

“NO WAY TO RETURN”: AGENTIC ASSEMBLIES, SWITCHBACK RESISTANCE,
AND SPATIALIZING THOMAS PYNCHON’S NARRATIVE POLITICS IN
VINELAND

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

July 2012

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on one of the least acclaimed novels in Thomas Pynchon's canon, *Vineland*. It was reviewed with disappointment by critics like Brad Leithauser, who writes that *Vineland* falters "chiefly through its failure in any significant degree to extend or improve upon what the author has done before." I argue against such a reading, and position *Vineland* as a critical turning point for Pynchon's work in which his articulation of the relationship between humans and nonhumans is dramatically refigured. I do this by reconsidering the history of American countercultural politics presented in *Vineland* in two distinct ways. First, attending to Pynchon's critical interest in landscapes and urban spaces, I argue that the novel's histories should be read as conceptual objects, materially coded into the landscape in such a way that they speak through these landscapes. Second, continuing to focus on ways in which space and materiality function in this novel, I draw out the nonhuman actors at work in the narrative in order to demonstrate a shift in Pynchon's conceptualization of the relationship between what he often refers to as the animate and inanimate worlds. While his earlier novels posit an inanimate world that is threatening to humans, *Vineland's* human-nonhuman dynamic is far more entangled in terms of its investment in how these actors function in assembly with each other. I pay particular attention to what Jane Bennett calls "agentic assemblages," groupings of human and nonhuman materialities—a storm or a power grid, a city or a bioregion—that function together to author the spaces that they occupy in this novel. At stake here is a refiguring of historical agency as the product of a web of competing human and nonhuman discursive strategies. I argue that the novel's narrative politics is one in which nonhumans have an authorial role, and that its form repeats this politics by deploying a spatial and discursive navigational strategy for human actors living in a world which is fundamentally nonanthropocentric. Through this narrative politics, *Vineland* emerges as a major contribution to late-20th century critical thought on spatiality, political ecology, materialist philosophy, and narrative theory.

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Introduction: Mapping the Switchback

“Although there is no Meaning to history (an End which transcends it, from its origins to its term), there can be meaning *in* history, since this meaning emerges from an encounter that was real, and really felicitous – or catastrophic, which is also a meaning.”

--Louis Althusser, 194

If Thomas Pynchon’s return to the 1960s in *Vineland* can be read as a history of American counterculture, then it is a history not of ends but of encounters both felicitous—a birth, a sunrise, a reunion, a harvest—and catastrophic—riots, landslides, detentions, tornados. It is a history not of linear trajectory but of dense movements mapped onto a landscape of competing spatiotemporal encodings. In both content and form, *Vineland* is a novel plotted by switchbacks, difficult passages that navigate rough terrain via hairpin turns demanding a constant refocusing of the traveler’s perspective. It leaps through history, from 1984 to the 1960s, from the 1930s to the 60s and back again. Similarly, the narrative zigzags through the California landscape, navigating its inclines and declines, cliffs, valleys, and ridgelines on roads that often serve as a medium through which the novel’s temporalities are traversed, as when a meeting of old rivals in 1984 Vineland County sends them “blasting along at dangerous speed, up and down hills, around curves, weaving among flatbeds and motorheads” to arrive at the site of their first meeting in late 1960s San Diego (226 – 227). Taking Pynchon’s strategic muddling of sign systems and road systems as a model, this thesis reads the switchback, in *Vineland*, as a phenomenological tool which serves to reframe the history of American countercultural politics within a field of spatio-material encoding. Upon this field, the landscape itself is an actor engaged in the work of flattening the hierarchical linearity of historical time until its moments begin to spread out along a plane of shared spatial

resonance. In this way, the novel's sites of historical encounter take on a kind of material being, coded into the landscape in much the same way that a switchback both shapes and is shaped by the terrain, moving travelers along risky vertical grades by increments that turn ever back upon themselves, engaging in a constant process of re-confrontation in which the past is no longer something that can be left behind.

Movement through Vineland County is “a long, intimidating drive upward through crowds of tall trees, perilous switchbacks, one-lane stretches hugging the mountainsides, pavement not always there—then a sunset so early [the driver] thought at first something must have happened, an eclipse, or worse” (223). In the last two words of this passage—“or worse”—lie the stakes that the switchback by turn encodes and exposes at the all-but-unsignable heart of this novel: that 1984 America dwells in the shadow of the bomb that hovers overhead at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*; that the rise of the techno-capitalist state has destabilized the ontological status of human being in a way that looms always at the periphery of experience—intimidating, erosive, eclipse-like, as the quoted passage above suggests—and cannot be erased by the strategically deployed discursive strategies of the controllers of history. Critics of *Vineland* have called its historical engagement sentimental, too drenched in popular culture, and short on the fearless poetics of *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Stefan Mattessich writes, somewhat scathingly, that unlike *Gravity's Rainbow* “it lacks the ambition to reconstitute its own discourse” (212), it is a novel “*about* preterite characters without being itself preterite” (231). However, as this thesis demonstrates, by approaching the novel through its switchbacks, what emerges is not a lack, but rather a radical discursive reconstituting in which the switchback spatializes a narrative strategy of resistance for the Pynchonian

preterite. In the novel's switchback narrativity, the spatial encoding of the erasures and contests of history are laid bare, not permitted the status of "an ever-accumulating history marching straight forward in plot and denouement," as Edward Soja writes, "for too much is happening against the grain of time, too much is continually traversing the story-line laterally" (23). This lateral motion is not only mapped by the switchback narrative, it is exposed as already present, concealed but coded into the material constituents—the trees and rivers, roads and bridges—of the landscapes, cityscapes, and in-between zones of movement and transition that populate this novel.

As this project's investment in spatio-material encoding suggests, I assume throughout the following pages that in *Vineland*, discursive and material structures are not obviously set up as the kind of fraught dialectic Bill Brown describes as "a human condition in which things inevitably seem too late—belated, in fact, because we want things to come before ideas, before theory, before the word, whereas they seem to persist in coming after: as the alternative to ideas, the limit of theory, victims of the word" (16). *Vineland* is not populated by victims (whether subject or object) of symbolicity, but rather by relations of entanglement in which the material world functions as the inscriber of its own kind of text. As much as it *is* the inscription of its human community on the landscape, Vineland County is also *written by* the North Coast/Klamath bioregion in which it is set, as in the case of a parking lot near the beginning of the novel which "had never been paved, and the local weather had been writing gullies across it for years" (9). The entanglements of spatio-material encoding here encompass the parking lot (a text that delineates a certain kind of space—a human and technological space—and use of that space), the municipal move not to pave the lot (a negation, whether political or

economic, of the hegemony of the parking lot text), the local weather (the corrosive etchings of wind and rain and temperature their own forms of authorship), the dirt of the lot (a story of becoming-gullied, a counter-narrative to that of the tire's tread). The entanglements of discursive and material beings here signal a historicity defined by a contest for narrative space as it is encoded within the materialized spaces of this novel.

At stake in this contest for narrative space is not only what discursive networks and strategies will be deployed over what ground, but who or what the authors of these narratives, the actors in this contest, will be. In her reading of literary islands, ecocritical theorist Jean Arnold emphasizes that not only do “architectonic geographical formations...lend their forms to the structure of ideas or meanings that unfold in literature” (26), but they also serve “as causal agent[s] of cultural beliefs and practices” (33). The possibility implied here—that nonhuman beings can be thought as “causal agent[s]”—is taken seriously in *Vineland*, where switchbacks and weather patterns (along with a supporting cast of evil corporations, sinister government agencies, and techno-capitalist cityscapes) take on agential roles, “personally aware, possessing a life and will” (*VL* 202).¹ The novel, then, may be approached as populated by both human and nonhuman actors entangled in contests over spatio-material authority. I use actors throughout this argument in the sense given by Bruno Latour as part of his deconstruction of the subject-object binary. He writes that “actors are defined above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective. To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appear first of all as troublemakers” (81). And I would add to this list of

¹ Throughout this document, parenthetical citations will abbreviate *Vineland* to *VL*, *Gravity's Rainbow* to *GR*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* to *CL49*.

descriptors that of authorship, as throughout *Vineland* the agency of nonhuman actors is often deployed in the form of inscription. Even “the light of Vineland,” authors a kind of text upon the landscape, “the rainy indifference with which it fell on surfaces, the call to attend to territories of the spirit” (317).² This call is a demand to engage the particular discursive strategies of light, its concealments and unveilings, its seeming capacity to parse worlds of seen and unseen, knowledge and obscurity, life and death. *Vineland*’s tangled histories, then, are written into the landscape by nonhuman as well as human authors, destabilizing conventional understandings of history, authorship, and discursive agency.

Significantly, in *Vineland*, there is an irreducible degree of scale involved in these acts of authorship. Actors like the switchback, the light, or “the fascist monster, Central Power” (202) do not take on the animism of a fetish or commodity so much as the space-occupying entanglements of what Jane Bennett calls an agentic assemblage:

Bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*. What this suggests for the concept of *agency* is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts. (23)

Just as agency becomes “distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field” in this formulation, in *Vineland* the capacity for narrative inscription is similarly distributed

² Light often takes on a significant agential role in Pynchon’s novels, as in “The Story of Byron the Bulb” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (660–668), where a lightbulb’s struggle for agency is the focus of the narrative arc. While Byron’s is a tale of alienation and disenfranchisement, the authorial light of *Vineland* sets the stage for the preoccupation with the strange agency of light that dominates *Against the Day*.

among assemblies of actors, themselves networking among memberships of varying power in multiple assemblages struggling for both discursive and materialized space in a contested “theatre of operations” (Bennett 23), or what Pynchon calls “the great arena” (*GR* 689).

As Bennett suggests, this approach to thinking nonhuman actors changes the ways it is possible to think about agency and antecedently causality, the contingent, linear historicity, and political action. It is no longer possible, in these terms, to think an untroubled human agency, any more than it is to think of the movement of the planet as something that happens *to* humans. As Junot Diaz writes, quoting Neil Smith, “There’s no such thing as a natural disaster,” only the movements of an assembly of actors as they inscribe and become inscribed within the spatio-material frameworks their movements encode. In these terms, the contingent can be understood as the effects of sometimes imperceptible assemblies of actors, what Pynchon calls, quoting Emerson’s “Sovereignty of Ethics” at the end of *Vineland*, “secret retributions” (369), rather than the accidental or the disastrous.

This attention to the discursive strategies being deployed by nonhuman agents reframes the tension between the animate and inanimate worlds that runs throughout Pynchon’s previous novels. In his reading of Pynchon’s “existential Gnosticism,” Dwight Eddins (writing before the publication of *Vineland*) argues that the animism at work in the Pynchonian cosmos is “the nightmarish projection of a massive, indifferent chaos that is nonetheless experienced as something *antihuman*” (“Probing the Nihil” 170 emphasis added). In other words, Eddins posits that in Pynchon, humans experience the indifference of “a world of things” (*V.* 322) as a combative materiality that conspires

against us. This experience takes on a specifically anti-techno-capitalist edge in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where, as Khachig Tölölyan suggests, the “war for the preservation and advancement of the inanimate” (63) achieves a kind of victory as the military-industrial complex emerges as the secret engine and triumphant issue of World War II. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, human actors—the amorphous and ubiquitous “They”—are posited as the capital-and-power-obsessed force behind this privileging of the inanimate. However, there is the intimation throughout the novel that the globe-encompassing plots and directives of those running the military-capitalist state possess a nonhuman agency that exceeds the limits of causation encapsulated in any individual human actor's material embodiment. What they create is not akin to the controlled result of an architectural project, but rather the effect of an assemblage like the Rocket City of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or the waterspout that swallows up Sidney Stencil at the end of *V.*, or the mystery of the Tristero that galvanizes Oedipa Maas' hopeless quest for origins and ends in *The Crying of Lot 49*. What makes *Vineland* such a significant shift in the animate-inanimate tension running throughout Pynchon's work is that here it seems to withdraw from the Gnostic mythos of a fundamentally “demonic animism” (Eddins, *Gnostic Pynchon* 10). Instead *Vineland* accepts the cosmic smallness of its human actors, abandoning references to a global conspiratorial “They” in favor of named and identifiable villains, and drawing out, instead, the agency and awesome scale of the assemblages within which humans must struggle for both discursive and physical space.

