CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Pynchon Studies in the Twenty-First Century

Joanna Freer

The twenty-first century has been a time of renewed energy within Pynchon studies. Among other factors this is due to the publication of three novels, *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013), which have each brought something distinctively new to the table. *Against the Day*'s vast scope and range makes it Pynchon's most fully realized example of what has come to be conceived of as the "systems novel"; *Inherent Vice*'s revisiting of the counterculture era first examined by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) offers a concrete point of comparison on which to base assessments of his maturation as a writer amid changing sociopolitical contexts; and *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon's (quasi-) 9/11 novel, provides a thorough and long-anticipated thematic engagement with computer technology and digital culture. *Mason & Dixon*, published a little before the turn of the millennium in 1997 and one of Pynchon most critically acclaimed works, has also provided fertile ground for twenty-first-century criticism. While some of this work is understood to represent the final fruition of projects that have had a long gestation period (projects that Pynchon interestingly anticipated in 1964 could constitute "the literary event of the millennium"), the publication of these novels in fairly rapid succession means that this current period of productivity easily rivals that of Pynchon's initial entry onto the scene of American letters.[1] In this rich context the academic field of Pynchon studies has grown exponentially, spawning a successful biannual international conference that has run consistently since 1998. There have also been significant online innovations such as the collaborative Pynchon wiki that collates detailed notes on each of the novels as well as discussion forums, such as pynchon-l.

While some contemporary Pynchon criticism has remained beholden to the understandings of his writing consolidated between the 1970s and the early 1990s, the distinctive qualities of his recent work have invited many new readings. The post-hiatus wave of Pynchon novels in general, and, I suggest, his twenty-first-century fiction in particular, has not just

reinvigorated the field but has enabled and provoked significant critical developments within it. The majority of the contributions to this volume are focused around his twenty-first-century novels, asserting their significance and helping to correct the lack of critical attention they have received, but Pynchon's newer work also provides a basis to both delineate trends of development in his writing over a much longer historical arc and to rethink our interpretations of the earlier work. The publication of novels such as *Against the Day, Inherent Vice*, and *Bleeding Edge* can enable a fuller appreciation than was previously possible of Pynchon's oeuvre as a complex interlinked whole, with numerous echoes between texts operating via overt parallels, such as the recurrence of settings or characters, or via subtler stylistic, structural, or thematic features. This recognition impels both retrospective approaches to Pynchon's first novels informed by his later fiction and the thorough investigation of continuities and innovations across his career. Indeed these approaches often operate in tandem, as in Ali Chetwynd's chapter in this collection, which reassesses Pynchon's career-long association with the paranoid register via analysis of *Bleeding Edge*'s "post-paranoid" stance; or my own contribution to the volume, which rethinks Pynchon's engagement with gender dynamics in *V.* (1963) via a reading of *Against the Day*; or in Hanjo Berressem's chapter, in which the contemporary state of "permanent crisis" in the West, as well as the specific crisis of 9/11, inspires a reading that tracks the changing implications of "disorder" throughout Pynchon's fiction.

Beyond its engagements with new novels, the "newness" of Pynchon studies in the twenty-first century derives from its engagement with advances in critical and political theory, with developments in political activism, and also with the new analytical opportunities and material afforded by the advent of the digital age. *The New Pynchon Studies* brings together examples of each of these approaches that are only disparately available elsewhere, and if read collectively the chapters in this volume offer a cohesive view not just of where Pynchon criticism is directed but also of twenty-first-century directions in literary criticism more broadly. Indeed, American literary criticism has witnessed myriad exciting innovations in the postmillennial period, the so-called postcritical age being paradoxically a time characterized by the "intense forging of new frameworks for critical thought within which to make sense of literature."[2]

