While Thomas Pynchon is usually described as an American author who primarily writes about American reality, *Planetary Pynchon: History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene* argues that his major novels, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*, can profitably be read as a global trilogy that presents a coherent historical account of how the emergence and spread of European modernity across the world have had devastating consequences for the planet and its inhabitants. This book sets a new agenda in Pynchon studies, charting his early anticipation of anthropocenic and planetary ideas, including globalization’s demand for constant growth. It combines close textual readings with broad perspectives on large thematic arcs and stylistic developments across Pynchon’s entire career as well as an extensive dialogue with the rich reception of his work.

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PLANETARY PYNCHON

History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene

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For Ane, and for Laura and Agnes
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Preface

The outlandish notion of time travel plays an important role in Thomas Pynchon’s longest novel, *Against the Day* (2006). Mysterious Trespassers claim to have returned to the novel’s present from the future, members of the Chums of Chance get a glimpse of the coming Great War from Dr. Zoot’s ramshackle time machine, and at the yearly International Conference on Time-Travel, Professor Heino Vanderjuice dreams of holding future conferences in the past: “because once time-travel is invented, you see, […] there’s nothing to keep us from going as far back as we like, and holding the Conferences then, even back when this was all prehistoric around here, dinosaurs, giant ferns, flammivomous peaks everywhere sort of thing….” (AtD 407). In Pynchon’s two other biggest novels, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), characters do not travel through time in the same direct fashion, but the novels themselves can easily be described as vast time-traveling devices that transport their readers to other periods, including the deep past: *Mason & Dixon* is mainly set in the second half of the eighteenth century, but the main characters find traces of a more distant past where an older race harvested gigantic vegetables; and while *Gravity’s Rainbow* is mostly concerned with the end of World War II, it brings us back to “the World just before men” where Titans ruled the land and nature was too “violently pitched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly” (GR 720).

Even while Pynchon’s three largest novels provide tantalizing glimpses of a distant, fertile past rife with titanic plant and animal species, they all evince a clear awareness that this superabundant natural era could not last. The giant ferns and mighty dinosaurs are “species we will never see again” (GR 166), and the only intact dinosaurs we actually encounter are located in an amusement park and constructed of steel-mesh (GR 421). Their organic predecessors have been extinct for eons and through the force of gravity transmuted into fossil layers, which humanity is now digging up and releasing into the atmosphere once again in the form of carbon dioxide.

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Pynchon and many of his characters are clearly aware of the shortsighted and harmful nature of this process: “Burning dead dinosaurs and whatever they ate ain’t the answer,” as the female Ätheronaut Viridian lectures Chick in Against the Day (AtD 1031). At the same time, Pynchon himself exhibits a marked impulse to dig through the many layers, not to gather fossil fuel but to lay bare the interwoven history of humanity and the planet. In more than one instance in Gravity’s Rainbow, the fossil layers are even compared explicitly with layers of history. Following a number of mystical visions, the character Lyle Bland “imagines that he has been journeying underneath history: that history is Earth’s mind, and that there are layers, set very deep, layers of history analogous to layers of coal and oil in Earth’s body” (GR 589). A very similar image appears earlier in the novel, in the oil city Baku, where we learn that it is “[t]ime for retrospection here, for refining the recent history that’s being pumped up fetid and black from other strata of Earth’s mind…” (GR 354). History is thus depicted as a series of strata – “epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city” (GR 167) – and a crucial ambition in Pynchon’s largest novels is to delve into these historical layers and make them come alive.

These unusual comparisons of history with fossil strata and Earth’s mind are evidence of Pynchon’s enduring interest in humanity’s long, fraught relation with the planet and of his unique ability to fuse wide-ranging ideas of history, ecology, and geology. This interest and this ability are most fully realized in his three longest novels, where they manifest themselves in remarkably similar ways. In fact, I will argue that Gravity’s Rainbow, Mason & Dixon, and Against the Day treat these overarching topics in so consistent and similar a fashion that the three novels should really be considered a trilogy, or one large megatext, whose central aim is to write the long, global history of humanity’s harmful impact on the planet and its various lifeforms. Furthermore, I will show that this ambitious novelistic project can best be understood in the light of recent concepts of the Anthropocene and planetarity, which it in significant ways prefigures.

Even though it contains many references to all of Pynchon’s novels and touches upon a wide range of different topics, this book is mostly concerned with the issues sketched above and how they are treated in Pynchon’s three largest novels. This is not to say that these topics are more important than the ones discussed in a number of other recent books on Pynchon, such as for instance gender or the counterculture. The research on the work of Thomas Pynchon is as rich and vital as ever, and the last ten to fifteen years have seen a slew of important books and articles...
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on his novels. Nevertheless, I believe that the story I aim to tell in *Planetary Pynchon* is an important one, which has not been told before, at least not as elaborately and coherently as I hope to do in this book.