Rather than tasking *Vineland's* human actors with impossible quests, Pynchon seems to require of these characters only that they *move*. Movement itself, in this novel, is a constant negotiation, a constant process of encountering, as I demonstrate over the

chapters to follow. Through such contested space, switchback narrative encoding becomes a kind of survival strategy, a method of movement—through history, through space, through the earth—suited to the limited human agent. Significantly, such movement is as much about phenomenological experience as it is about ontological perception. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are hints of secret agents at work, Pynchon calls them “Titans, [...] all the presences we are not supposed to be seeing—wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods—that we train ourselves away from” (735). Training ourselves back towards seeing these Titans can be understood as the perceptual goal of switching back, which forces travelers to engage in the experiential act of re-orientation. Here, Sara Ahmed’s work on “orientations” becomes a pertinent theoretical model. She writes:

Bodies...acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain ‘objects’ in view...The nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual: *it is not just that I find them there, like that*. Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary but are effects of the repetition of the ‘tending toward’” (“Orientations Matter” 247).

Pynchon’s focus on how “we train ourselves” draws attention to the ways in which phenomenological experience is spatially determined by habitual orientation towards certain objects and directions, and away from others which by the very necessity of the occupation of space by material being, become hidden “far below” (*GR* 735), suppressed in the repetition of tendencies that privilege anthropocentric ways of seeing, discursive strategies, and forms of power. In opposition to such experience, *Vineland*’s preterite narrativity orients readers towards an engagement with the “presences we are not

supposed to be seeing” (*GR* 735) and the often-concealed ways in which they shape the human experience of cause and effect, contingency, history, power, and “the legacy America” (*CL49* 151). Through this narrativity, *Vineland* offers a strategy of political resistance that opposes and exposes the maps and structures that encode and instantiate the oppressive linear discursivity of, in Althusser’s terms, “the reign of Reason, Meaning, Necessity and End” (169), and antecedently, the telos of history, and the suppression of the nonhuman agent.

The following chapters will endeavor to draw out the switchback narrative strategies at work in *Vineland* by foregrounding the agency of these and other spatio-authorial assemblages from several different points of orientation. Chapter 1 will focus on the novel’s Titans, or agentic assemblages—its cities, bioregions, government programs, weather systems, infrastructural arrangements, and watersheds. How might our reading of *Vineland* be complicated, I ask, by reconsidering the theorizations of power and political agency—always central to Pynchon’s work—through his deployment of these Titans? Whereas in earlier works the sources of political power remain grounded in human hands, here the human is clearly delineated as one among multiple factors at work in the discursive and physical contest over space which defines the politics of the assemblage. Competing temporalities co-exist in these entangled discursive encodings, confusing the straight shot from origin to end and getting in the way of the impulse to rectilinear narrativity. With switchback tools in hand, Chapter 2 will approach *Vineland*’s nonhuman world from another set of points, focusing specifically on the spatial assemblages of freeway systems and urban streets that structure the novel’s Southern Californian periphery. I also focus here on how the freeway traveler fares when

confronted by the switchback. How these passageways function as sites of narrative encoding and decoding is developed by attention to Pynchon's use of the freeway as an avatar for the rectilinear narrative systems of the capitalist state. Throughout both of these chapters, I will endeavor to push the research sites of agentic assembly and spatial encoding in the novel to their interpretive limit, and then I will switch back, reorient, and come at the novel from another direction in order to draw out the political and material stakes at play in *Vineland*.

Chapter 1: Assembling the Secret Agents

The chapter investigates the agency of nonhuman actors in *Vineland* by not only approaching the novel from several directions, but by attending to its own investment in directions: roads taken and not taken; the narrative strategies of streets, freeways, and dead ends; the relationship between pathways and perceptions. This phenomenological act of perceptually foregrounding nonhuman discursivity is one of dis- and/or re-orientation, which functions to draw out the agency of the nonhuman world at work in the novel. I argue that Pynchon proposes this work of re-orienting as a strategy for human survival in a world that is not “antihuman,” as Eddins claims (“Probing the Nihil” 170), so much as it is the stubborn, intrusive, surprising world of material contingencies and causal complexities that comes, as Cary Wolfe puts it, “both before and after humanism” (xv). Such an attention to re- and dis-orientation situates humans in terms of the materiality of spatial determinants and, in so doing, “open[s] up how spatial perceptions come to matter and be directed as matter” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 12). I attempt to draw this out by focusing on the large-scale nonhuman agential assemblages that dominate the spaces of this novel, such as roads, cities, weather patterns, and bioregions. I argue that Pynchon deploys and creates juxtapositions among such authorial assemblages in order to map the ways in which these assemblages encode narrative-discursive frameworks—their histories, their agendas, their phenomenological imperatives—in and through the materialities of their being.

One of the most massively scaled examples of this in the novel occurs in a scene in which Brock Vond and Frenesi Gates spend an afternoon at a motel in Oklahoma, planning the overthrow of the People’s Republic of Rock and Roll as a cell of tornados

moves in over the city. Madeline Ostrander is right to draw attention to the storm as an important component of this scene. She suggests that it “symbolizes the forces Brock represents...The storm image associates Vond with the dominant patriarchal structures of oppression” (128), but while Ostrander is attentive to Pynchon’s treatment of the nonhuman world, this interpretation relies on the assumption of a human-centric ontology in which the world outside the motel reflects the turmoil within, and in which the drama of masculinity remains a key index in understanding Pynchon’s political philosophy. In other words, this approach applies what we know about power from *Gravity’s Rainbow* to how it functions in *Vineland*. What happens, though, when we push the influence of the storm on the scene even further, and foreground the drama outside the motel room? Frenesi describes the storm as destabilizing her sense of being secure with Brock, “just when she thought they were nestled safe in the center of America” (215). The aggressive intrusion of the tornado outbreak into this scene, and the unambiguous evocation of a war being waged as “the storm held the city down like prey, trying repeatedly to sting it into paralysis” (216), define a landscape and skyscape that function to minimize the struggle unfolding in the motel room, and to suggest that the real secret about power in the world has little to do with the human categories of gender, desire, ambition, and control and more to do with the massive nonhuman forces unfolding all around them. In the search for alternate sources of power in this novel, the storm as “agent of rapture” (*VL* 212) is a useful marker, suggesting that the secret agents at work here are not exclusively of the federal variety.

As a bridge to the focus of Chapter 2, I conclude this chapter by introducing the switchback narrative, an alternative to the linear narrative of the freeway system

assemblage that is one of the avatars of capitalist infrastructural ideology in this novel. This alternative narrative strategy is figured as a product of American radical politics in the postwar 20th century, an aspect of that history which, despite its failures and disappointments, has become coded into the landscape so that alternative strategies of movement, perception, and navigation remain viable forms of resistance for human-nonhuman assemblages that resist the discursive tyrannies of techno-capitalist state fascism. While *Vineland* has been critiqued for being less labyrinthine than Pynchon's major novels—Joseph Tabbi calls it “too easily *placeable* in the field of current writing” and “an imaginative shortcut on Pynchon's part” (90), and Ken Knabb affirms that it “is constructed like a large public square”—I argue that the novel's central conceptual and stylistic challenges can only be fully engaged by attending to the complexities of its spaces, their coded narrative architectures, and the subtle nonhuman agencies at work within, all of which are suggested by the following passage:

The arrangements of hillside levels, alleyways, corners, and rooftops created a Casbah topography that was easy to get lost in quickly, terrain where the skills of the bushwacker became worth more than any resoluteness of character, an architectural version of the uncertainty, the illusion, that must have overtaken his career for him ever to've been assigned there in the first place. (*VL* 25)

In this scene Pynchon is describing Gordita Beach, and the career is not his own but rather that of disgraced DEA Agent Hector Zuñiga. However, the references to the “architectural version of the uncertainty, the illusion, that must have overtaken his career” and the call for “the skills of the bushwacker” point both to Pynchon's reliance on the spatio-material as a site of narrative encoding, and to the ways in which *Vineland*

approaches encoded space—even in the case of constructed urban environments—as, to borrow a phrase from Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology, “not entirely a creature of our experience” (176).

While in his previous novels—particularly *V.*—the worlds of the animate and the inanimate have been at undisguised odds, *Vineland*’s ontological approach is far less certain about where this tension begins (as Oedipa Maas wonders, “how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?” [CL49 150]) and where it ends (“mightn’t we find some way back?” [GR 707]). As the line between the human and the nonhuman author becomes tangled in the struggle over spatio-material encoding, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is encoded in an assemblage like Pynchon’s “Casbah topography” and what is being encoded *by* that assemblage. That this is not a straightforward deposit-and-withdrawal system for human discursive strategies, but an authorship system in itself, complicates the narrative investment in origins and ends suggested by a question like “mightn’t we find some way back?” (GR 707). The question in *Vineland*, with its flattened temporalities and human-nonhuman entanglements, is “back to what?” Vineland County, no less than Gordita Beach or any of the Southern Californian megalopolises, is a complexity of material entanglements that is impossible to escape within Pynchon’s spatial economy. This being the case, what other world, other “pattern of track” (CL49 83), ought the human actor endeavor to find its way back to? This is not the open road, but rather history’s “Casbah topography [...] of uncertainty and illusion” (VL 25) where there is no way back so much as a perpetual spatio-temporal circling, an unavoidable rereading of old ground and as such a constant re-confrontation with what the tornado has to say about the city’s authorship.

Switchback

Critics have suggested that Pynchon's human actors are the subjects of "a humanity-centered norm without effective defenders" (Eddins, *Gnostic Pynchon* 7), taking on a "dwarfed stature" in his "mythological cosmos" (Hume 639). The opposite is true for his nonhuman actors. They are massive, god-like, the "Titans" of the prehuman world in *Gravity's Rainbow* (734), and also, the techno-capitalist assemblages of post-World War II modernity. *Vineland's* cast of acting assemblies includes "the fascist monster, Central Power itself, merciless as a tornado or a bomb yet somehow [...] personally aware, possessing life and will" (202), and the fogs of Vineland County, composed not only of water, but of light, shadow, air currents, and the too-fast human lifespeeds that navigate the California coastal roads. "These white presences," Pynchon writes of the fog, "full of blindness and sudden highway death, moved, as if conscious, unpredictably over the landscape" (37). Rather than relying on ecocentric moralizing, in which humans, "God's spoilers [...] *our mission to promote death*" (GR 734-735), destroy the planet, only to find themselves enslaved by their own inanimate creations, in *Vineland* Pynchon blurs the line between "tornado and bomb" (202) by equating their quality of mercilessness. Both tornado assemblage and bomb assemblage author landscapes in ways that overwrite human intention, indifferent to the sacral encoding of the city (GR 378). This is not to suggest that Pynchon disconnects the bomb from human labor, but rather that he seeks to emphasize the ways in which techno-capitalist warfare becomes an assemblage in excess of the human, its effects as radically contingent as that of a tornado. In *Vineland*, techno-capitalist Titans, like "Central Power," take on the kind of nonhuman being that Lewis Mumford, writing on urban development in the wake of World War II, envisions

developing out of metropolitan modernity, in which “the controllers themselves have...produced a collective mechanism that is not, in fact, under control, and once set in motion is not capable of being brought under control by the kind of mind that has devised it” (555).³ However, Pynchon equally engages Titans of the nonhuman planetary biosphere. In his choice of the embattled Northern California landscape as the setting for Vineland County—the “rainy indifference” of its light and the “intention” exuded by the enormity of its “massed and breathing redwoods” (317)—Pynchon takes up Lawrence Buell’s challenge to “think bioregionally” and to “provoke within and against ingrained grid-think keener attention to how interaction with topography, climate, and nonhuman life directs not only how people ought to live but also the way they *do* live without realizing it” (84). *Vineland*’s interest in the entanglements and vibrancy of agential assemblages engages materiality, to borrow a phrase from Paul Outka’s reading of *Frankenstein*, in a way “that sees nature, the human, and the technological as all differently realized, but fundamentally and qualitatively similar material constructions” (32).

