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ARTICLE

Mr. Pynchon Goes to Iowa: The Search for Community in the Later Novels

Michael Harris

Central College (Pella, Iowa), US

harrism@central.edu

In much of his work, Thomas Pynchon has avoided the Midwest as a setting, and criticized the region as a cultural wasteland. However, his aversion to the Midwest has given way to a tacit recognition of that region in his later novels. Since his novels are often structured as quests to new worlds, the Midwest might qualify as a new, unexplored world. This essay analyzes Pynchon's portrayal of the Midwest, and, more specifically, Iowa, my home state. I argue that, beyond a literal, geographical place, Iowa, and the Midwest, function as a metaphor for a now unavailable imagined community.

Ultimately, it turns out, we all have an intrinsic need to pursue purposes larger than ourselves ... I came to realize ... that the search for purpose is really a search for a place, not an idea. It is a search for a location in the world where you want to be part of making things better for others in your own small way. It could be a classroom where you teach, a business where you work, a neighborhood where you live.

Atul Gawande

A sense of place is undeniably important in Thomas Pynchon's work, and given the lateness of the present moment in his career and his wide assortment of global settings, one might assume that he has by now covered every conceivable geographical location in his many novels. However, this is not the case. One glaring omission among Pynchon's panoramic settings would be the very middle of the United States, the region known as the Midwest. In his early work, Pynchon studiously avoided or simply ignored the Midwest. A native of New York, he apparently adopted the view of America conveyed in the famous Saul Steinberg cover of *The New Yorker*, in which the Midwest, seen from 9th Avenue, appears as a distant speck on the horizon. With his background in California, he would, of course, allocate a large portion of his map of America to the representation of that state and the Pacific coast as well. Culturally, Pynchon's America might resemble a topographical map of Australia, with the areas of noteworthy civilization on the East and West coasts flanking a vast desert in the middle. It is not surprising then that a recent article in the *London Review of Books*, on writers seeking anonymity, identified Pynchon as "some bloke who [divides] his time between California and Manhattan" (Lanchester). But Pynchon's aversion to the Midwest as a setting has gradually given way to a tacit recognition of that region, in later works such as *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*. Since many of his works are structured as quests to new worlds, the Midwest might qualify as a belatedly new, unexplored world whose virtues remain a well-kept secret. In this essay, I will focus on Pynchon's portrayal of the Midwest, and more specifically, his inclusion of Iowa, my home state, among his recent settings. I will argue that, beyond a literal,

geographical place, Iowa, and the Midwest, function as a metaphor for a now unavailable imagined community.¹

Pynchon's *oeuvre* – his eight novels to date – can be neatly divided into three categories: the novels that take New York City as their primary setting (*V.* and *Bleeding Edge*); the California trilogy (*The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice*); and the longer works that include numerous global settings (*Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*). Thomas Schaub has explored the similarities between *The Crying of Lot 49* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. If we look closer at Pynchon's settings throughout his work, however, his persistent gravitation toward the coasts represents the opposite movement conveyed by Fitzgerald, a native Midwesterner. Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, finds himself working in the bond market in New York City following his service in World War I, but is repulsed by the greed and corruption endemic in the Big Apple. At the novel's end, with the Great Depression looming on the horizon, Nick leaves the East coast behind and returns to the heartland to pick up the pieces of his life. Although Pynchon could certainly understand the plight of Fitzgerald's imagined community of ex-pat Midwesterners living in Long Island, his tendency throughout much of his career has been to reverse Fitzgerald's direction by ignoring what he would see as the wasteland of the Midwest to locate his works in the livelier cultural centers of California and New York City. Pynchon's habitual turn to those locales is in line with the sentiment of Bob Dylan, also a transplanted Midwesterner, who sings in "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues": "I'm going back to New York City, I do believe I've had enough." Although we know that

¹ The Midwest as a region has long been considered an open, welcoming community. In a recent article, "America's Nations," Colin Woodard analyzes the ethnic make-up of nine regions, one of which it designates "the Midlands," which includes Iowa and Ohio, but not Minnesota or Wisconsin: "America's great swing region was founded by English Quakers, who believed in humans' inherent goodness and welcomed people of many nations and creeds to their utopian colonies like Pennsylvania on the shores of Delaware Bay. Pluralistic and organized around the middle class, the Midlands spawned the culture of Middle America and the Heartland, where ethnic and ideological purity have never been a priority, government has been seen as an unwelcome intrusion, and political opinion has been moderate. An ethnic mosaic from the start—it had a German, rather than British, majority at the time of the Revolution—it shares the Yankee belief that society should be organized to benefit ordinary people, though it rejects top-down government intervention."