The contributions collected in the first part of this volume, titled "Theory," deal specifically with some of the more recent critical advances of most relevance to Pynchon's work, namely post-postmodernism, the "post-paranoid," new materialisms, and posthumanism. Discussion of

theory is, however, not limited to the chapters in this part; the collection as a whole evinces a common engagement with the contemporary critical-theoretical landscape. Centrally, *The New Pynchon Studies* concerns itself with the shift beyond the post-structuralist emphasis on the epistemological limits of language and the practice of deconstruction that was prevalent in literary analyses produced in the 1970s and 80s. The first wave of Pynchon criticism which emerged in these years and based itself on the author's first three novels, *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), was very much invested in this critical trend – which is, of course, unsurprising, given that Pynchon's early fiction was considered to define a literary postmodernism that shared many of the concerns of post-structuralist thought. To take just a few examples, seminal works of Pynchon criticism such as William M. Plater's *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (1978), Thomas Schaub's *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (1981), Molly Hite's *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (1983), and Peter L. Cooper's *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World* (1983) are all primarily concerned with how Pynchon deals with issues of truth and meaning – with the way his writing calls into question the cultural, linguistic, and literary structures that produce and legitimize particular notions of truth, stranding the reader paranoically between the binary alternatives of the excess or absence of meaning. As Schaub put it, Pynchon's writing involves "a conscious narrative strategy on his part to engage readers in the activity and condition of meaning."[3]

The deconstructive approach works, of course, to collapse these binaries, and these early texts thus recognize how Pynchon's novels challenge a structuralist "either/or" logic and replace it with "a plurality of limited, contingent, overlapping systems that coexist and form relations with one another without achieving abstract intellectual closure."[4] However, in focusing on Pynchon's treatment of the rather abstract ideas of order and disorder, meaning and its lack, such works were limited in the extent to which they could think through the real-world implications of such plural systems. The second wave of Pynchon criticism, which has run from the early 2000s to the present (following a relative waning of critical interest in Pynchon in the 1990s), has been informed by developments in literary criticism and critical theory generally that set out to do just this. The establishment of deconstruction as something that can be taken for granted, along with the advent of globalization, the "network society" (and the internet in particular), and increased ecological awareness have collectively led to the rise of the plurally constituted interconnected web or

network as a dominant conceptual paradigm in fields such as decolonial theory, transnational theory, eco-criticism, and feminism, as well as in more general theorizations of the contemporary. This is part of an even more general intensification of interest in the relational dynamics that were already implicit in the deconstructive approach.

Christian Moraru's *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (2011), is just one of the works that understands the contemporary world according to this network model. As Moraru points out, a network can take different forms. As a horizontal structure it "gestures to lateral, even bottom-up moves, implies challenges to extant stratifications of power, and is otherwise suggestive of democracy, fairness, [and] increased participation."[5] Alternatively, a vertical network operates on "a hierarchy with its command nodes, one-way channels, preferred circuits, and profit schemes"; problematically, such networks may present themselves as horizontally oriented while their "actual effects" consolidate vertical power.[6] The essays in this collection engage with this network model in various ways, collectively demonstrating its significance to understanding Pynchon's entire oeuvre, but especially his more recent fiction, and highlighting his anxiety around the potential for vertical effects to be channeled through apparently horizontal systems. To give just a few examples, Christopher K. Coffman's chapter on digital ecologies underscores the relevance of environmentalist notions of nature as "a complex web of systems existing in a careful balance" to Pynchon's representation of interlinked human, natural, and digital networks; Michael O'Bryan's discussion of Pynchon's anarchism draws on David Graeber's definition of anarchism as "about creating and enacting horizontal networks [. . .] based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy"[7]; and Ralph Clare analyses the social-media/video-gaming landscape depicted in *Bleeding Edge* as "a decentralized network of isolated individuals interacting with and through various devices that privilege virtual ways of being over the material."[8] Moreover, Katie Muth's digital analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow* employs this figure as an analytical tool, drawing critical conclusions by visualizing the novel in network form.

Another consequence of the impetus to think beyond postmodernist and post-structuralist understandings – or, indeed, to rethink the implications of these – has been a turn toward more rigorously politically informed literary criticism. Both postmodernist literature and post-structuralist theory have had a fraught relationship with politics in which, despite being clearly motivated by a critique of authoritative power, they were seen by many as disconnected from or even as undermining the ethical basis for

real-world political action. As a postmodernist – and a stereotypically white, male American one at that – Pynchon was not initially considered a writer whose works were particularly legible through the neo-Marxist, postcolonial, or identity-political lenses that predominated in late twentieth-century academia, despite early awareness of his concern with structures of power and "excluded middles" (*CL49* 181). However, this view has increasingly come under fire in the twenty-first century, in tandem with critical attempts to recuperate a post-structuralist ethics or politics.[9] Apart from some important but sporadic essays and articles, the "political turn" in Pynchon criticism did not become a consolidated trend until the 2000s with the publication of works like Niran Abbas's edited collection *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins* (2003), Samuel Thomas's *Pynchon and the Political* (2007), and David Witzling's *Everybody's America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism* (2008).