The centrality of the switchback to *Vineland* points to the care with which Pynchon refuses to leave the human behind even as he deconstructs its political, material, and spatial privilege. His portrayal of California’s North Coast/Klamath bioregional entanglements implicates not only geological formations, tectonic shifts, and unruly weather patterns, but also human infrastructural development, economic limitations, and

³ Mumford’s work is a useful resource through which to read Pynchon. In his letter of January 8th, 1969, to Thomas F. Hirsch, Pynchon encourages Hirsch to “read Lewis Mumford” as a guide to the ways in which “the physical shape of a city is an infallible due to where the people who built it are at” (Seed 241), demonstrating an early commitment to theorizing urban space that becomes increasingly central to his writing over time.

localized politics entrenched in negotiation with the landscape. A switchback road is both a human imposition on difficult terrain, and a representation of that terrain's resistance to human inscription. To reach the "mountainside retreat of the Sisterhood of the Kunoichi Attentives" (107), one of Vineland County's several countercultural communities, travelers must navigate a final ascent "over dirt roads vexing enough to those who arrived in times of mud, and so deeply rutted when the season was dry that many an unwary seeking was brought to a high-centered pause out in this oil painting of a landscape, wheels spinning in empty air" (107). Here, as in the case of the weather-written parking lot in the City of Vineland, an assemblage of actors—ridgelines, downpours, dry spells, the road-building budget of the Kunoichi Attentives, a spiritual ideology that perhaps embraces the challenge of difficult passage, the disoriented traveler, the ill-equipped vehicle—converge on the authorship of space. Significantly, this authorship takes place along both horizontal and vertical axes. The switchback is a technology of ascent and descent, and up-down movement in this novel is central to its spatial economy. To leave the ridgelines of the North Coast/Klamath bioregion is always to move "back down [...] all the way back inside the Mobility" (166). It is a move from dirt roads to freeways, which are repeatedly situated "far below" (106), "tucked into the unfolding spill of land toward 'down there'" (155). Similarly, movement along the vertical axis encodes a slide from transcendence of to implication within the quotidian. Kunoichi Attentive DL imagines the worldly application of her martial arts skills as a movement "out of the anterooms of clarity, back down the many levels to a malodorous, cheaply lit, nowhere-up-to-code assortment of spaces" (176). However, the novel ultimately suggests that being able to navigate these descents—not to reject the freeway as the "Lower Realm"

(382) but to learn how to travel it so that “it *didn't* feel like a descent” (383)—is an essential component of switchback narrative survival strategy. The switchback traveler’s ability to integrate into the contest over discursive space, rather than becoming alienated or trapped in the phenomenological constraints of a particular framework, does the political work of creating active and engaged human-nonhuman assemblies.

In *Vineland*, the ability to integrate a human community into a resistant bioregion defines the battle between the region’s pot-growers—who rely, like the Sisterhood of the Kunoichi Attentives, on “rolling, breaking terrain” (*VL* 108), troublesome to the “unwary seeker” (*VL* 107), to protect their world—and federal agencies under pressure to produce the next big drug bust for the campaigning Reagan administration. Part of Pynchon’s introduction to Vineland County references the contested nature of this space: “at harvest time, when CAMP [Campaign Against Marijuana Planting] helicopters gathered in the sky [...] North California, like other U.S. pot-growing areas, once again rejoined, operationally speaking, the third world” (49). While Vineland County may read in one sense, then, as the opposite of the Southern California cities from which its human actors seek refuge—“a pastoral escape from the economic realities of L.A.” (Clarke 189) because of “the natural seclusion offered by its rich forest” (Bumas 160)—Pynchon makes sure that we note, too, the juridical grid of prohibition that overlays and encodes even the most hidden and seemingly un-urbanized bioregional spaces.

Pynchon’s attention to the spatial politics of grids and zones is amply theorized. In her work on views from above in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Kathryn Hume writes that “the grooves and grids seen in the [novel’s] aerial views are systems of control at work in the cities and in human nature” (640). Here, Hume focuses on the city streets and buildings

that form such aerial grids of infrastructural prohibition. However, in *Vineland* the contest between competing systems is staged along more invisible lines of juridical and economic authorship that overlay the outwardly off-the-grid pastoral of Vineland county. While the area may be “extraordinarily tough” for law enforcement “to penetrate” (*VL* 221), it is nonetheless shot through with control systems, suggesting that when multiple and competing assemblies of actors clash, it is most often in a contest over space. If the agentic assemblage that is the ridges and valleys, fogs and floods of this region represents a certain topographic resistance to infrastructural development, it also represents a space that, vulnerable in its very status as the extra-urban, is uniquely susceptible to being remade as “pacified territory—reclaimed by the enemy for a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy” (*VL* 221-222). Overlaying the region, the “monster program” (222) known as CAMP may not be a prison or a detainment center, but it pervades the community with as much influence on the “civic atmosphere” (222) as an electro-shock system on the landscape that can be switched on at any moment. The switch that this grid flips is not so much physical as perceptual, countering the local pothead resistance to a “zero-tolerance drug-free America” with a government-funded mind-altering technology known popularly in Pynchon studies as “paranoia.”⁴ As paranoia overtakes the community—“seasonal speculation [...] as to who might be

⁴ It is worth noting here that in Pynchon, drugs, and access to drugs, generally function as physical-discursive economies of resistance to what Buell calls “grid-think” (84). Much like the fogs of Vineland County and their unpredictable movement over the landscape, pot-smoke moves subversively. It is a joint that sparks revolution in one of *Vineland*’s central scenes of hippie uprising. Like the music emanating from the College of the Surf, “reaching like a fog through the fence” to “the sombre military blanckness at its back” (204), at “the mere distant spice-wind scent of the Joint in the Plaza, other states of mind all at once seemed possible” (206). What leaks through borders, what disrupts the spatial dominance of the grid, is also an agent, “curls of smoke” (206) their own form of rebellious text.

secretly on the CAMP payroll,” police “flagging down everybody on the highways whose looks they didn’t like, which resulted in massive traffic snarls felt as far away as 101 and I-5” (222)—the monstrous nature of the program becomes apparent. While CAMP might be a government initiative, the grid of prohibition that it extends over the landscape becomes more than the long arm of any definable bureaucracy. “Like bad weather or a plant disease” (222), CAMP takes on an extra-human agency, sending unforeseeable reverberations through the community and down its highways. Paranoia, bad food, traffic jams, parrots teaching the children of Vineland the technique of lucid dreaming—Pynchon’s list of the increasingly aleatory effects of CAMP delineate both the pervasive influence of the program and the impossibility of controlling the rippling effects of another of the novel’s “fascist monster[s]” (202). Thus the juridical grid of prohibition becomes one of both control and loss of control, pointing to the presence of the competing assembly of actors—bioregional, human, psittacoidae—that exert their own forms of control over this space.

Similarly, further inland, while the Kunoichi Attentives may be able to offer psychic retreat and physical protection on their remote ridgeline, they are unable to escape from the exigencies of the market, turning their refuge into a self-help empire in order to pay the bills. In his analysis of the Sisterhood’s enterprising business practices, William D. Clarke points out that “there can be no *enduring* shelter from the same irrepressible, creatively destructive wind that blows across all property” (193). This description of the all-encompassing wind of market force is a kind of counter-wind to the one that blows “spice-scent” across the College of the Surf to transform it into PR³ (206), and it joins the conceptual and material assemblage that is the switched-on grid of

juridical prohibition in blanketing Vineland County with the winding-sheets of military-industrial state oppression. The “grooves and grids” and “systems of control” (640) traced by Hume in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are representative, in *Vineland* of control systems far more insidious than the more obviously infrastructural, and in this case, the systems do function with a power that is able to compromise resistant bodies like that of the Kunoichi retreat.

Also joining the juridical grid and the winds of the market in the covert war against the resistant landscape of Vineland County are the webs of cable access companies “eager to claim souls for their distant principles, fighting it out house by house, with the Board of Supervisors compelled eventually to partition the county into Cable Zones, which in time became political units in their own right” (319). Pynchon’s use of “Zones” here calls to mind the Zone in which the rise of the military-industrial complex is spatialized in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. However, rather than Cold War powers carving out spheres of economic influence, market forces are here engaged in overlaying both the landscape and the political state with their own version of spatial governance. So significant is the pervasive market penetration of this web to *Vineland* that it is possible to argue that Brock Vond’s ignominious aerial retreat at the novel’s conclusion is not necessarily driven, as most critics seem to agree, by “Reagan budget slashes” (Hayles 27). Indeed, Vineland radio tells us only that “Reagan had officially ended the ‘exercise’ known as REX 84” (376). Although anxiety over economic instability has pervaded the narrative, it is not obviously the force invoked here, as the physical presence of “all the military traffic on the freeways, more than Hector could ever remember, headlights on in the daytime, troops in full battle gear” suggests just the opposite (339). And so while N.

Katherine Hayles reads this scene as one in which “the good guys do win, not because of the infallibility of Emersonian justice, but because of the ironic patterns of fate or Pynchonesque whimsy” (27), the impression that emerges when the novel’s nonhuman Titans are foregrounded is not of victory for the good guys, but of the suspicion that CAMP is no longer needed in Vineland because the Titan of spectacular society—the infrastructural instantiation of media conglomeration that overlays the landscape and penetrates every private home—has the population under control. The author of oppression here is the spectacle itself as it creates an escapist discursive space from which escape becomes, ironically, impossible. Hector describes the space-making power of the “Tubaldetox” system in which he is repeatedly incarcerated: “ever-lengthening, newly branching corridors, with progressively obsolete wall maps of the traffic system posted beneath lights he knew, though staff never admitted it, were being replaced each time with lower-wattage bulbs” (336). Even detox from the spectacle, then, is part of the system by which the absorptive authorship of techno-capitalism, “true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into *its own peculiar décor*” (Debord 121).

As this contest over spatio-material inscription plays out, the human lives entangled in competing large-scale assemblages take on increasingly limited agential roles. By reorienting reading practices to focus on the nonhuman actors in Pynchon’s text, it is possible to see the narrative contest unfolding between the landscape of Vineland County and the grids, winds, and webs of corporate entities and government bodies, a struggle among competing assemblages for the right to occupy space.

Switchback

This spatial contest, seemingly decided by the hegemony of the grid, can be reformulated by focusing on the secluded pot-growing community of Holytail, to which Zoyd Wheeler flees from the attentions of federal authorities. Since it is situated, “between the coastal ranges and yearlong fogs, [...] access [to Holytail], at least by road, wasn’t easy—because of the Great Slide of ’64, you had to double back and forth along both sides of the river and take ferries, which weren’t always running, and bridges said to be haunted” (220). From the ground, at least, multiple resistant actors make Holytail a safe haven. Its positioning in a valley, “between the coastal ranges,” and its permanent, “yearlong” shrouding of fog signal a community that is protected by a concealing ecology. Similarly, “the Great Slide of ’64,” likely a reference to the flooding that devastated many areas of Northern California in the winter of 1964,⁵ evokes the aleatory nature of weather “patterns” and the resistance of certain topographies to systematized absorption by the military-industrial complex.

The routes of access to Holytail schematize such resistance as not only physical, but physically encoded into the landscape, both by the history of its use and by its own counter-history. Access is dependent on “ferries, which weren’t always running”—in other words, on a system of exchange uninterested in the stable accumulation of capital—and on “bridges said to be haunted,” a reference to the “realm behind the immediate” (186) that pervades Vineland County. The haunting of these bridges can be understood as a kind of nonhuman inscription that destabilizes the human actor as the sole locus of the

⁵ “The Great Slide of ‘64” may refer either to the 1964 Alaska earthquake that triggered a tsunami in March of that year, “completely devastating several North Coast towns and resulting in 14 deaths,” or to the flooding that occurred in December, when torrential downpours caused water levels to rise dramatically in North Coast rivers and streams and “34 California counties were declared disaster areas” (“Floods in California”).

historiographical act. If, as Mike Davis suggests in his work on the Southern California landscape, “disaster amnesia is a federally subsidized luxury” there (47), then the landscape surrounding Holytail signifies this axiom’s obverse: where no federal subsidy sweeps down to restore order, a kind of nonhuman memory, encoded into the materiality of the assemblage, rules.