Pynchon is a native of New York and resides in Manhattan, and that he spent time in the Northwest working for Boeing as well as in California, a general lack of knowledge about his personal life makes one turn to the texts for clues about his geographical preferences in selecting his settings.

Vineland, a novel which on one level mourns the loss of community – historically, on the part of the Yurok, and more recently, on the part of the 60's community gathered around the College of the Surf – represents the paradigm of Pynchon's early aversion to the Midwest.² An important narrative thread of that novel follows DL Chastain, a young woman living in the Northwest, who is recruited by Ralph Wayvone, based on her training as a Japanese sensei, to carry out the elimination of Brock Vond. DL wants no part of Wayvone's plan and attempts to elude him, leaving Oregon via Los Angeles by car under cover of nightfall. The narrator explains her eventual choice of refuge as she drives across America: "On inertial navigation, knowing she'd know what she was looking for when she found it, DL didn't stop till the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio, which she first beheld around midday in a stunning onslaught of smog and traffic" (133). William Grim has noticed the irony in DL's first impression of Columbus, which, with its "smog and traffic," is actually "redolent of Los Angeles but hardly the stuff of the healthy environment of the Midwest" (156). DL's stay in Columbus is mercifully brief, although long enough to establish that area as one of the least desirable in America. Bland, mundane, utterly devoid of distinction and surprise, Columbus offers DL the perfect place to disappear and blend in, enhanced by her clerical job at a "vacuum cleaner parts distributor's" (133). In her search for a new disguise to fit into the numbing normality of Columbus, DL is compared to Clark Kent giving up his exciting career as Superman: "Lois Lane might not give her the time of day anymore, but that'd be OK, she'd be dating somebody from the secretarial pool" (134). Caught up in the process of "slowly becoming her alias, a small-town spinster pursuing a perfectly diminished life, a minor belle gone

² Frenesi Gates later grows nostalgic for this "old sweet community" (292) centered around the film collective 24fps. Back in those days, she "dreamed of a mysterious people's oneness, drawing together toward the best chances of light, achieved once or twice that she'd seen in the street . . . the people in a single presence" (117). DL is amused by Frenesi's romantic conception of community.

to weeds and gophers before her time," DL is providentially kidnapped and forced to return to Japan (134). In a novel which views America from the Western perspective of Vineland, California and which ends with a family reunion and the word "home" (385), the Midwest appears as an unfortunate pit-stop, deserving of clichés such as the back of beyond and the middle of nowhere.³

The search for community has been recognized by a variety of scholars as an important feature in Pynchon's work. For example, in "Dimming the Enlightenment: Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*," Victor Strandberg refers to the "lifelong search for a viable community in Pynchon's books," which he sees in "the two travelers' commitment to the most ancient and deeply rooted of human communities, the biological family" (108). Similarly, Phillip Gochenour, in "Anarchist Miracles: Distributed Communities, Nodal Subjects and *The Crying of Lot 49*," sees the WASTE mail system as an analogue and forerunner of today's "World Wide Web and the distributed communities that have been born from it" (49). Here Gochenour envisions a fluid, ever-changing community, since "meaning and power are to be found in those linkages rather than in the individuals or groups themselves" (49). More recently, J. Hillis Miller in *Communities in Fiction* has argued that the adolescent boys' gang in Pynchon's early story, "The Secret Integration," represents "a kind of ideal, visionary, utopian, messianic, egalitarian, classless community" (273). To underscore the ideality of this utopian aspect of the boys' community, however, Miller also notes that it is imaginary, which leads him to conclude, "Community belonging seems no longer to have the force it seemed to have even in the time of Pynchon's early stories" (271).

