

## In the Zone: Sovereignty and Bare Life in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Steven Weisenburger

Who or what are the political subjects of *Gravity's Rainbow*? Put differently: What defines the novel's represented humankind in their relations with modern states? Such relations always entail whether subjects are represented as having certain rights, privileges, and immunities, blessings hinging on whether one is a citizen or a non-citizen, always a matter of historical contingency. Those determinations of citizenship, especially in modernity, are further reckoned by the shifting identifications of race or ethnicity that sovereign powers use in legitimizing and conditioning the subjection of persons. This is Pynchon's great subject even from his earliest stories, especially when it involves how powers transform persons into stuff, into objects.

Consider the example of a passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* that one may well have read multiple times, but without much thoughtfulness—just another of Pynchon's laundry-lists, it seems. The scene unfolds shortly after the opening of episode twenty-five of Part Three, "In the Zone." Slothrop has just awakened in a village locksmith's somewhere near Rostock and, walking out the door dressed in Tchitcherine's Red Army uniform, he gazes over a landscape seemingly reverted to Viking times, a Europe with "no clear boundaries." Then begins this long catalogue:

The nationalities are on the move. It is a great frontierless streaming out here. Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what's forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenberg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniards, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pajamas, footsteps light as waterfowl's in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins

failing, horses dying, families leaving their vehicles beside the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, over the white hot Autobahns, trains full of their own hanging off the cars that lumber overhead, squeezing aside for army convoys when they come through, White Russians sour with pain on the way west, Kazakh ex-P/Ws marching east, Wehrmacht veterans from other parts of old Germany, foreigners to Prussia as any Gypsies, carrying their old packs, wrapped in the army blankets they kept, pale green farmworker triangles sewn chest-high on each blouse bobbing, drifting, at a certain hour of the dusk, like candleflames in religious procession—supposed to be heading today for Hannover, supposed to pick potatoes along the way, they've been chasing these nonexistent potato fields now for a month—"Plundered," a one-time bugler limps along with a long splinter of railroad tie for a cane, his instrument, implausibly undented and shiny, swinging from one shoulder, "stripped by the SS, Bruder, ja, every fucking potato field, and what for? Alcohol. Not to drink, no, alcohol for the rockets. Potatoes we could have been eating, alcohol we could have been drinking. It's unbelievable." "What, the rockets?" "No! The SS, picking potatoes!" Looking around for his laugh. (549)

Reading those lines invokes a familiar aesthetic experience. *Gravity's Rainbow* often gives the feeling that we are being buried under a rubble of words naming things, concepts, techniques, and peoples; words with no clear reason for being tumbled together and that challenge us therefore to seek meaningful order and readerly control, a task all the more vexing because Pynchon draws so many nouns from technical jargons, chronotopically specific slangs, as well as foreign languages. Now, while reading a text like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," having that kind of reading experience brings forth the new, variegated democratic body politic Whitman intended for us to celebrate. But what then shall we make of Pynchon's passage? It begins with the expelled ethnic Germans or "Volksdeutsch" trekking westward out of liberated Poland and it ends with the Wehrmacht soldier telling the bitter irony of his fellow refugees' collective starvation, then he waits in vain for them to reward his black humor with a "laugh." It is framed on one end by émigré Germans, on the other by German citizen-soldiers. Grammatically in between—set forward in a 370-word sentence that embodies an in-betweenness crucial thematically—are the *Reich's* former enemy aliens.

With their deep-set eyes and emaciated "white wrists and ankles," and in their "numb" and silent "drifting" on waves of "momenta" generated from somewhere deeper than any potential or actual "nationalities" signified in this catalog, Pynchon's refugees, denationalized families, former concentration camp inmates, and prisoners-of-war collectively represent the multitude of stateless persons streaming over occupied Europe in the months following V-E Day. What is their relation to those "Imperial" powers on whose cauldron-surface they drift? Put differently, what form of body politic might one's

reading bring forth from this text? The figures set before us in this passage are “white,” a sign that skin color alone cannot account for the ethno-racial marking of bodies that modern state powers have demonized and interned. So in this sentence their ethnic identities pile up like blasted bricks: Tosks, Ghegs, Vlachs. English-speaking readers might read such ugly, tongue-stopping monosyllabic proper nouns as exemplary “material typonyms,” what McHoul and Wills (53-61) define as post-rhetorical, semiotic prostheses for that which is absent but that could (or should) fill the space between western culture’s over-determined binaries: white and black, law and anarchy, and—especially in this passage—sovereign power and its subjects.