One of the most closely treated examples of this alternate nonhuman history in *Vineland* is “the ruins of the old WPA bridge” (187), connecting the City of Vineland to the Shade Creek Thanatoid Village. Destroyed in 1964, the bridge is nonetheless still passable, although “detours were always necessary, often with the directions crudely spray-painted onto pieces of wall or old plywood shuttering” (187). In 1984, Pynchon writes, the bridge is in a state of attempted reconstruction that has been going on, nonstop, for the past twenty years, “always crews at work, around the clock” (187). The labor of development is constant here, because the creek below, and the river that feeds it, are always doing their work of erosive disassembly: “sometimes entire segments vanished overnight, as if floated away downriver on pontoons” (187). This passage sets up the simultaneous presence of multiple histories, haunting the assemblage through their materially encoded persistence: the bridge, the work of the WPA, is the inscription of the civic optimism of 1930s pre-war “New Deal earnestness” (317) on a municipally marginal area. In its decay, the bridge encodes both the disastrous failure of the 1960s to revitalize the political energies at work in those pre-war years of Wobbly leftism, and the state’s failure to control or maintain the infrastructure it develops. Whispering between these two decades, of course, is the unsignifiable backdrop of world warfare, which takes on a haunting presence-by-way-of-absence here as the discursive gap to which all the

novel's late-twentieth century failures and betrayals can be traced. The result, in 1984, is a contested space in which efforts to salvage (on the part of the state) and to find navigational strategies (on the part of the counterculture) become a perpetual cycle of repetition without difference in a resistant nonhuman world that haunts human travelers both in its encoding of ruin and in its assertion of a bioregional agency that refuses to privilege an exclusively human historical narrative.

Seeking routes by which to navigate this nonhuman terrain, travelers wait on the bridge while “a truck piled high with smashed concrete and corroded iron rod went grinding back and forth by its own routes of beaten earth” (187). This image of truck-beaten earth is not the only one of its kind in the novel. It functions as another of Pynchon's spatial codes. Jeff Severs writes that Pynchon's compacted earth evokes “the well-beaten paths of a paved nation,” engraving and instantiating in the landscape the narratives of “a kind of everyday fascism, warring on nature” (225). As Severs's phrasing suggests, the other side of this war, the other assemblage in competition over this landscape, is the Northern California bioregion, its watershed a complex assemblage in its own right, resisting the imposition of fascist infrastructure and insisting, through its own discursive command lines, on an authorial role in the inscription of these beaten paths. Ahmed points to the circularity of this authorship: “we walk on the path as it is before us,” she writes, “but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon. A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (16). I would add that this “paradox” becomes less mysterious, less haunted by its circularity, when we add to the equation the other agents involved in the creation of these paths.

In the paragraph preceding his description of the bridge, Pynchon has already set up the nonhuman agency of Vineland County's water system. The Yurok, he writes, "had always held [Seventh River] exceptional, to follow it up from the ocean was also to journey through the realm behind the immediate" (186). It is a river that, beyond the city, "took back its older form" (186 emphasis added). This word choice indicates that the river can be understood, not in its thingness, but as a force with its own independent being that cannot be contained or defined by the bridge crossing it. It is not the human that is threatened by the inanimate world, but rather the nonhuman world that seeks to take back its agency from the imposition of human infrastructures. Significantly, within this contested space, human actors have to make their transactions in the economy of "detours" and "directions crudely spray-painted." In other words, in signifying systems that swerve off the "routes of beaten dirt" encoded by the nonetheless failing labor of the military-industrial state, the human actor inevitably chooses between engaging an assemblage of well-beaten passages and straightforward lines, and conversely, engaging an assemblage of doubling back and detours. This act of detouring off the beaten path might call to mind Oedipa's experience of dis-orientation, "a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare" (*CL49* 104). However, while Oedipa suffers from a hegemonic spatial distinction: "inside, safe, or outside, lost" (105), the experience of becoming "unfurrowed" from "the legacy America" (*CL49* 150) in *Vineland* is not to be "outside, lost" but rather re-oriented towards other assemblies of material beings with their own insides, safety features, and legacies.

Switchback

The detours around the WPA bridge are just one of many swerves in the novel, in which human actors find themselves not only disoriented, but also pushed to reorient away from the encounter with the assemblages of the techno-capitalist state, and towards other forms of assembly and understandings of material being. As Ahmed suggests, “bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space” (“Orientations” 245). Space, then, and the material realities that structure it, enter into a kind of intersubjective relationship with human bodies and their orientations, functioning as what Ahmed calls “disorientation devices”: “a disorientation device mak[es] things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world.” She further calls this “political work” which “reshapes the very surfaces of bodies and worlds” (“Orientations” 254).

Nonhuman actors can be seen as engaging in a kind of “political work” as they draw human actors into assembly with them, as when Takeshi Fumimota, once a kamikaze fighter pilot in the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, drives the switchback road up to the Retreat of the Kunoichi Attentives, and thinks of it as “an all-day hard-edged video game, one level of difficulty to the next, as the land rose and the night advanced. Enough of this, like travel in outer space, can begin to what they call ‘do things’ to a man. By the time he arrived at the Retreat, high on that fateful California ridge, he was no longer in his right mind” (161). As the car-human hybrid moves through the switchback, the actors of the switchback assemblage “do things,” that is, they engage in a form of political labor that disorients the human actor, moving him away from a “right mind,” which approaches its relationship to the landscape in terms of a Kantian mastery of the sublime

by the faculty of judgment, and towards what Bill Brown calls the “mutual constitution of subject and object” (5). This falling into the matrix of material forces at work on the traveler’s body creates an encounter in which “right mind” requires integrating oneself with the assemblage of the switchback. To gain and maintain membership in this assembly, movement—both of the body and of the idealized self—is not only necessary, it is the dominant discursive imperative. This is not only a political labor on the part of the nonhuman, as Ahmed suggests, but a politics of labor, which insists on the participation of its constituents in the shared authorship of space.

The switchback, then, serves as a phenomenological tool that adjusts human perception towards an attention to its implication within a lively nonhuman world. However, it is not only a technology applicable to the non-urban center. The switchback’s zigzag motion also evokes the ability of the already-reoriented actor within the arena of advanced global capitalism to swerve, that is, to find means of encounter with materialities beyond the reach of, and through means unanticipated by, dominant control ecologies like the techno-capitalist megalopolis. Prairie meets with her friend Ché for shoplifting excursions to L.A. megamalls, “by way of zigzag and trick routes...only steps ahead of the bright attention of Child Protective Services, not to mention, these days, the FBI” (328). The girls’ ability to see differently, the ability of countercultural thinkers to reorient and encounter in ways unexpected by control ecologies, maps another form of switchback labor, that of “expos[ing] how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 21). In Prairie and Ché’s ability to negotiate the freeway, “weaving and tailgating” (331), is a survivalist alternative to the apocalypticism

of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the oppressively rectilinear is countered only by the post-apocalyptic: “the straight-ruled boulevards” of Berlin, “built to be marched along are now winding pathways through the waste-piles, their shapes organic now, responding, like goat trails, to laws of least discomfort” (*GR* 379). Prairie and Ché’s movements, conversely, are neither organic nor purely utilitarian. They are, rather, signifiers of a search for means of resistance, for encountering materiality differently, and for expressing a human agency that is not exclusively in the service of systems of control. In this way, the devastation and death of *Gravity's Rainbow*’s spatial economy is countered in this novel by a human material embodiment that rejects its implication in such an economy and finds ways through the waste-piles that defy the spatial encoding of the hegemony of death.

The desire for a different kind of encounter, and for access to different forms of agential assembly, is foregrounded in Pynchon’s depiction of the joyriding exploits of Prairie and Ché’s parents’ generation, who “go out and play motorhead valley roulette in the tule fogs [...] The idea was to enter the pale wall at a speed meaningfully over the limit, to bet that the white passage held no other vehicles, no curves, no construction, only smooth, level empty roadway to an indefinite distance—a motorhead variation on a surfer’s dream” (37). Although the road is not a switchback in this case, the game for the driver is to use his or her zigzag orientation, that knowledge of the switchback, to disengage from control ecologies in which the teleology of the straight shot (the predictable passage through “birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death” [Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 21]) rules. It is a means of resisting the grid systems overlaying Vineland County, and of engaging the materiality of one’s own body

in defiance of those systems in which Pynchon situates “the worship of mechanism, power, and—ultimately—death” (Eddins, *Gnostic Pynchon* 5). Thus while playing motorhead valley roulette may seem to court death, an alternative may be to view these troublemaking human actors engaging in a struggle to resist this worship, to resist the straight shot from birth to death by integrating into an assemblage of the aleatory, an “external reality *with surprises and events*” (Latour 79) in which the fog and the highway become an escape both from excesses and, significantly, losses of control. To embrace the swerve is to find a middle ground between these, where one is neither a pawn of the system nor a victim of fickle fate, but rather the author of a small space, somewhere in between.⁶

Switchback

As though to suggest that a zigzag or switchback orientation can counter even the hegemony of death, Pynchon peoples *Vineland* with some of his most troublesome human actors: the “Thanatoid personality.” This community, living in the interior beyond Vineland County’s coast, exists in a state “like death, only different” (170). Indeed it is not clear whether they are living or dead, only that they resist Western teleo-ontology’s straight story of human life, settling instead into “constant turnover, not living but persisting” (173). The Thanatoids are victims “of karmic imbalances [...] that frustrated their daily expeditions on into the interior of Death” (173), and yet these “transient souls” (173) seem, in *Vineland*, neither particularly unhappy (despite all the sleeplessness, bad food, and “complexities in the credit situation” [218]), nor particularly desperate to move

⁶ An interesting point of cross-reference here is Katje Borgesius, cringing away from the control of E.W.A. Pointsman under the Wheel of Fortune in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “getting ready now to bolt down the beach and into the relative calm of the switchback railway. Pointsman is hallucinating. He has lost control” (181).

on. Although the Thanatoids are described as feeling “little else beyond their needs for revenge” (171) for past wrongs, they seem rarely to achieve this sought-after closure, remaining instead “entangled in other, often impossibly complicated, tales of dispossession and betrayal” (172). These tales, rather than reaching a conclusion, become increasingly tangled: “facts only grown more complicated, many original wrongs forgotten or defectively remembered, no resolution of even a trivial problem anywhere in sight” (219).

These tales are representative of the switchback narrative strategy that I propose Pynchon maps in the landscapes of *Vineland*. Rather than doing its telling from start to finish, the switchback narrative loops back on itself, insisting on a recursive motion over the spatio-temporal plane, so that every movement forward becomes simultaneously a look back on a past that remains materially encoded in the present, an act of reorientation demanding that the traveler become accustomed to seeing the relationship between time and space as what Pynchon calls in *Gravity's Rainbow* “a progressive *knotting into*” (*GR* 3), rather than a smooth unfurling of clear narrative passage. Such a narrative strategy also represents a practice laden with risk—“perilous” as Pynchon describes switchbacks (223)—in that it is uncertain in terms of opportunities for resolution. However, despite its loops and risks and densities, the switchback is nonetheless a technology of movement, its authorship functioning over vertical and horizontal planes. It is a modification to Benny Profane’s Kerouacian yo-yoing in *V.*, which, as David Seed notes, never *moves* anywhere. “Pynchon is careful to point out that [Profane’s] dress is exactly the same at the end of the novel as at the beginning, thereby suggesting that he has not changed at all” (74). As difficult as the search for resolution may be in *Vineland*, the reward of the

switchback lies in that it is always, albeit incrementally, an inscription of movement that resists entropy, and inscribes a politics of limited but persistent agency within a crowded field.