Several recent full-length critical studies, however – by Samuel Thomas, Joanna Freer, and Sean Carswell – argue that Pynchon's interest in the value of community is present and perhaps increasing throughout the later novels. In his analysis of *Vineland*, the final chapter of *Pynchon and the Political*, Thomas states that the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives "allows us to re-plot a system of

³ Beyond a prejudice against the Midwest, Pynchon must harbor a special aversion to Columbus, Ohio. In *Against the Day*, Merle Rideout makes a short visit to Columbus, and afterward "understood that he must never if he could avoid it set foot within the limits of this place again" (66).

political or 'community' ethics, to imagine a system of human relations and shared responsibilities that offers something beyond the existing dictum of 'socialized,' 'integrated' society" (140). Freer, in *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture*, observes an increasing focus on family in the later novels: "as the years pass, it seems that Pynchon comes to view the family as a social ideal and even as a last bastion of *communitas* in self-interested times, as a blighted but resilient unit of resistance within which, in post-revolutionary America, altruistic, non-possessive love still has a chance to flourish" (144–145). In locating the search for community in the confines of the conventional, nuclear family, however, Pynchon risks slipping into sentimentality, according to Freer and others (Freer 144). Taking the previous insights further, Carswell identifies Pynchon's project since *Vineland* as "envisioning a future that wrests wealth and power from the opulent few ... that moves the contemporary ideology away from the free market/neoliberal utopian ideal of accumulation of wealth; [and] replaces this power system and ideology with a life based on social relations constructed out of reconstituted family systems and communities" (16). I would like to build on this focus on community in Pynchon's later novels and connect it to his gradual recognition of the Midwest as a referent and setting. Although there has recently been an increasing focus on regionalism in Pynchon studies, evident, for example, in *Pynchon's California*, edited by Scott McClintock and John Miller, to date little attention has been given to the Midwest.

The term *community* is used widely and in a variety of contexts: it is employed so frequently in the academy that some, including Mary Louise Pratt, question its usefulness. Pratt suggests the term *contact zone* as an alternative to community to describe the site of interactions between people or groups in a given setting. An example of the academic use of the term *community* would be my college's Office of Community-Based Learning, which administers internships and service-learning projects that provide students with a more hands-on educational experience to inculcate the idea of reciprocity. "Community," in that sense, is fostered by volunteer work that serves the greater good, based on "sustained partnerships" with the populace outside the boundaries of the college. Pratt, however, objects to the implicit utopian connotations of the term *community*, "embodying values like equality, fraternity,

liberty, which [modern] societies often profess but systematically fail to realize" (38). Due to factors like culture, class, race, gender, and language ability, all members may not have an equal seat or voice at the communal table.

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, argues that the rise of that large community known as a nation is linked to the mass production and dissemination of print literacy that helped people imagine themselves sharing common values and purpose. Through the mass production of newspapers, pamphlets, books, etc., ideas bonding those in the community together could, of course, not only be generated and inculcated, but also manipulated. In his texts, Pynchon suggests that the end result of this process – nations, multi-national corporations, business and manufacturing conglomerates – has made the ideals of equality, openness, freedom of expression, and freedom from censorship implicit in the term *community* difficult, if not impossible, to attain. As Mason remarks to Dixon in that premonitory way so typical of the novel *Mason & Dixon*, "In any case, both Pennsylvania and Maryland are Charter'd Companies as well, if it comes to that. Charter'd Companies may indeed be the form the World has now increasingly begun to take" (252). The power of Mason's prophecy lies in the repeated word "charter'd," signifying the organization of a city or state for the express purpose of trade and commerce.⁴ Pynchon refers to community in many ways in his fictional work, often interrogating that concept; the best examples of community his readers find often seem to involve underground counter-cultural groups who have developed their own means of meeting and communication, such as WASTE in *The Crying of Lot 49*, or the Counterforce which emerges at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Part of the implied criticism in Pynchon's description of Columbus, Ohio, in *Vineland*, besides its lifeless conformity, is that it is devoid of any active involvement in a real or imagined community.

Mason & Dixon marks a subtle change in Pynchon's attitude toward the Midwest; in this historical novel with its simulated eighteenth-century language, the Midwest

⁴ In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams discusses the use and meaning of the term "charter'd" in relation to William Blake's poem "London" (148).

