. Eve, 4.
6. For a discussion of *Bleeding Edge's* correction of the representation of New York in *V.*, see Rolls.
7. Fletcher, 112. Fletcher argues that *kosmos* is "a symbol that implies rank in a hierarchy" (109), something that obliges him to emphasize, as Georgia E. Brown has recently observed, "*kosmos* as the expression of systems of status that do not allow the free play of imagination" (Brown, 34). Brown—in an extension of Fletcher's thought that is relevant to Pynchon's Marvin, or what he represents—calls attention to the power of *kosmos*, the ornamental and the marginal, "to frame new ways of thinking . . . [to] adumbrate knowledge that is apprehended through, determines and is determined by, the fragmentary form of ornament" (34).
8. March's parable of a "powerful ruler who liked to creep around town in disguise, doing his work in secret" and the bag lady who serves as "the guardian of whatever the city threw away" (*BE*, 112) can, in fact, be seen as a parable of the unperceived city as a source of both power and its subversion.

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