Switchback narrativity's disavowal of the hegemony of death also counters the Western narrative tradition of interdictions against looking back.⁷ Pynchon explores the possibility of breaking with this narrative tyranny through his use of a Yurok story about a man who visits the land of the dead to retrieve his lover. Like Orpheus, he fails to get her back, but in this version of the story, the man "found the boat of Illa'a, the one who ferried the dead across the last river, he pulled it out of the water and smashed out the bottom with a stone. And for ten years no one in the world died, because there was no boat to take them across" (379). The pragmatic materialism of this resistance to death—the rock smashing the boat and thereby temporarily ending death's tyranny—again demonstrates this novel's profound commitment to drawing out the ways in which ideology is encoded in spatial and material structures, and therefore, how it can perhaps be "smashed" by the dismantling of these spatio-materialities. That this can take place discursively does not suggest that the materiality of death can be avoided, but rather that there are narrative strategies—some human, some nonhuman—that challenge the hegemonic encoding of "that special Death the West had invented" (*GR* 736), which Thomas Schaub identifies as one of the basic assumptions governing *Gravity's Rainbow*,

⁷ Both the biblical episode of Lot's flight from Sodom and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice are referred to by Pynchon in relation to their interdiction on looking back in almost all of his work: at least twice in *V.* (78, 345); four times in *Gravity's Rainbow* (411, 479-480, 482, 769); five times in *Mason & Dixon* (91, 127, 147, 207, 555); and seven times in *Against the Day* (550, 619 - 620, 847, 946, 953 - 954, 962, 1017). Of particular interest in terms of Pynchon's engagement with this interdiction as a characteristic of a particularly Western form of narrative investment is the reference to "this Eurydice-obsession" in *Gravity's Rainbow*. "Slothrop lost her, and kept losing her," Pynchon writes of Slothrop's relationship with Bianca; "it was an American requirement" (479).

that is, “that our efforts to establish the control of nature have produced a culture of death” (Schaub 63). To suggest that a human with a rock can, in some way, thwart death, is to accept an ontology that rejects the distinction between a human world of privileged ideality and a nonhuman world of physically unavoidable but discursively subordinated material facticity. The argument forwarded by *Vineland*'s flattened ontological hierarchy is not, then, that death can be avoided, but that neither its finality, the linear progression of life that leads to this finality, nor the teleologized temporal plane upon which these seeming inevitabilities play out, are in any way as under the control of human actors as the inviolable quality of such concepts—life, death, history, time—would seem to assert.

Conversely, then, human actors are left with the knots of history, the precarity and contests of spatio-material authorship, and the imperative to see through the discursive economies of “Origin, or of the Cause and End of the world” (Althusser 170). Indeed, even the classic Pynchon dialectic between order and chaos, conspiracy and paranoia—what Eddins succinctly names “absolute connectedness and absolute nonconnectedness” (*Gnostic Pynchon* 1)—is destabilized by material contingencies that demand the rejection of clear lines of causality, thereby rendering the question of *who's to blame-who's on top-where's the man behind the curtain* moot. In the switchback narrative, causality is a web of relations too dense to pick apart. This comes to the fore in one of the most politically allegorical passages in *Vineland*, in which Thanatoid Weed Atman describes his recurring dream of constant search to Prairie:

Used to think I was climbing, step by step, right? toward a resolution—first Rex, above him your mother, then Brock Vond, then—but that's when it begins to go

dark, and that door at the top I thought I saw isn't there anymore, because the light behind it just went off too. (366)

Weed describes the way in which he has been oriented towards clear chains of causality, to look up for the elect architects of fate in much the same way that DL associates “down” with “a malodorous, cheaply lit, nowhere-up-to-code assortment of spaces” (176). The Thanatoid desire for vengeance, and their tendency to remain in a state of limbo because the story of their demise is too complex, too entangled for resolution, is based in the hegemony of this orientation and its fundamentally flawed mechanics of linear progression and, to modify Buell's term, “up-think.” It is always possible to name names—Rex, Frenesi, Brock Vond—to find a face that soothes the desire for an originary source to whom responsibility can be assigned. However, what Weed's dream suggests is that this process has no origin, and no end. If Vond is to blame for Frenesi, who is to blame for Vond? His power in the novel, even as an agent of “the white mother city” (274), is severely limited. “The Real Ones,” our trip into his private thoughts suggests, “regard him as [...] a thug whose services had been hired” (276), and the funding that fuels his projects fades in and out, a romance moving him from center to periphery and back in much the same way that Zoyd comes in and out of the novel's narrative attention, seemingly pivotal one moment, all but irrelevant the next. The assignment of blame, then, the desire to point out an architect for every system, is an always already failing gesture in *Vineland* because there is neither chaos “down there” nor order “up here” (*VL* 155), but rather the complexities of the assemblage, a web of entanglements always in excess of the human actor, “direct[ing] not only how people ought to live but also the

way they *do* live without realizing it” (Buell 84) and equally, “not capable of being brought under control by the kind of mind that has devised it” (Mumford 555).

This sensitivity to the complexity of causal webs, and awareness of the influence of nonhuman actors on human life points to one of the big political moves Pynchon makes in *Vineland*. While his three earlier novels are always asking who’s to blame,⁸ and tend towards the conclusion that humans are both monstrous and the helpless subjects of chaos, *Vineland* proposes that the question of blame has been the wrong one all along. As Jane Bennett suggests in her attention to the agential assemblage:

A politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good. A moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins... becomes unethical to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort (38).

If we can follow the link Bennett makes between moral condemnation and violence, then it is also possible to argue that Pynchon’s decision to stop playing the “world-historical conspiracy” (Eddins, *Gnostic Pynchon* 1) blame game is also his attempt to propose an alternative to the Western “order of Analysis and Death” (*GR* 737). In this alternative narrative, the interdiction on looking back is not only lifted; the look back becomes a necessary component of the reorienting practice that both challenges the hegemony of capitalist infrastructural ideology and suggests a strategy for the navigation of a riotously complex terrain of agential-authorial contest.

⁸ Who is V. and what happens to Stencil Sr. in *V.*? Who are the Tristero that haunt *The Crying of Lot 49*? Who’s behind the rise of the military-industrial complex in *Gravity’s Rainbow*?

If the message of *Vineland* is finally a human message, as Hayles suggests in her appeal to the novel's "small everyday acts of kindness that flourish in networks of kinship and friendship" (28), then this message is one of defining strategies for being human in an only marginally human world. While Pynchon's portrayal of the ongoing battle between the animate and the inanimate demands to be read in terms of his critique of the global dominance of capitalist war-state politics, the cast of nonhuman actors in *Vineland* suggests a modification to the threateningly antihuman narrative encoding forwarded by the Rocket-Slothrop displacement in *Gravity's Rainbow*.⁹ Seventeen years after writing a grim elegy to the liberal humanist project, Pynchon uses *Vineland* to trouble the idea that the "doomed and deformed" (*GR* 734) human subject has been straightforwardly overthrown by the sinister military-industrial object, instead presenting readers with a narrative strategy of dis-orientation that immerses the reluctant human actor in the stubborn and resistant, subtly interdependent arena of nonhuman, not quite-so-secret, agency.

⁹ By the final pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, as Khachig Tölölyan points out, "the Rocket ultimately displaces Slothrop's search for his personal history as the central concern of the book" (51).

Chapter 2: Decoding the Spatial Assemblage

It would be difficult to discuss Pynchon's spatial encoding of switchback narrativity in *Vineland* without attending to the encoded spatial assemblages that the novel resists. This chapter draws out the narrative encoding of techno-capitalist state power, and follows Pynchon in the task of decoding these oppressive infrastructures, as they are deployed in the novel. Throughout Chapter 2, I juxtapose zigzagging switchback narrativity with the discursive linearity of the novel's examples of fascist architecture, with the intention of arriving at what lies embedded, unrecognizable in all but the most heavily coded missives, within this infrastructural ideology. The bomb is here, much as it is at the heart of this novel, encoded so deeply as to be all but invisible. That a chapter on decoding oppression should follow, rather than precede, a chapter on encoding resistance, reflects *Vineland's* work of encoding its own forms of narrative resistance in order to create space for decoding the most deeply materialized (and therefore concealed) discursive tyrannies. In this sense, *Vineland* reads not as a history of the failed radical political energies of the American 20th century, but rather as a spatialized history of the routes of escape that these energies encoded, like hidden narrative passageways, into the infrastructures of the advancing techno-capitalist state. Traveling these passageways becomes a means of seeing into the inner workings of the machine. Significantly, then, *Vineland* is not a pure bid for freedom, "a story about the counterculture's escape from technocratic society" which "leaves many without a clear sense of direction, disoriented, swamped, and finally immobilized in an *aporia*" (Mattessich 212 – 213), but rather one that insists on pushing past that moment and making a move towards reorientation *within* a technocratic society

whose decadence and “apocalyptic grandeur” (*VL* 249) may be inescapable, but is not, ultimately, un-negotiable.

It is in this atmosphere of perpetually impending “eclipse, or worse” (*VL* 223) that I begin by considering the largest zigzagging movement made in the novel. Cutting across the American landscape, *Vineland* charts a shift from western pilgrimage and expansion, to what has certainly been read, as the above quote from Mattessich implies, as escape north up the coastal edge of the continent. Within Pynchon’s spatial economy, southern California marks a geographical limit in which illusions of agency, fascist designs on the landscape, and fantasies of historical progress accumulate alongside the technologies and commodities of the Western capitalist state and transform into detritus turned back upon itself by the “unimaginable Pacific [...] inviolate and integrated” (*CL49* 41). *Gravity’s Rainbow* concludes in California with “the pointed tip of the Rocket” (775) poised just above movie theatre America. In *Vineland*, Pynchon not only returns to the site at which he left readers hanging for seventeen years, but he also writes the novel at the limit of his temporal scope. *Vineland*’s present is 1984, which remains to this day—despite his interest in the malleable and navigable nature of time—the latest year in which any of his novels is set.¹⁰ *Vineland*, then, is plotted along a spatial and temporal boundary in which human actors, functioning under the Enlightenment delusion of the subject’s agency and ontological privilege, run up against the limits of the teleological narrative of Western progress, and find themselves with backs against the cliff-edge (often quite literally, as in the case of PR³), forced out of the techno-capitalist citadels in

¹⁰ The timeline in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is such that Pynchon’s two previously published novels take place under the rainbow of the Rocket’s arc. Both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, although set in the decades following the majority of the action in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, take place before the 00000 Rocket arrives above the spectating head of 1972 America.

which they have become marginalized actors, and obliged to flee to a “green free America” (*VL* 314) that exists only, as the previous chapter suggests, as a highly contested space. This movement north, then, can be read as a means of escape that not only seeks physical distance from implication in the Western march of progress and its narrative of linear destiny, but is also in search of strategies for different forms of movement, orientation, and perception.

The chief techno-capitalist avatar which switchback narrativity “unfurrows” with its zigzag discourse is the freeway system that Pynchon imagines in *The Crying of Lot 49* as “a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain” (*CL49* 14). This is the freeway system that DL, running from Ralph Wayvone’s offer to make her an assassin for the mob, “inject[s] herself into [...] trying not to get emotional but still hanging on *the rearview mirror’s single tale* of recedings and vanishing points” (133 emphasis added). This “single tale” is what Hanjo Berressem calls “the discourse of the master whose first appearance marks the birth of ‘Western individuality’—exactly the moment of origin that Pynchon constantly questions but also returns to, as for instance in the description of Slothrop’s disintegration” (215). By tying together the hegemonic ideological underpinnings of the straight story with the straight road, both of which insist on a teleological narrative of progress, privileging the look forward, and proscribing the look back, Pynchon points to the ways in which the “discourse of the master” is not only a code but is also encoded in material assemblages like the “ancient freeway systems” (*VL* 89). Significantly, while the material embodiment of the freeway itself may not always travel along straight lines—often trapping travelers in impossible interchange loops and off-ramp complexities—it is the systematicity of this

discourse—its sheer scale, refusal of counter-trajectories, and concrete overwriting of the landscape (*VL* 89)—that lends it its terrifying power. If, as Mattessich suggests, “the tip of the Rocket... becomes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the implement of a writing that takes the real as its text” (5), then in *Vineland*, the freeway system emerges as this implement’s inscriptive medium.¹¹

However, the link between the Rocket and the freeway should not suggest that the discourse of the Rocket precedes that of the freeway. Clean historical lines of development are not as productive in terms of historicizing these avatars of modernity as is attention to the entanglements of their co-instantiation and implication within long-running contests over spatial narrative inscription. Pynchon calls the freeway “ancient” because, while California’s road systems may not evoke such an association, the linearity of the system that reproduces the master discourse of “Western individuality,” and the linear infrastructural ideology that both reflects and supports that system is, in Pynchon’s spatial economy, as ancient as the first global empires.¹² Through the assemblage of the single car with its solitary driver occupying a single lane headed in one direction from which escape can seem impossible—as it does for DL’s narrative antecedent Oedipa Maas, who “head[s] irreversibly for the Bay Bridge” (*CL49* 87)—the system is materially encoded in a way that presents its being as not merely “ancient” but primordial, originary, “an ideal state predicated upon transcendental values” (43), as Amy Elias

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre suggests that his readers “think of a slab of concrete or a motorway” when imagining the “domination of space” by such an ideological structure (164).