The book draws on close to thirty years of research on and fascination with the work of Thomas Pynchon. I first read Pynchon in 1994 and have been doing so more or less continuously ever since. Vladimir Nabokov famously stated that a good reader is a re-reader, and a character in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* is of the opinion that “it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially” (29). When it comes to Pynchon’s novels, I – along with many others – have taken these statements to heart. One of my favorite descriptions of this tendency appears in Brian McHale’s *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992):

Pynchon, for me as for many other students of postmodernist literature, is like the episode of the looking-glass house from *Through the Looking-Glass*: try as one might to turn one’s back on him and walk away, one always ends up walking right in through his front door again anyway. (10)

I have had the same strange experience, and even though Pynchon himself is rarely to be found at home, I take comfort from the fact that there have always been plenty of other enthusiastic visitors to talk to. I can say without hesitation that the Pynchon community (sometimes derogatively called the Pyndustry, which would make us Pynheads, I suppose) is the nicest flock of academics I know of. The group is warm, inclusive, and characterized by a spirit of selfless cooperation. It holds a deep affection for Pynchon’s work, but unlike other more idolatrous communities, the affection is not untempered by a certain critical bite. Furthermore, the biennial International Pynchon Weeks are wonderfully unhierarchical: There are no keynote speakers, every paper is allotted the same amount of time, and young scholars are warmly welcomed, even while they are not overly coddled. Finally, the dress code at these events tends toward the more than casual (think Slothrop on the beach), and I always look forward to presenting my work in shorts to the attentive and generous audience at these conferences. It has been a privilege to be a part of this global community, and I want to thank its many members for the stimulating discussions that have sharpened my own understanding and appreciation of Pynchon’s work. Throughout the book I have done my best to acknowledge the arguments and astute readings of other scholars in the Pynchon community, but the existing research is so rich and varied that I have found myself in the same position as Enzian trying to include a more or less complete list of the things in the world in his song “Sold on Suicide”:
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The trouble with it is that by Gödel’s Theorem there is bound to be some item around that one has omitted from the list, and such an item is not easy to think of off the top of one’s head, so that what one does most likely is go back over the whole thing, meantime correcting mistakes and inevitable repetitions, and putting in new items that will surely have occurred to one. (GR 320)

I have tried to be as conscientious as possible, but I apologize in advance for any glaring omissions there might be.

I have strived to make Planetary Pynchon into a coherent whole with a clear progression rather than a loosely joined patchwork of previous arguments, but I want to acknowledge that parts of it are based on earlier articles and essays: Material from Chapters 1 and 3 first appeared in “Mapping the World: Thomas Pynchon’s Global Novels,” published in Orbit: A Journal of American Literature, vol. 4, issue 1 (2016), pp. 1–40. My discussion in Chapter 2 of Pynchon’s historiography partly draws on arguments from an early essay in Danish, “Mason & Dixon og 1700-tallet,” published in Frits Andersen, Ole Birklund Andersen, and Per Dahl (eds.), 1700-tallets litterære kultur (Aarhus University Press, 1999), pp. 174–202. Sections of my discussion of Pynchon’s style in Chapter 5 are based on my article “August Ampersands and Rude Manicules: Punctuation as Historical Method in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon,” in Elizabeth M. Bonapfel et al. (eds.), The Cambridge History of Punctuation in English Literature vol. 1–3 (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Parts of Chapter 6 appeared in “Back to Gondwanaland: Deep Time and Planetarity in Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow and Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” published in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, vol. 62, issue 1 (2021), pp. 97–111. I want to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of those earlier texts, and of the present book, who helped honing my arguments. Furthermore, I wish to thank the Carlsberg Foundation for the generous Monograph Fellowship that secured the continuous time and focus that enabled my completion of this book. Finally, I want to thank my wonderful wife, Ane, who has endured my Pynchon obsession through thirty years with vast patience. This book is dedicated to her. It is also dedicated to my two beloved daughters, Laura and Agnes: Discussions of planetarity and the Anthropocene often revolve around the children and future generations who will inherit the mess we have created. Therefore, this book is naturally also for them, and I hope that they will find it in better condition than the planet.
Note on the Texts

Parenthetical citations in this volume refer to the following first editions of Thomas Pynchon’s novels, using the abbreviations given.

V. (Lippincott, 1963), 492 pages V
The Crying of Lot 49 (Lippincott, 1966), 183 pages CL49
Gravity’s Rainbow (Viking, 1973), 760 pages GR
Slow Learner (Little, Brown, 1984), 193 pages SL
Vineland (Little, Brown, 1990), 385 pages VL
Mason & Dixon (Henry Holt, 1997), 773 pages MD
Against the Day (Penguin Press, 2006), 1,085 pages AtD
Inherent Vice (Penguin Press, 2009), 369 pages IV
Bleeding Edge (Penguin Press, 2013), 477 pages BE