But here is a hitch in their approach. McHoul and Wills regard Pynchon’s practice as bringing forth the *positive* potentiality of critique to cleanse the “bad shit” of binary rhetorics by opening speech to formerly excluded middles. Yet the passage above implies that a sovereign authority has reckoned these persons through the lens of an ethnic type of humankind, and deployed the name for their kind within a mode of statecraft dedicated to their abjection, to the “bad shit” of their dehumanization. Thus they represent an excluded middle well along the way to becoming a midden, mere human trash. In fact, the grammatical subjects of this compound-complex sentence are represented as no longer standing in a relation of citizen-subjects to *any* sovereign power; the *Imperium* has abandoned them to what the text depicts as long and “deep” waveforms practically beyond reckoning, and according to whose inertias they are “supposed” to do this or that mindless labor. For sovereign authority still *needs* them after all, needs especially their reduction to menial, naked life; and needs them not only as slave labor but just thus, as an index of its total power. Historically grounded figures, still human but non-subjects vis-à-vis the state, these refugees represent a paradoxically included-excluded middle. Politically, they embody the staggering consequences of a modern biopower hell-bent on producing ever more of them. Alienated from homelands, banned from membership in a citizenry, denied the protective tent of any nation-state, and therefore beyond protection of constitutions and authorities warranting their claim on human rights, such persons figure a humanity apparently outside of the political yet posing the core political problematic of modernity.

This was Hannah Arendt’s thesis in her magisterial study of 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book whose chapters on statelessness most likely suggested some of those ethnic names to Pynchon (e.g. Arendt 354). Yet that discrete intertextual connection pales beside Arendt’s strong yet unrealized influence on *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a work of historical and political fiction. Especially significant I believe are Arendt’s claims about European colonialist outposts as seedbeds for the concentration camps, themselves understood as spaces for the manufacture of bare life—in all, a process and result vital to Pynchon’s novel. My own approach to Arendt is further indebted to her

contemporary Walter Benjamin as well as to more recent theorists of biopower and total sovereignty. The following paragraphs draw specifically from Michel Foucault's Collège de France lectures, and particularly from Giorgio Agamben's recent work on sovereignty's juridical bases, on the topology of the camp or zone, and on the juridical (non)status of persons captured in those spaces of abandonment.

Always lacking character names in *Gravity's Rainbow* and appearing most frequently in parts three and four, these figures of bare life have walk-on roles throughout Pynchon's novel. Yet even some of its major characters become stateless and rightless in the same sense, though under a more expansive sense of camp and zone. Take Leni and Ilse Pökler, for example, as well as Miklos Thanatz and the Schwarzkommando. Still more: what is Slothrop's Progress? Or the reader's? For we open the text in mid-December 1944 with "fantasist surrogate" Pirate Prentice dreaming that he is seated in the "velveteen darkness" of a railway car and surrounded by other London evacuees such as "derelicts," "drunks," "old veterans" and "exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone." Where is this train taking these passengers and why, as they "pass under archways," is their destination figured as "a judgment from which there is no appeal"? Indeed a judgment of dereliction seems to rest upon them all, Prentice included; in the post-Holocaust moment of this novel's writing, these figures seeming to have been "stacked" in the railcars imply a deeply ominous answer to our questions (3). Thus the Camp shadows things from the novel's beginning. And then at the last, as our reading approaches its terminus, in the "Orpheus Puts Down Harp" section of the final episode, our narrator represents just outside the windows of the "black Managerial Volkswagen" carrying Pynchon's thinly disguised Richard M. Nixon a host of countercultural "freaks . . . swarming in . . . in full disrespect for the Prohibitions," and showing most of all their disrespect for the sovereign Nixon (755-56). But "Relax," the Manager advises Richard M.: "There'll be a nice secure *home* for them all, down in Orange County. Right next to Disneyland" (756). So the *Konzentrationslager* stalks 1973 America as it goes global.