¹² The relationship between straight “lines of force” (*VL* 200) and a politics of domination and tyranny becomes the focus of Pynchon’s next novel, *Mason & Dixon*. As William Emerson tells his young pupil, Jeremiah Dixon, The Romans ““were preoccupied with conveying Force, be it hydraulic, or military, or architectural,—along straight Lines”” (219).

describes the modernist ethical-aesthetic imperative that Pynchon's genre-play resists in *Against the Day*.

The same ideology is expressed, in *Vineland*, by infrastructural signifiers like “the great echoing cement lobby, lined with geometric statues who loomed overhead, staring down like the saints of whatever faith this building had served” (227); “gates in the railing that stood like a bar in a courtroom, an altar rail in a church, between the public side and the office penetralia full of their mysteries” (228); “low plasterboard corridors, with no way to see who else was sharing the subdivided building” (242); “rows of white columns suggesting national architecture and deathless temple” (255); and “the sleek raptors that decorate fascist architecture” (287). All of these aesthetic choices function, in *Vineland*, as signifiers of fascist bureaucracies that demand through such architecture the obeisance of worshipful subjects. The meaning behind these fuzzily defined symbols—“geometric statues [...] of whatever faith” (227)—is not as important, as Ken Knabb points out in his comparison of the federal architecture in *Vineland* to that of the German National Socialist state, as the constraints and interdictions imposed by the built space itself. “As long as the building or the symbol functioned as intended (facilitated total control),” Knabb writes, “it didn't matter what form the building or the symbol took.” That the imperative to control dominates whatever ideological underpinnings might govern such infrastructural arrangements points to Pynchon's investment in the exposing the abiding nature of tyranny. There will always be a “Cosmic Fascist” deploying “the dark joys of social control” (*VL* 83) and thus there will always be a need for that “federal building, jaggedly faceted, obsidian black, standing apart, inside a vast parking lot whose fences were topped with concertina wire” (*VL* 317). Within the particular spatiotemporal

situating of the novel—1984 at the edge of America—the linear thinking inscribed by such architecture speaks of the spatial oppression of the human actor who is physically oriented by the structuring of such space to always stay on the authorized side of the “gates in the railing” (228), and whose sight is limited “with no way to see” (242) beyond the corridor.

Significantly, these infrastructural arrangements and the ideology they encode—of “deathless temple” (255); of a sometimes uncanny organicity, appearing to have “landed one night” (317)—reinforce the freeway system’s instantiation of the uncompromising capitalist rhetoric of constant development, a relentless moving forward that becomes an aporetic narrative here at the extreme spatio-directional limit of the dream-cum-political-agenda of Western expansion. The prevalence of the switchback in this landscape thus enacts a kind of spatial pun, suggesting that life on the edge of expansion is necessarily a process of doubling back, and thus re-encountering these fascist spaces and the histories they privilege from a different, backdoor or preterite, perspective. This process is not simply one of daring the nostalgic look back at what is disappearing in the rearview mirror,¹³ but rather circling around on oneself, a never-ceasing re-confrontation with what the proper capitalist consumer-subject ought to know how to leave behind.

¹³ In one of the more bizarre riffs on the interdicted look back in the novel, Pynchon puts a portable TV set in the backseat of DEA agent Hector Zuñiga’s car “which Hector had angled the rearview mirror at so he could see, for the highway was a lonely place, and a man needed company” (335). Assuming that the commodified nostalgia of the rerun does not qualify, within the economy of spectacular society, as a forbidden look back, Hector is, by virtue of this arrangement, able to combat the loneliness of his divorce, addiction, and downward spiraling career with an illusory hall-of-mirrors effect that allows him to avoid the look back entirely.

Switchback

While *Vineland* is a project dedicated to deconstructing the spatial encoding of power, Pynchon is nonetheless committed to thinking of such spaces at their totalitarian extremes. In other words, if he suggests ways in which structures of ideological control can be disassembled, broken, and laid bare, he also envisions the opposite: the domination of space, and the development of its constructed assemblages into the Titans of a technocratic urbanism that close down pathways of resistance.

The challenge of getting the Street¹⁴ to communicate its being is central to *Vineland*'s project of switchback narrativity. The novel's leaps between decades demonstrate not only the links, but also the simultaneity of events past and present as their repercussions and ideological underpinnings are and have become encoded in the cityscape. To read *Vineland*'s urban streets is to read a story of the silencing of social space and the concealment of the narratives of techno-capitalist domination within the infrastructures that come to fill that space. These are not the streets that Oedipa learns so intimately on the night she explores San Francisco: "its far blood's branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shapeless municipal hickeys, out on the skin for all but tourists to see" (95). In the urban environments of *Vineland*'s 1984, what Lefebvre calls "the social production of space"—that is, the process whereby "the body with the energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space" (170)—is envisioned by Pynchon as having been all but completely brought to a halt. In such an environment, Lefebvrian "abstract space,"

¹⁴ "The Street" is often capitalized, and just as often takes on an archetypal character in Pynchon's mediations on urban life and movement. "You know the street I mean, child. The street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning—we hope—is some sense of home or safety. But no guarantees. A street we are put at the wrong end of, for reasons best known to the agents who put us there. If there are agents. But a street we must walk" (*V*. 324).

“the space of power” (51), “buttressed by non-critical (positive) knowledge, backed up by a frightening capacity for violence, and maintained by a bureaucracy which has laid hold of the gains of capitalism in the ascendant and turned them to its own profit” (52) defines the human experience of the city.¹⁵ As Guy Debord puts it, following the urban theory of Lewis Mumford, “the effort of all established powers, since the experience of the French Revolution, to augment their means of keeping order in the street has eventually culminated in the suppression of the street itself” (122).

This suppression plays out in *Vineland*'s 60s flashbacks to rioting and protests in the California city streets, in which freedom of movement and escape is slowly pared down to nothing. In one significant passage, Frenesi finds herself trapped on Telegraph Avenue, “halfway between the people and the police, with no side street handy to go dodging down. Hmm. Shop doors were all secured with chain, windows shuttered over with heavy plywood” (116). Here, capital accumulation, protection of property, and law enforcement “carrying small and she hoped only rubber-bullet-firing rifles” (116) come together to form a spatial assemblage in which human life is both imprisoned and dangerously exposed. The street becomes a space for the protection and the defense of property and commodities, the single human body in its midst out-of-place, secondary or even tertiary in privilege to the property being protected there, and the juridical rule which the mere presence of that body seems to violate.

The shutting down of the city street as a space privileging the human or the social is most apparent in Pynchon's spatial encoding of the College of the Surf, briefly The

¹⁵ As Nicholas Spencer suggests in his spatial reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*, while that novel doesn't arrive in 1970s urban America until its final pages, “much of the narrative portrays the formation of models of power that are realized in the abstract space of Los Angeles” (141).

People's Republic of Rock and Roll, "a lively beachhead of drugs, sex, and rock and roll" (204) that occupies a space at the very edge of the Californian landscape. The "clifftop campus" (204) is quite literally marginalized in the sense that it occupies a thin sliver of land not taken by a "military reservation," leaving it "pressed between the fenceline and the sea" (204) and "bracketed by the two ultraconservative counties of Orange and San Diego" (204). Standing in, as it does, for all the campus revolutions and utopian revolts that blossomed only to be smothered in the 1960s, the campus's precarity and isolation among the Titans of the military industrial complex give a sense of just how little ground was left, "a small crescent-shaped region of good spirits in that darkening era" (208), for American radicals and revolutionaries to defend in what, for Pynchon, is the already too-late post-war decade of the 1960s. As the campus is surrounded by juridical and military law-enforcers, "all lines of withdrawal" become impassable. "By the time of the last offer by bullhorn of safe passage, every road, watercourse, storm drain, and bike path was interdicted. All phones were cut off, and the news media, compliant as always, at a harmless, unbridgeable distance" (203). In this image is not only the triumph of the fascist state over 60s radicalism, but also the closing of the urban American street—the attempt to shut down passageways of difference, resistance, non-quotidian movement—to the human body on bike or foot or in a crowd.

In the 70s and 80s, *Vineland's* urban dwellers travel by car, footpaths are restricted to mall galleries, and every step taken is directed towards producing the good consumer moving without struggle through the seamless shapes and objects of capitalist culture. Prairie's memories of mall gallery rebellion – saving her friend from a cop during "the Great South Coast Plaza Eyeshadow Raid" (327), "paralyzing the pursuit long enough to

sail alongside Ché, take her by the wrist, twirl her till they were aimed the right direction, and get rolling with her the hell on out of there” (328)—create a parallel with her mother’s impression of protesters in the street moving “smoothly between baton and victim to take the blow instead” (117) that is more polarizing than syncretic. If earlier generations fought the forces of state capitalism over the uses and production of space, Prairie’s generation must settle for achieving a modicum of counter-current movement in an environment that has become effectively dominated by the commodifying energies of that system. Just as the space for resistance is shrunk to a sliver for the PR³ in the 60s, such space is nullified for all but the most mundane of rebellious practices in the urban environment of *Vineland*’s 1980s. While in his articulation of the socio-spatial dialectic, Lefebvre insists on the Marxist-utopian notion that “state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable” (23), the world that Pynchon posits here is one in which transgressions are absorbed as part of that system. When the streets have become mall galleries and the town squares food courts, where might Lefebvre’s “seething forces... still capable of rattling the lid of the cauldron of the state and its space” (23) stage such a rattling? Acts of radicalism and rebellion have come down to petty theft in theme malls, Pynchon seems to suggest, because the spaces of revolution—the field, the town square, the street—have been effectively molded into inaccessible, abstract, and fundamentally anti-societal spaces.

While Pynchon’s pessimistic vision of the closing of the city street counters Lefebvre’s belief that the social demand on and for space will always resist “the coming into being of a clearly defined space – a capitalist space (the world market) thoroughly purged of contradictions” (11), the purging of the human from the urban American

cityscape does require that landscape's marginalized actors to find some space for themselves. In *Vineland*, the sense of expulsion from the commodity-centric Southern Californian megalopolises experienced by 60s radicals generates the subsequent exodus up the coast to Northern California. That this is a sort of switchback move on Pynchon's part is suggested by his engagement with narratives of pilgrimage¹⁶ and myths of American westward expansion. As E. Shaskan Bumás illustrates so thoroughly in his reading of *Vineland*'s utopian spaces, for Pynchon, California represents

the final outpost of European westward movement and, because of its ongoing experimental communities, the final outpost of Utopia. California is also, in a sense, a synecdoche for the U.S.A....The name of the place, Vineland, evokes Vinland, the name that the Norse or Viking explorers under Leif Ericson or Leif the Lucky gave to the land they discovered a millennium earlier when they arrived in what is now called Newfoundland. *Vineland*'s name connects its story to the present and the past of the whole continent that the name once indicated, as well as the country that borrowed its later name, America. (150)

In the context of this essay's focus, then, the California coast as a "final outpost" comes to demand some sort of recoil, a bounceback or reversal of the move west. In these terms, the citizens of PR³ can be read as ironic counterpoints to their Puritan ancestors. While John Berryman describes the Puritans' "precarious hold upon the margin of the new land" (11), PR³ (along with all of the novel's urban exiles) find themselves pushed to the

¹⁶ In her reading of *Against the Day*, Elias suggests that in that novel Pynchon develops the genre trope of "a kind of postmodern pilgrimage in motion somewhere between the secular and the sacred, between history and romance, between nature and culture" (42). While Elias notes this novel's circular plot, "as a ritual pattern, pilgrimage, like quest, tends to move in a circle rather than an Aristotelian line" (41), Pynchon counters the line in *Vineland* with a spatiotemporally zigzagging plot.

opposite margin of the continent by a new kind of wilderness. Eddins notes Pynchon's use of "the Puritan's 'one-way' husbandry of earth's bounty" (*Gnostic Pynchon* 131) in *Gravity's Rainbow*. "Convinced that God's elect were authorized by the Word to exploit God's creation, they turned the countryside into a 'necropolis, gray with marble dust'" (*GR* 28 qtd. in Eddins, *Gnostic Pynchon* 131). In 1984, this necropolis is now a techno-capitalist sprawl whose expansion charts the early American settlers' dominance of the land, and the subsequent loss of control that comes when that myth of election reaches its western limit.