is figured as a new, unknown world – uncharted territory. A turn toward regionalism in Pynchon's work appears to begin with this novel. Up to this point, his work was confined to the coasts or to a variety of global settings, but in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon begins to attend to other localities. In the country/city binary, the metropole is now Philadelphia, "second only to London, as the greatest of English-speaking cities" (258), which the surveyors are eager to leave, to begin "Westering" in the hinterland (600). Mason and Dixon and crew move inexorably toward the heart of the country, laying out their Visto, despite warnings of danger from the Mohawk, Iroquois, and Catawba. The linear boundary the astronomer and surveyor trace is seen as a desecration of these native peoples' sacred land, the foundation of their community: their Great Warrior Path, open to all Indian groups, represents their cooperative and communal spirit, in spite of their occasional war-like attitude toward one another. In this text, the Midwest serves as the endpoint, the *telos*, of the narrative, but hardly as a setting: as soon as Mason and Dixon arrive there, they turn back. Once the surveyors reach "the Ohio Country" and take in "the most delightful pleasing View of the Western Plains the Eye can behold" (679), the region passes into legend; Pynchon adopts the language of Romance and tall tale to describe the abundance and size of Midwestern agricultural produce: "In this Valley, plants, – Vegetables, – grow big, – very big. Big corn. Each Kernel's more than a man can lift. Big Turnip. Six-man crew to dig out but one. Big Squash. Big enough for many families to eat their way into, and then live inside all the Winter" (654). Mason and Dixon "dream of going on, unhinder'd, as the Halt dream of running, the Earth-bound of flying. Rays of light appear from behind Clouds, the faces of Bison upon close Approach grow more human, unbearably so, as if about to speak, Rivers run swifter, and wider" (677). The briefly-glimpsed Midwest here turns into a metaphor for magic, mystery, abundance, and America itself, but also for danger, for an imagined community that we know from historic hindsight cannot last. Both the indigenous nations and the community of ax-men and others comprising Mason and Dixon's crew will soon break up and scatter across the land.

Pynchon's next novel, *Against the Day*, represents a more sustained exploration of the Midwest, but nevertheless seems to pass through the region rather than explore it. Beginning with the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, this historic novel moves

restlessly between many global settings, but as it unfolds, some of its action not surprisingly takes place in nearby states like Colorado and Iowa. The narrative thread involving Merle, Erlys, and Dahlia Rideout, for example, lingers in the Midwest, particularly in Iowa, the family's landing place following the World's Fair. In this way, *Against the Day* continues the turn toward regionalism and an attention to local communities found in Pynchon's later work. To some extent, Pynchon moves beyond a postmodernist emphasis on meta-fiction to a "post-postmodernist" concern with social realities. Merle Rideout, a pioneering photographer and native of Connecticut, is content to remain in the small towns of the Midwest, eking out a living, even after his wife leaves him and his daughter departs to pursue an acting career in New York, London, and Paris. The association of Scarsdale Vibe's name and Dally's poor reception in "the Cabinet of Ultimate Illusion, known also as New York City" (353) make Merle's decision seem justifiable. *Against the Day* counters the viewpoint in *Vineland*, where the city of Columbus, Ohio represents an ugly, lifeless existence, by establishing Audacity, Iowa as the chosen site in Merle's "search [for] something essential" that might contain a "good part of the meaning of his life so far" (449). Here Iowa, which has sometimes been called "the Midwest of the Midwest,"⁵ appears to be a site of ancient, almost shamanistic knowledge: Merle reveals that his technique of "redeeming light from the inertia of precious metals" (80) came from "an old-school spagyrist" in What Cheer, Iowa (1060).

At times Pynchon's description of this heretofore ignored region waxes lyrical. The following passage mentions the names of several iconic towns in states like Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois to evoke the peculiar beauty of the region, as experienced by Merle Rideout and his daughter Dahlia. Here Pynchon plays on the literary motif of the "inner sea," used by writers such as William Cullen Bryant in "The Prairies," Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, and Ole Rolvaag in *Giants in the Earth*, that likens the plains to a sea or ocean in its vast, rolling topography and undulating grasses. The conceit extended to the typical mode of transportation, a covered wagon known as the "prairie schooner," probably similar to that used by Merle and Dahlia:

⁵ See Tim McClelland, *How to Speak Midwestern*.