This coincided with a parallel trend of increased interest in Pynchon's writing of history, in such works as Shawn Smith's *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (2005) and Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds's *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's* Mason & Dixon*: Eighteenth-Century Contexts, Postmodern Observations* (2005). As these titles suggest, political and historical readings of Pynchon did not imply a rejection of his works' inclusion within the category of the postmodern, but they did provoke a broadening of understandings of what that category could contain. This interest in Pynchon's politics shows no signs of abating, with further works published in the 2010s including David Cowart's *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (2011), Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger's Gravity's Rainbow, *Domination, and Freedom* (2013), and my own *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (2014). The five essays in the "Politics" section of this collection do further work in giving the lie to the idea that Pynchon's writing, early or late, was ever unconcerned with politics. Specifically, they are informed by recent advances in feminist and race theory, by new forms of political and environmental engagement (digital ecologies and network anarchisms), and by twenty-first-century political events and discourses (9/11, "permanent crisis," the "postfactual").

The twenty-first century has also witnessed Pynchon's writing taking new, and in some cases unexpected, forms, partly in apparent response to revolutionary changes in the ways narrative fiction can be communicated and publicized.[10] In the last few years especially, the range of forms in which Pynchon's fiction can be consumed has expanded significantly. A reported reluctance on Pynchon's part to embrace digitization was

overcome in 2012, when e-book versions of his novels were made available to readers, and certain titles have also been released as audiobooks. The challenge of adapting Pynchon's fiction for the cinema was finally taken up by the acclaimed director Paul Thomas Anderson, whose *Inherent Vice* came out in 2014. The author himself has become slightly more of a presence, voicing a trailer for the novel *Inherent Vice*, which was published on the Penguin Press website to promote the title's release, as well as voicing himself in two episodes of "The Simpsons" that poke fun at his secretive stance by representing him with a question-mark-emblazoned paper bag over his head. This new variety of form and greater quantity of available material, along with developments in computer-assisted reading techniques, offer fascinating new analytical possibilities. Hence "Analysis" is the focal point of the final selection of essays in this collection. Contributions in this part address the potentiality of digital techniques in criticism, the place of Pynchonian narrative in the context of digitally adaptive reading habits, the implications for our understanding of Pynchon's fiction of Anderson's *Inherent Vice* adaptation, and the significance of twenty-first-century digital paratextual material. The digital, as a technology that for many defines the postmillennial age, is thus central to this part and, indeed, makes its presence felt strongly across the collection.

The New Pynchon Studies thus captures a cross section of the most important recent developments in criticism on one of the most challenging and inspiring authors of our time. Bringing together essays by a new generation of Pynchon critics alongside more established names still active at the forefront of the field, the volume both builds on and moves beyond major trends within the substantial body of scholarship that accumulated around Pynchon's fiction in the twentieth century. Although formally divided into parts on "Theory," "Politics," and "Analysis," there are multiple points of mutually enlightening interaction between contributions, some of which I have indicated above. While it has not been possible to represent every "new" approach to Pynchon criticism, the contributions gathered here offer broad coverage of the contemporary critical environment in Pynchon studies, providing perspectives that connect to and inform topics not covered directly or in detail within the collection, and offering multiple jumping-off points for further advances in this rich field.

To give further details about the approaches taken in particular chapters, the first part, on "Theory," kicks off with Sascha Pöhlmann's head-on confrontation of what has perhaps been the most dominant trope in Pynchon studies: his association with postmodernism. In the light of current theorizations of the end of postmodernism and speculation as to

what has superseded it, Pöhlmann interrogates the easy equation of Pynchon's literary career with postmodernism as part of a broader questioning of the usefulness of literary categorization. The chapter recognizes that, in the present day, postmodernist literary aesthetics have "lost their discursive dominance" but that what has replaced them remains unclear, perhaps because periodizing paradigms are no longer either ideologically or practically appropriate to today's more complex global literary environment. Participating in revisions that have emerged in Pynchon studies over the last two decades to the automatic identification of the author's work as postmodernist – such as those made by Brian McHale, Simon de Bourcier, and Pöhlmann himself[11] – the essay turns to *Against the Day* and *Mason & Dixon* to illustrate two critically overlooked "non-postmodernist" aspects of Pynchon's fiction. The first, "globality," has only become a focus in recent years with the transnational turn and critical engagements with globalization; the second, Pynchon's non-postmodernist treatment of the relationship between the fictional and the real, has also been recognized primarily since the publication of *Against the Day*, but is again a feature of his earlier work.