Switchback

Lefebvre writes that if abstract space were ever to make its dominance permanent, we would "have to deem it the locus and milieu of the ultimate abjection, of that final stability forecast by Hegel, the end result of social entropy... Whatever traces of vitality remained would have a wasteland as their only refuge" (52). Is it possible to read Vineland County, its coastline named in the novel "'A Harbor of Refuge'" (316), as such a wasteland? Perhaps not in Lefebvre's sense, but since Pynchon is working beyond the kind of teleological historical materialism in which Lefebvre theorizes, it may be possible to approach the pairing of these seemingly opposing terms—"refuge" and "wasteland"—differently. Gil Doron, whose work focuses on wastelands or what he terms "dead zones,"¹⁷ argues that a productive way to understand wastelands is as "non-utilitarian spaces." "They oppose... capitalist society and even more so the architectural profession, the notion of design and production and as such they [a]re spaces of resistance" (207). In

¹⁷ Dead zones, Doron writes, "present history (rather than represent it), foster creativity and nourish the aesthetics of ruins; they are a habitat for wildlife and plants, places in which the body has to adapt to its environment rather than being cuddly choked by its surroundings" (204).

this sense, Vineland County serves as a sort of refuge because it is a wasteland or “non-utilitarian” dead zone. “The strange ‘lost’ town of Shade Creek, supposedly evacuated in a flood of long ago” (320), its susceptibility to the elements implicitly declaring its inutility, becomes the ideal site for the Thanatoid community whose special form of exile discursivity I discuss in the previous chapter. Similarly, the difficult roads typical of the Californian North Coast/Klamath bioregion are themselves “spaces of resistance” (Doron 207). These roads blur distinctions between wasteland and refuge by inscribing a disorienting “aesthetics of ruins” (Doron 204) that becomes a refuge next to the more aggressively representative, solid, and stolid infrastructural assemblies with which it spatially contrasts.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that one of the ways in which oppressive techno-capitalist infrastructural ideology is decoded in this text is through the encoding of the switchback. The wasteland-refuge decodes the dominant narratives of abstract space, and similarly, one of the novel’s “switchback” human actors, Zoyd Wheeler, participates in the decoding of one of its most oppressive fascist agents, Brock Vond. Both erstwhile lovers of Frenesi Gates, Zoyd and Vond occupy opposing ends of the political spectrum, and both, in a sense, encode in their own embodiment the discursive-material assemblages in which they participate. Vond is described as resembling “any of the sleek raptors that decorate fascist architecture” (287), while the house that Zoyd builds himself embodies the opposite of this overt structural menace: “nowhere near up to code,” the house is a jumble of found and recycled materials, improvised plumbing, and wildly tangential additions (*VL* 358). When this home is seized by Vond’s troops, Zoyd finds himself spending a great deal of time on Vineland

County's network of dirt roads, helping local pot growers ship that year's harvest. It is as if the very act of occupying these unofficial spaces resists the "monster program" cannibalizing his property. Albeit a patchwork assemblage, his home has nonetheless served as the site linking him to the economic and juridical networks whose influence overlays the terrain, and to lose such a site is to be forced, implicitly, off this grid and into contest with it. "Out on those runs," Pynchon writes, "speeding after moonset through the smell of the redwoods, with all the lights out, trying to sense among the different patches of darkness where the curves were, and what gear to be in for grades that were nearly impossible to see," Zoyd finds himself "half hoping for a run-in with Vond, knowing by now it was never going to happen in any frontal way, attempting to get back his own small piece of Vineland, but out here at the periphery, in motion, out on one of the roads that had taken him away from his home, and that must lead back..." (374). In this passage, Zoyd is aware, not only of the unique agency he has as an actor within a resistant nonhuman assemblage, but also of the ability of these roads "out here at the periphery" to authors of a discourse of risk, aleatory encounter, and disorienting movement. His knowledge of the roads gives him an advantage that Vond, as an agent of the techno-capitalist assemblage, does not possess. For Zoyd to meet Vond out here, on terrain whose opacity and resistances he has learned to orient himself within (rather than impose himself upon), could shift the balance of power. It is not a head-on collision that Zoyd imagines, "knowing by now it was never going to happen in any frontal way," but rather the anticipation of Vond running into the very switchback resistances of which Zoyd finds himself the competent user. Such a run-in would not be a confrontation so much as, once again, a contest over who is better able to author himself into the assembly

of actors at work in the narrative encoding of this terrain. The material and the discursive again become indivisible as Zoyd imagines such a confrontation in and over space as tantamount to regaining his property: “the roads that had taken him away from his home,” he thinks, “must lead back.” In other words, Zoyd engages the road systems of Vineland County as disorientation devices that, regardless of where they lead, are nonetheless conduits of return that narrate an alternative to the juridical and economic systems pressing against him.

Zoyd hopes that the Titans of Vineland County will support his fight against the Titans of the State, and in a sense, this fantasy of using one’s membership in a particular assemblage against the machinations of another is supported by the novel’s spatial politics, as Vond’s engagement with the resistant terrain of Vineland County becomes the site of his decoding and ultimate deconstruction. It is not accidental that Vond—aware, like Zoyd, of the perils of any direct confrontation—is never shown, in action, directly on the terrain of Vineland County; rather, he hovers always just above that unpredictable surface. His colleagues call him “‘Death From Slightly Above’ [...] traveling in a tight formation of three dead-black Huey slicks, up and down the terrain of Vineland nap-of-the-earth style, liable to pop up suddenly over a peaceful ridgeline or come screaming down the road after an innocent motorist” (375). While *Vineland*’s villains have been described as less “glamorously threatening” than in his previous novels (Wilde qtd. in Thoreen 215), such a spatial positioning of Vond-as-fascist-agent should enforce the point that this choice has a strategic effect. Just as the “vertiginous vantages” (625) that Hume charts in her reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s aerial perspectives have here been reduced to this hovering above the trees, so too is the agency of human actors in *Vineland*

deliberately and dramatically diminished. To endeavor to exceed this reduced sphere of authorial agency—to make bigger moves than the assemblage authorizes—is to risk tangling with the counter-movements of the nonhuman world.

Vond, in his desperation to leap forward in his career and in his quest for power, embodies the kind of aggressive movement that dooms him, within the novel's refusal to grant privilege of agency to its human actors, to failure and obscurity, his movements ultimately truncated, his successes petty and qualified. Not only does Vond fail to achieve aerial dominance or destruction in this novel, but he also fails to effectively touch the terrain he seeks to conquer. When we finally do find Vond on the ground at the end of the novel, it is because he is already dead, his fascist fantasies decoded, his raptor architecture deconstructed by the resistant terrain, which wastes no time in swallowing him up. As Blood and Vato guide him on his journey, "along the nearly lightless road [...] the surface changed to dirt, and trees began to press in on either side" (379). Vato tells Vond the Yurok legend of the "Ghosts' Trail leading to Tsorrek, the land of death, traveled by so many that it was already chest-deep" (379). Abruptly, Vond finds himself on that trail, "a wall of earth each side of the narrowing road, in which tree roots twisted overhead now, and mud, once glistening, had grown darker, till only its smell was present" (379). In a landscape of switchbacks, this is one trail with "no way to return" (379), its more-than-beaten earth authoring its own hegemonic text, and in a Thanatoid community made up of souls reluctant to take that trail, Vond is ushered down it quickly and unceremoniously. An agent of linear narratives and clear paths of cause-and-effect in life, in death he reflects that same uncompromising ideology. Brought into conflict with a space of dirt road and rushing river authorship, Vond seems to become no more than the

materiality of his encoding. When his tyrannies are exposed, he effectively ceases to exist, and he is absorbed by the land he sought to dominate. If, as Severs suggests, one of the novel's key images is a footprint, "a single homogeneous one formed by many successive generations of tramping, which we can read as Pynchon's cynical image for what centuries of American individualists have done in their communions with nature and their supposed trailblazing" (224), then Vond's death may be read as a sort of deliberate reversal, a counter-footprint deep as any made by American trailblazing ideology, as the fascist agent who refused to touch his boot to the soil is swallowed into its depths.

Switchback

While there is narrative satisfaction in Vond's deconstruction within the non-utilitarian, unroutine and unroutinizable Vineland County landscapes, the novel's spatial economy asserts that these landscapes are not straightforwardly anti-oppressive. The Northern California bioregion offers not only refuge from the abstract spaces of technocratic urbanity, but also, at times, secrecy for the most covert and brutal control systems. The area's "wet and secluded valley[s]" (*VL* 249) conceal government bases, sites of "fascist architecture" (287) whose purposes shift seamlessly to accommodate the fresh and private horrors of each new administration: "an old Air Force fog-dispersal experiment" (251); "a holding area able to house up to half a million urban evacuees in the event of, well, say, some urban evacuation" (251); "prison camps [...] like feedlots where we'd all become official nonhuman livestock" (264). To draw out the spatial mechanics required for the covert offshoots of the official story being told by the military bases that populate Southern California so unabashedly—"the most powerful assemblage of weapon-making

expertise ever grounded into any one place” (224-225), as Soja asserts—Pynchon introduces the “National Security Reservation,” to which Vond’s people transport the rebels of PR³ after its fall. Following a rumor that Frenesi has been kidnapped and brought to this reservation, DL and the other members of fps24 come upon “the old FEER freeway” (250) in a state of decay, “defects here and there in its camouflage, gray columns and guardrails, ruins from Camelot” (250). These markers of the corruption and failure of even the most romantically recalled administrations suggest, *not* that the impulses and anxieties governing FEER’s construction have diminished, but rather that they have become something slightly more transparent, not the grand schemes of a world power, but the petty plots of a nation-state at war with itself. In this sense, the Reservation’s concealed location becomes a key to its decoding, the very fact of its concealment signifying the weaknesses and internal contradictions of what, in more public space, seems, as Soja suggests, insurmountably powerful.

In his reading of the novel’s contested spaces, Bumás suggests that the National Security Reservation is both utopian “in the literal sense of having no location” and dystopian, in that “the horror of it is that it does indeed exist” (159), and this points to the tension surrounding the Reservation’s (un)official (non)existence. Within Pynchon’s layered references to the different uses to which the Reservation is put throughout the novel’s histories, there is the intimation of a kind of impregnable discursive stability. Whatever administration is making use of the site, it is nonetheless an infrastructural arrangement into which oppression has been encoded architecturally, and so in its very occupation of space, it instantiates and defends the same kind of history as that of the “ancient freeway system” (*VL* 89). As DL wonders when she enters the “subterranean

complex” beneath the barracks, “would the magnitude of the fear that had found expression in this built space allow them to use it in ways just as uncontrolled and insane...thinking it authorized them somehow?” (255). The complex is both nuclear bunker and interrogation site, an “escape to refuge deep in the earth” (255) and “deep privacy for whatever those in command might wish to do to people they brought down here” (255). As Bumás correctly interprets, the horror here is of the existence of such a space. Its authorization and use cover a range of purposes, but they are all encompassed within the rubric of “the magnitude of fear” that DL identifies as having “found expression in this built space” (255). As long as the infrastructure of oppression persists, the novel’s framework of spatio-material narrative encoding suggests, there is no possibility of moving on from the ideological systems that it instantiates.