They pushed out into the morning fields that went rolling all the way to every horizon, the Inner American Sea, where the chickens schooled like herring, and the hogs and heifers foraged and browsed like groupers and codfish, and the sharks tended to operate out of Chicago or Kansas City – the farmhouses and towns rising up along the journey like islands, with girls in every one, Merle couldn't help but notice, the extravagantly kept promises of island girls, found riding the electric trolley-lines that linked each cozy city to each, or serenely dealing cards in the riverside saloons, slinging hash in cafeterias you walked downstairs into out of the redbrick streets, gazing through doorscreens in Cedar Rapids, girls at fences in front of long fields in yellow light, Lizas and Chastinas, girls of the plains and of profusely-flowered seasons that may never quite have been, cooking for threshers far into and sometimes all through the nights of harvest, watching the streetcars come and go, dreaming of cavalry boys ridden off down the pikes, sipping the local brain tonic, tending steaming washtubs full of corn ears at the street corners with radiant eyes ever on the move, out in the yard in Ottumwa beating a rug, waiting in the mosquito-thick evenings of downstate Illinois, waiting by the fencepost where the bluebirds were nesting for a footloose brother to come back home after all, looking out a window in Albert Lea as the trains went choiring by. (71)

In that one-sentence paragraph, Pynchon's description of America's interior suggests the lively presence of community, with its references to farming, fishing, card games, the seasonal production and consumption of the harvest.⁶ The type of community in this passage conforms to Raymond Williams' notion of "a knowable community – a whole community, wholly knowable" in *The Country and the City*, his classic study of British literature and society prior to and following the Industrial Revolution (165).

⁶ In a later passage Dahlia recalls these trips by wagon "when she'd ridden with Merle past all those small, perfect towns [and] longed after the lights at creeksides and the lights defining the shapes of bridges over great rivers, through church windows or trees in summer" (581) and wonders what the painter Hunter Penhallow would make of that light (580).

According to Williams, the Industrial Revolution made this knowable community, represented to varying degrees by Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, “harder to sustain” (165).⁷ Underlying the evocation of a knowable community in Pynchon’s passage, however, is a sense of loneliness with the recurrent figure of the girl in a doorway or looking through a window with longing (the sequence of verbs *gazing, watching, dreaming, waiting*) achieving the cumulative effect of a painting by Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, or Grant Wood. Beyond his play on the motif of the inner sea, Pynchon also draws attention through the incongruous seaside imagery – herring, groupers, codfish, sharks, island girls, etc. – to the land-locked reality of the Midwest, as if the region is being viewed through the refracted lens of a traveler from the coast. The passage is marked by movement – similar to a landscape glimpsed through a car window and never seen again – except in a photograph one may have taken.

Indeed, Merle Rideout’s pioneering work in photography and motion pictures adds a dimension to Pynchon’s description of the Midwest. Pynchon has long been interested in the relation of photography, film, and cinema to reality; the historic period covered in *Against the Day* – from 1893 until the end of WW I – marked the rise of photography, which Pynchon traces through characters like Merle. The photographic, passing-through effect of the earlier description of the Midwest calls to mind Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, a book of photographs taken of various sites across the country, as seen through a tourist lens in which “the fascination of senseless repetition is already present in the abstraction of the journey” (1). If the rise of print literacy helped to establish nationality, then the development of photography ushered in regionalism and tourism. Baudrillard’s theory of *simulation*, in which “signs of the real [substitute] for the real” (2) also applies to Pynchon’s vision of the Midwest, with its draining of population, leaving behind those young girls dreaming in doorways. *Community* here looks like a curiosity out of the past that visitors find quaint and

⁷ J. Hillis Miller critiques Williams’ rather narrow definition of community. For instance, Williams states, “Only a small group of families living in the same place in a more or less classless society, or a society in which class distinctions are minimized, can justifiably be called a community” (Miller 6). Nevertheless, Williams’ conception of a knowable community is useful to this study.

strange. *Against the Day* describes many kinds of community, including the order of monks that Cyprian Latewood joins, the historic *stranniki* that Yashmeen Halfcourt imagines herself a part of, the gathering together of Webb Traverse's sons and their families toward the novel's end, and even the Chums of Chance themselves, but the novel also examines those forces that destroy community, such as the railroad, owned and controlled by J. P. Morgan. Like Mason and Dixon's Visto, figured as a scar across the Earth, the railroad "broke apart cities and wild herds and watersheds, it created economic panics and armies of jobless men and women, and generations of hard, bleak city-dwellers with no principles who ruled with unchecked power" (930). Indeed, the long passage quoted above ends with a girl in the window watching as "the trains went choiring by" her community in Albert Lea, Minnesota, perhaps signaling its precarious future.