In the collection's third chapter, "Pynchon after Paranoia," Ali Chetwynd takes on another of the most dominant themes in Pynchon studies to examine the renewed centrality of paranoia in Pynchon's most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*. Chetwynd argues that the treatment of the phenomenon in *Bleeding Edge* is distinctly parodic, such that the novel aligns with what he has identified elsewhere as a turn away from serious paranoia toward a focus on moral agency and obligation in Pynchon's post-hiatus fiction.[12] While paranoia in the Cold War era had seemed "revelatory" of the pervasiveness of state and corporate power, and thus had functioned as "oppositional," this chapter points out that in the twenty-first century the triumph of cynicism robs the paranoid register of its critical force. Drawing out several points of contrast between paranoia in Pynchon's early and late work, Chetwynd suggests that although *Bleeding Edge* asserts the objective reality of modes of power operating behind the scenes even more strongly than Pynchon's famously paranoid *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, it ultimately foregrounds Maxine's embrace of a "post-paranoid" mode of ethical relation to others, which accords with the theories of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick among others.[13]

Continuing this focus on relationality, Martin Paul Eve reads Pynchon's fiction in Chapter 4 against new materialist philosophical paradigms that contest both traditional idealism and materialism, whose anthropocentrism is seen as preventing a move beyond restrictively dualistic thinking. For

Eve, Pynchon's novels treat the human and the nonhuman, the internal and the external, and the bodily and the social in such a way as to suggest a straining beyond dualism toward an "ontological plurality" that in at least one case – the thorough disrespect shown to the principle of noncontradiction – exceeds even the antidualism of the new materialism. The "intra-action" he identifies between internal and external space across Pynchon's oeuvre leads Eve to posit an "onto-epistemology" in his work, an argument that calls into question Brian McHale's assertion of a shift to an "ontological dominant" in postmodern fiction.[14] However, in assessing the success of Pynchon's writing beyond the human, Eve concedes that it is limited in scope, concluding that the human/nonhuman binary is not fully transcended. Neither, in his reading of the representation of gender and biological sex in the context of new materialist feminisms, does Eve find the author managing to move entirely beyond binary frameworks.

Pieter Vermeulen's contribution, "Pynchon's Posthuman Temporalities," concludes the collection's first part by going into more depth on the relation between the human and the nonhuman touched on by Eve. Specifically, the chapter reads *Against the Day* through the concept of the Anthropocene – a concept that has gained considerable critical currency of late as designating the geohistorical period in which the distinctive impact of human life on the planet has been felt. Notions of the Anthropocene require us to view human activity on a much grander scale than is traditionally dealt with in the novel form, and Vermeulen argues that the vast and broad-ranging *Against the Day* rises to this challenge both formally and thematically. As an example of Anthropocene fiction then, this chapter suggests that Pynchon's 2006 novel provides an "update" to the historiographic approach of the author's earlier work and confirms his technopessimism. Vermeulen structures his argument around three forms of temporality that he identifies as central to *Against the Day*'s narrative, each of which are informed by posthuman insights: firstly, a planetary temporality that privileges the geological over the human; secondly, a disaster temporality that destabilizes the present via a sense of impending apocalypse; and thirdly, time as untranscendable, in the sense that the planet's intractable materiality resists human attempts at technological control.

The second part of this collection, which groups essays on "Politics," begins with my own contribution in which I seek to advance the long-running critical debate around Pynchon's gender thinking and association with feminism by focusing on gender as a relational dynamic that is deeply bound up with questions of responsibility to others and possibilities for ethical action in Pynchon's work. Outlining Judith Butler's notion of the

recognition of the social construction of the self and "our fundamental dependency on the other" as "an indispensable resource for ethics," I argue that such a recognition increasingly structures Pynchon's writing of gender but is already present in germinal form in *V.*[15] While *V.* points to an antiethical, divisive gender binary [that I term "operational relationality" after Foppl's notion of "operational sympathy" (*V.* 261)] as socially formed, and emphasizes male responsibility to challenge this, I suggest that *Against the Day* goes further in imagining concrete alternatives based on connection and mutual care. This aligns Pynchon's work with the developing awareness in feminist discourses of the important role of male as well as female responsibility in achieving gender equality.