Pynchon sets the Reservation at the end of a concealed road: “The little-known and only confidentially traveled FEER, or Federal Emergency Evacuation Route, which followed the crestline of the Coast Range north in a tenebrous cool light, beneath camouflage netting and weatherproof plastic sheet. It was a dim tunnel that went for hundreds of miles” (249). Noticeably linear, noticeably as blind as it is concealed, FEER is the novel’s clearest articulation of the freeway system’s ideological and narrative hegemony, to which Pynchon opposes switchback narrativity. “Conceived in the early sixties as a disposable freeway that would only be used, to full capacity, once” (249), Pynchon writes, the highway is a product of “the apocalyptic grandeur of Kennedy-era strategic ‘thinking’” (249), an escape route should some destructive force ever come to

hover over the heads of urban California.¹⁸

To make the “lines of force” (*VL* 200, *GR* 595) that define the particular narrative aesthetic of such a route absolutely explicit, Pynchon marks its distance with poles along the shoulder that hold pizza-sized medallions, each emblazoned with the face and story of an “American Martyr in the Crusade Against Communism” (251):

Had they been meant somehow for the long jammed and crawling hours of flight from the City, something inspirational to look at, to assure them all in a way not immediately clear *it is not the end*, or *there is still hope...?* was it only some travel game for the kids, to keep them occupied, to pass the time till the sudden light from behind, the unbearable sight in the mirror? (252)

The speculation surrounding the meaning of the medallions is, I would suggest, deliberately meant to encourage readers to follow the second conclusion. If the medallions are meant to reassure the traveler that “*it is not the end*,” their power to inspire and assure is “not immediately clear,” a weak attempt by a paranoia-riddled administration to drum up a bit of patriotism at the eleventh hour. However, the second option is far more explicit about what, exactly, the traveler is fleeing from—“the sudden light from behind, the unbearable sight in the mirror.” The medallion is not a child’s amusement, just as to look back through the rearview mirror is not a child’s act. As both freeway and rearview mirror function as powerful signifiers within the novel’s spatial economy, the medallions join them to suggest that the interdiction against looking back—so central to the fascist narrative aesthetic of straightforward teleology, uncurbed

¹⁸ In a novel of freeways, it is no coincidence that “FEER” is an anagram of “free,” evoking the spatial tyranny embedded within the freeway system that here becomes, quite literally, a fear-way, a passage through and escape from that ever-present but barely glimpsable threat that hovers at the novel’s horizons.

progress, and linear causation that this novel decodes—is driven as much by terror at the consequences of such an ideological framework—“the sudden light [...] the unbearable sight”—as it is by belief in its self-evident or indisputable rightness.

That the bomb about to drop on California at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* remains a presence hovering at both the barely-seen horizon and the secret heart of this novel becomes clear in this sequence. It is not an obvious presence in *Vineland*. It is only through the look back demanded by switchback narrativity that we are able to see the bomb, the fear (or FEER), the coding into the land of a century of global warfare. Only by seeing the ways in which the narrative landscape is encoded, first, by the rise of the military-industrial complex, and second, by the closing of the city space to human actors and social endeavor, does the bomb become visible, not so much the bringer of conventional catastrophe as a seed planted deliberately in the “dull brown earth” (CL49 13) of the spatio-conceptual limit of America, authorizing, and indeed, demanding the never-ceasing development of techno-capitalist sprawl. This is where Pynchon leaves his humans, at the edge of this arena of operations, searching for means by which to negotiate such space, perhaps suggesting that for all us humans, as for Vond, there is “no way to return” (379), but that at least one survival strategy may be to learn to see differently, to use space differently, to negotiate our living with the nonhuman world in a way that manages the precarity of the human position.

Switchback

Conclusion: In the Habit of Swerving

Walking around the UBC campus, I notice features of the landscape surrounding me that, although not exceptional, do help me find my way into these final thoughts. I notice the unending project of infrastructural development that dominates the terrain. I also notice that despite all this building, the campus is shot through with funny little dirt pathways made by footsteps that eschew the wide and convenient boulevards in favor of alternatives that seem to insist on ruining the carefully invested time, funding, and planning that goes into the constant making of a beautiful campus. Sara Ahmed notes “that in landscape architecture they use the term ‘desire lines’ to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow” (*Queer Phenomenology* 19 – 20). I like to imagine that such transgressive footpaths are not simply lines of desire, choices to ease everyday living by moving as the crow flies rather than along the right angles delineated by the gentle tyranny of sidewalks, but rather that in their very existence as the “unofficial,” these footpaths form lines, or better yet, squiggles, curves, meanderings, swerves of resistance; resistance to the quotidian, to the mapped, to the rectilinear encouragement to respect borders marking off the difference between concrete and grass. These funny paths lead me to a final question emerging out of the political stakes of *Vineland*: is it possible to think of the human as sharing, along with nonhumans, a resistant or troublemaking material being? not the kind that rebels against itself, as when our bodies fail us in injury or old age or desire, but the kind that exerts some small and secret degree of agency that can be characterized as unconscious, unmindful, not nonhuman, but rather that part of us that might be called nonhuman if it were possible to

be anything other?

To answer this question, I begin with the swerve, a motion embedded in the switchback, and evoked in passing throughout this project. The swerve is one of the originary concepts of materialist philosophy, what Althusser calls in his later work “a secret tradition” (183) that begins with the atomism of Epicurus, which contends that the world is formed by the unpredictable and anticausal collision of atoms. Even falling straight down through a void, this philosophy argues, these atoms “deflect a bit in space at a quite uncertain time and in uncertain places, just enough that you could say that their motion has changed,” and suggesting that matter itself, as Lucretius puts it, is “in the habit of swerving” (Inwood 66). Thus begins the philosophical undercurrent, in Althusser’s succinct cobbling together of terms, of “*the ‘materialism’...of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take [prise]*” (168). In this listing of like concepts there is a history (or perhaps, an anti-history) that rejects a fixation on questions pertaining to “Reason, Meaning, Necessity and End” (Althusser 169) in favor of an exploration of everything that escapes design, resists rationalism, that assumes “the primacy of the swerve over the rectilinearity of the straight trajectory” (Althusser 190).

This “habit of swerving” evokes the same aleatory materiality involved in the inanimate acts of breakage and intrusion that Graham Harman takes up in his reconsideration of Heidegger’s tool-analysis, wherein Harman argues that one way in which things function as nonhuman agents is in the way that they *break*. In this way, Heidegger posits in *Being & Time* (without directly ascribing any form of agency to objects), “the environment announces itself afresh” (105). As my project demonstrates, this announcement or obtrusiveness, obstinacy, breakage, or troublemaking are all ways

in which it is possible to think of the nonhuman as acting upon, resisting, and determining the experience of being-in-the-world for human actors. However, where does the human actor's own material being come in to this? How do we swerve? How do we break? What is in question here is not the ability to choose to stray from the beaten path, nor to strategize a motion—the swerve is not a human thing in this sense—but to feel as if through the materiality of our being, *we are moved*, and to experience the aleatory as something that is of us, rather than something—some offense or intrusion—that happens to us.

What I think of as *Vineland's* response to these questions comes in the form of its encoding of “the spilled, the broken world” (267). This is not a world of human control systems and predictable outcomes, but a world that begins with the assumption of the swerve, and then tries to find a way to fit the human in among all this spilling, breaking material discursivity. There may not be untroubled human spaces in this world, but what Pynchon does seem to suggest is that there are navigational strategies that can be deployed to allow the movement of human beings, the contribution of our own narrative meanderings, through the highly contested spaces of nonhuman assembly. Given these terms, *Vineland's* switchback narrative strategy becomes, as I argue throughout this thesis, a kind of survival strategy for humans, or what I'd like to call a nonanthropocentric humanism. This seemingly contradictory term is intended to acknowledge that the human is not a privileged being that finds itself obtruded upon by the largely nonhuman assemblages that dominate the spaces of material existence, but simultaneously, that its human embodied materiality is part of the breakage, part of the spill. This suggests, in turn, much like the switchbacks of Vineland County, and the

desire lines cut into the grass of my campus, that even within the individual human actor, there is something that swerves, a perhaps unconscious agential materiality that does not always choose which direction it travels or sees in, that does not always move in the way that it is conditioned through repetition to move. While the nightmare aspect of this in Pynchon is the human-become-automaton—the unconscious repetition of actions sanctioned by state capitalist modernity which render the laborer-consumer’s “disassembly plausible as that of any machine” (*V.* 40); the body-in-war that has “taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city” (*V.* 307)—the other side of the coin is that people are, at last, at least as unpredictable as things, and that we all, humans and nonhumans alike, may move in ways that are surprising. As Ahmed puts it, “places where we are under pressure do not always mean we stay on line; at certain points, we can refuse the inheritance, points that are often lived as ‘breaking points.’ We do not always know what breaks at these points” (“Orientations” 248). Ahmed emphasizes the unconscious nature of the human swerve, falling out of line with certain material assemblages, falling in with others, causing ontological scandals (as do the Thanatoids of Shade Creek), making trouble (as do Prairie and Ché with every move they make), getting “in the way of domination” (Latour 81), or conversely, out of its way, as Frenesi does when she abandons her radical leftist roots for a life as an FBI rat.

This habit of swerving, which Pynchon assigns not only to nonhuman matter but also to that which is matter in humans and that which tangles with the Titans of *Vineland*, is a form of resistance that constitutes a nonanthropocentric humanist survival strategy. It is aleatory, contingent, the opposite of predictable, quantifiable, or controllable, but these

are features that also what makes it useful to the humans of a nonhuman-centric world. In writing the switchback, then, Pynchon writes that which escapes us in our own material being, and that which connects us most physically and intractably to “the spilled, the broken world.” Importantly, this does not make humans the helpless pawns of the aleatory, of fate, of the Titans, but rather, all the more responsible for small actions that reverberate out into the webs of causal implication we can barely imagine, barely, in the grips of the rectilinear, the narrative straight shot, stand to look back on.

What, then, finally, does a nonanthropocentric humanism look like?

- Anchored in the materiality of human being, it sees the connections between that materiality and the materiality of nonhuman bodies. It acknowledges the elements of human materiality that escape the control of the human mind.
- It is limited in its opportunities for agency; however, it finds those opportunities within and among assemblies of human and nonhuman actors. Simultaneously, it resists and troubles systems of domination and control that seek to overstep the limits on agency dictated by the other actors in a given assembly.
- It is spatially aware, and sensitive to the large-scale contests that create spaces of protection and/or exposure of the human body.
- It is phenomenologically flexible, open to perspectival shifts and anticipative of disorientating situations that require radical swerves in perception and navigation. It avoids adherence to hegemonic systems of control and political stasis.
- It is temporally flexible, in that it acknowledges the presence of multiple and competing histories (and even possible futures), encoded into the spatio-material present that humans occupy.

- It is, above all, a strategy of movement, of thinking human material being in movement through space and time, of the impacts of that movement, and of the opportunities and risks inherent in the movement between and among titanic assemblies of actors.

The implication in *Vineland*, and in Pynchon's entire corpus, is that these spatialized determinants may be the limits of what any humanism can propose in a nonanthropocentric cosmos which, perhaps inevitably, takes on a tinge of the sinister given the very facticity of material being, of the unavoidable movement that takes us from birth to death. In one of *Vineland*'s last paragraphs, there is a strange scene in which Pynchon describes

The unrelenting forces that leaned ever after the partners into Time's wind, impassive in pursuit, usually gaining, the faceless predators who'd once boarded Takeshi's airplane in the sky, the ones who'd had the Chipco lab stomped on, who despite every Karmic Adjustment resource brought to bear so far had simply persisted, stone-humorless, beyond cause and effect, rejecting all attempts to bargain or accommodate, following through pools of night where nothing else moved wrongs forgotten by all but the direly possessed, continuing as a body to refuse to be bought off for any but the full price, which they had never named.

(383)

Contained within this sequence is Pynchon the mystic, the existentially stunned philosopher for whom ultimately, every strategy of narrative negotiation and survival fails. This scene is a reminder that Pynchon's work never deals in the realm of the exclusively material, because all the nonhuman agential matter in the world will not

suffice to explain away the “unrelenting forces” that follow us always “through pools of night where nothing else moved.” These forces, like the unsignable bomb, haunt the periphery of all Pynchon novels, and they cannot be ignored in any consideration of his work. What role they play or what price they demand is never clear. The only thing that Pynchon shares about these forces is the certainty that they pursue us, “as a body,” a nonhuman assembly with a constitution and politics all its own, and which, in a sense, come to define the human as that which is the pursued other whose inscriptive authority—its “attempts to bargain or accommodate”—is always unable to bridge the discursive gap between itself and the world from which it is set apart by the ideality of its sign systems. Under these conditions, the political stakes are shifted, and the question becomes one not of how we bring nonhuman actors into our world, but rather, how we find a way into a world without us. How change the terms of the pursuit in order to become participants in a politics that we have not authored? Under these conditions, humanism becomes a contestable and marginal scrawl, a weird and private code that has pushed us to the edge of being, and that must now find the means of negotiating some “way to return” (*VL* 379).

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