In one of his last appearances in the novel, Merle Rideout, who has now relocated to Santa Monica, California, attends a picnic where he meets "a bunch of Iowans," with whom he discusses "potato-salad recipes" (1048). In this context, Merle appears an anachronism out of the past searching for an imagined community, which he once found among the Aetherists, and later in the small towns of Iowa, and which he now cobbles together through his partnership in a photography business of sorts with Roswell Bounce and infrequent visits to the family of Erlys and Luca who happen to live nearby.⁸ Interestingly, Fredric Jameson has envisioned the logical future development of Merle's scattered California community several decades later in Los Angeles, captured in the detective novels of Raymond Chandler, which forecasts a "form the new America would take: 'a centreless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographical compartment'" (Meeks 33). Judging by his two most recent novels, Pynchon would evidently agree with Jameson that the logic of late capitalism poses a new challenge to community; as a character in *Bleeding Edge* puts it, "late capitalism is a pyramid

⁸ Merle's early interest in the Aether, which leads to his involvement in a study conducted at Case Institute in Cleveland, affords him an important early experience of community: "It was a sort of small Aetherist community, maybe as close as Merle ever came to joining a church" (60).

racket on a global scale, the kind of pyramid you do human sacrifices up on top of, meantime getting the suckers to believe it's all gonna go on forever" (163).

Pynchon's last two novels, *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* return to the familiar settings of California and New York City. *Bleeding Edge*, however, takes a brief detour to Iowa, when Horst, Maxine Tarnow's estranged husband, takes their two sons on a short vacation to visit their grandparents and their father's Midwest roots. Although this short episode takes place off-stage, it nevertheless reflects Pynchon's subtle, evolving shift in attitude toward the Midwest and toward community that we have been tracing. Maxine, through whom much of the narrative perspective is filtered, at times conveys some of Pynchon's early aversion to the Midwest, but through the eyes of her sons Ziggy and Otis, the heartland represents a new, unexplored world, just like Ohio did for Mason and Dixon, and Iowa for Merle Rideout. The boys' experience as visitors transforms the region into legend and themselves into explorers: the Iowa moon they observe is "bigger than any moon the boys had ever seen.... Further into the summer and days to the west, they watched the wind in different wheat fields and waited through the countrywide silences when it grows dark in the middle of the afternoon and lightning appears at the horizon" (290). Their entry into this new world is enhanced by arcade games, which they find "in derelict shopping plazas, in riverside pool halls, in college-town hangouts, in ice-cream parlors tucked into midblock micromalls.... They played ancient machines from faraway California ... Arkanoid in Ames and Zaxxon in Sioux City" (290). Through this medium Ziggy and Otis meet their Iowa counterparts, two brothers their own age: the arcade games ironically close the gap between Iowa and New York City, at least for the younger generation.

In this novel leading up to 9/11, Pynchon surveys the contemporary cultural landscape, dotted with Midwest food store chains: Hy-Vee, Maid-Rite, and Kum & Go. "Farm fields Kum & farm fields Go," the narrator quips, "but it's Chicago that really pulls you back" (289–290). As Ziggy and Otis discover Iowa, Pynchon injects a satirical note from Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* into the narrative through Horst's habitual absence as he attends to fluctuating prices of wheat shares in his work as a commodities broker. Seemingly insignificant, the novel's detour to Iowa throws light on

Maxine's fraud investigations back in the Big Apple. Although Maxine freely shares her sarcastic view of the "Midol West," she is equally derisive of New York, mourning its loss of diversity and community at the hands of gentrification.⁹ She bemoans the destruction of a Puerto Rican neighborhood to make way for Lincoln Center, and the conversion of beloved, time-honored buildings into "high-end chain stores or condos for yups with more money than brains" (115). In this novel, Pynchon reflects on the ever-changing, ephemeral nature of community contained in outdated arcade games in Midwest shopping malls, ethnic neighborhoods in New York sacrificed to gentrification, as well as the internet as a possibly revolutionary mode of communication and surveillance.¹⁰

If the railroad, with its ability to level and unite, is ironically figured as a destroyer of community in *Against the Day*, then the internet possesses similar creative and destructive potential in *Bleeding Edge*.¹¹ In her fraud investigations, Maxine uncovers new, unknown possibilities for human communication made available through the Deep Web as well as evidence of an undercover traffic in narcotics, opioids, weaponry, surveillance, and political control difficult, if not impossible, to detect. Pynchon here alludes, in part, to a new, hidden avenue of criminality that, according to the *New York Times*, is reaching crisis levels.¹² Maxine depends on the internet to maintain her

⁹ Maxine, also known as Lady Maxipad, calls the Midwest "the Midol West, because whenever she's there it feels like her period" (134). The narrator describes Maxine's husband, Horst Loeffler, as a "fourth-generation product of the U.S. Midwest, emotional as a grain elevator" (21). The couple, who met in Chicago, reconcile in the latter half of the novel. Indeed, the arc of the narrative bends toward Maxine's realization that, although near divorce at one point, Horst was "never out of [the picture]" (422). Her fear that her husband was in his office in the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11 is one of the few moments she lets her guard down and displays her emotions.