Chapter 7 takes up another identity-political issue with Sue J. Kim's discussion of *Against the Day*'s "post-racial aesthetic," a concept theorized by Ramón Saldívar. For Saldívar, such an aesthetic is identifiable in literary texts whose form and content work in tandem to demonstrate the *systemic* nature of racism, positioning themselves against an antiracialism that has in recent years become confused with antiracism. This antiracialism, which Saldívar associates with neoliberalism, is an expression of both the exploitative and individualistic aspects of that ideology, viewing racism as an individual identity issue. By thus ignoring the presence of racism in social structures, this form of antiracialism actually perpetuates racism's effects while presenting itself as superficially progressive. According to Kim, *Against the Day* illustrates the pervasive presence of race in every aspect of life via its emphasis on the multiperspectival, revealing the ubiquity of racial discourse and realities through characters' conversations and internal monologues, through references to secret histories, and also through the foregrounding of experiences of ontological destabilization. Kim suggests that the latter experience mimics the profound shift in our sense of reality that the advent of a truly postracial or antiracist society would necessitate.

In the subsequent chapter, titled "Another Apocalypse: Digital Ecologies and Late Pynchon," Christopher K. Coffman approaches ecology from a different angle from that pursued by Vermeulen, seeking to problematize readings of Pynchon's work that see it as one-sidedly pessimistic regarding both environmental futures and digital potentialities. This apocalypticism, while present, "is not the whole story," Coffman asserts. Rather, Pynchon's fiction also suggests the deep mutual imbrication of the human, the natural, and the digital, and implies that digital environments can foster "ecologization" – a state of nonlinear perceptiveness to nonhuman spatial and temporal dimensions that "allows for awareness of the complex relations between subjects and environments." Coffman

demonstrates that aspects of both *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* can be read productively against recent developments in the field of digital ecologies. Through examinations of social and digital networks in the novels – GNASH ("the Global Network of Anecdotal Surfer Horseshit") and ARPAnet in *Inherent Vice*, and the Deep Web and DeepArcher in *Bleeding Edge* – Coffman points to the experience of ecologization in Pynchon's writing as related to awareness of the networked interconnection of the cultural, technological, and environmental as potentially operating on a cyclical and recuperative rather than a linear and wasteful basis.

Another analysis that emphasizes the political significance of images of networked interconnection in Pynchon is provided in the next chapter by Michael O'Bryan's "Pynchon and New Political Activisms." This essay builds on the political turn that has taken place in Pynchon studies over the past ten to twenty years to further clarify the significance of anarchism to the author's work. Via a discussion of the foundational political philosophies of Jacques Rancière (whose ideas have recently been critically recuperated and inform the political theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among others), O'Bryan asserts the political value, for Pynchon, of anarchism's emphasis on horizontal, decentralized, nonhierarchical and temporary forms of organization against the verticality inherent in a Marxism still considered within academic circles as "the" Leftist political form. The chapter proceeds to track alternating moments of hope and despair in *Vineland, Inherent Vice*, and *Bleeding Edge* around the potential for anarchist social movements to make an impact on the American political environment, arguing that the latter two novels, which were respectively published shortly prior to and shortly after a major moment for new anarchist network forms in movements like Occupy or those of the Arab Spring, provide very different perspectives on the new interaction of anarchism with internet technologies.

The final contribution to the "Politics" section of *The New Pynchon Studies* is Hanjo Berressem's chapter on "Threat and Crisis in Twenty-First-Century Pynchon," which posits that the author's fiction counterintuitively embraces crises as "moments of bifurcation" that open up new political potentialities, looking to the positive in even those crises that, like 9/11, are productive of a general desire for stability. While the West is currently experiencing a state of "permanent crisis" viewed negatively, Berressem argues that Pynchon's novels seem to recognize crisis as defined above as integral to all processes of change, and hence to life more broadly. The question is how we can live with this fact while becoming more aware of who profits from crisis points and how they