¹⁰ A recent segment of *The Talk of the Town* in *The New Yorker* supports Maxine's viewpoint: "New Yorkers are accustomed to things disappearing. Every week, it seems, some beloved old diner, art-supply store, or punk den folds, to be supplanted by a CVS" (Michael Schulman, "Dearly Departed," June 26, 2017).

¹¹ In *The Devil and the White City*, Erik Larson attributes the initially disappointing attendance at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago to exorbitant fares charged by the railroads (310–311). Only those within a certain radius could afford the transportation costs to attend.

¹² See Nathaniel Popper, "Opioid Dealers Embrace the Dark Web to Send Deadly Drugs by Mail." June 10, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/business/dealbook/opioid-dark-web-drug-overdose.html?emc=eta1&_r=0.

network of contacts in the city – an impressive community, in its own right – and her ally March Kelleher can post material on her social justice Weblog not otherwise available to the public. Running parallel to the mythic Midwest discovered by Ziggy and Otis in Iowa is the boys' creation of their virtual community of Zigotisopolis, “a version of NYC as it was before 11 September 2001 ... coding together these vehicles and streets, this city that can never be” on the graphics files provided by DeepArcher (428). Founded by two undergraduates at Stanford who brought their idea East to New York, DeepArcher began as an open venue of communication – a “meretricious geeks' paradise” – but has since become the target of predatory internet sharks, like Nicholas Windust and Gabriel Ice, corrupted by the Deep Web's power to manipulate, control, and extort (319). Maxine discovers Zigotisopolis through her investigation of Windust and Ice's activities in DeepArcher, and this discovery leads her to remember a better version of New York: “the old Times Square, before the hookers, before the drugs, arcades like Fascination, pinball machines so classic now that only overcompensated yups can afford to buy them” (429). With its arcades and pinball machines, Ziggy and Otis' retrospective virtual community in DeepArcher resembles, perhaps not so surprisingly, some of the places they visited back in Iowa. Even though it appears to be a nostalgic return to an idealized past, Zigotisopolis, according to Carswell, represents a site of resistance to the current priority placed on economic accumulation and exploitation (155). Thus, in some ways, it functions like Pynchon's representation of the Midwest in the later novels.

The most striking aspect of Pynchon's inclusion of the Midwest in his later work is the way that region is figured as a new, unexplored world. In this way, his perspective probably mirrors that of many people who live on the coasts, even today. He first acknowledges the Midwest in *Mason & Dixon* perhaps out of necessity, since the surveyors' actual historical work takes them in that direction. *Against the Day*, his next novel, begins and lingers there. That Pynchon has an expanding interest in community beginning around this same time is not coincidental. The Midwest, with its location in the middle of the country – the heartland – with its small towns built around family farms, appears to embody the notion of community. As *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* are set in the past, the historic Midwest represents

an ideal, even a site of resistance to our present reality, marked by gentrification and corporate takeover. At the same time, Pynchon never fully abandons his earlier satirical attitude toward the Midwest, as we see through the perspectives of DL and Maxine. Even as physical, virtual, and literary communities take ever new and previously unimagined forms, it's natural to go back to earlier examples to understand the surprisingly complex, shifting nature of *community*. As Raymond Williams puts it, "A valuing society, the common condition of a knowable community, belongs ideally in the past" (180). Thus, in Pynchon's later novels, he turns to an idealized, early version of the Midwest "that may never quite have been" to help readers better imagine community (*AtD* 71). In doing so, he draws upon literary representations found in the work of Twain, Cather, and Morrison as well as simulations of the Midwest contained in photographs, iconic artworks, and/or movies like Morton DaCosta's *The Music Man*, Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, or even Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, rather than his own experience. Perhaps for this reason, he refers to the Midwest primarily in his historical novels, where it functions more as a metaphor than a literal place. Nevertheless, with help from this metaphor, Pynchon adds a regional flavor to the universal search for community and brings that search up to the present day.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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