Why then has "The Zone" as chronotope of statelessness and bare life remained practically invisible to critical analyses even while it may be read as standing formally, thematically, and politically at the book's core? In a rare moment when criticism has verged on treating such matters, Stefan Mattesich in his 2002 study remarks that the Dora concentration camp "would seem to be a radical limit to Pynchon's strategies, the arrest or suspension of the joke." He further argues that "the holocaust is never submitted to its parodic mutations of form" and even remains an "exteriority or muted presence in the background" of *Gravity's Rainbow* (159).<sup>1</sup> While I agree that Pynchon suspends parody (but not irony) in treating holocaust subjects, I nonetheless find the camp-space and its modes of violence haunting the novel's foreground in

zones or spaces where invisible sovereign agencies have suspended law, where war's demands have been used to invoke a profound anomie whose instrumental purpose is the increased production of bare life. These zones of political action punctuate the entire novel. They are certainly *not* the topoi of chaos or even anarchy, *per se*. Only a too-limited definition of exterminationist holocaust violence—the Auschwitz model—stands in the way of one's recognizing the dire significances of these spaces in Pynchon's narrative, hence the novel's potentials for political critique, as even a cursory reading of Arendt would have suggested. Moreover, I find Pynchon's text generally quite self-conscious about just where, in relation to actual camp realities, it should suspend the wise guy narrative voice's jokes. At the end of that 370-word sentence, for example, those starving DP's don't give even a nervous laugh to the Wehrmacht soldier's black humor.

We should first be clear about what these zones *are not*. The irrepressibly nostalgic Tyrone Slothrop, for example, considers the Zone a space where, "maybe for a little while, all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up" (556). To him as to many others, the Zone symbolizes the seeming suspension of bad rhetorical binaries and the promise of a Return to primal homelands where some originary historical and cultural singularity might promise a *way out* of current political dilemmas. In sum, this passage (like many others in the novel) describes what we might name The Romantic Zone: a cleared ground blooming with chthonic potential, an atavistic yet opportunistic wilderness space where the individual subject and individualism itself seem sovereign.<sup>2</sup> "It's so *unorganized* out here," Geli Tripping tells Slothrop soon after he's entered the Occupied Zone of Europe. But the novel clearly represents that as a delusional view, as if persons like Geli were watching their own movie, grooving to some intersubjective fantasia. Slothrop, chief among them, imagines that he might be "as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days" (290–91), a fantasy of the self-reliant soul figured repeatedly in the novel's pop-cultural riffs; figured, as one song-lyric puts it, as a westwarding hero "Zoomin' through the Zone, where the wild dogs roam" (522). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, other instances of the Romantic Zone are the American southwest of fiction and film, the nineteenth century Argentine *Pampas* of the Martin Fierro epic (specifically, Fierro's first avatar, *before* he sells out to General Roca's Indian hunters); or the desert wastes of *Südwest Afrika*, where Lieutenant Weissman hunts Hereros; or the high deserts backgrounding Tchitcherine's sojourn in the "wild East" steppes of Kirghizstan.

In the novel's narrative trajectory, its plot, the point is that all such desiccating, bare spaces have been re-imported from far-flung colonial outposts back into Europe, into the homelands. Thus Margherita Erdmann

tells Slothrop that in northern Europe near the war's end, Blicero, having earlier brought his *Südwest*-style colonialism home to the Reich, now at War's end had transported her, like his other subjects, "across a frontier. He had injected me at last into his native space," a Teutonic and fascist chronotope in which, Greta concludes, "I was free. . . . I could do whatever I wanted" (487). Yet this zone for the free-play of romantic individuality also entails, as Slothrop learns from Ensign Morituri, a paradoxical "liberty" binding one to the *Reich's* work of hunting and murdering Jewish boys (477-78). The virus of total power having thus been "injected," re-imported to Europe and its subjects, it is (they are) legion. As are its agents, though Blicero stands for an extremity other colonists such as Mondaugen, Prentice, Tchitcherine, even good old Frans van der Groov may variously approach or reject. As his family name suggests, Weissman simply represents metonymically their white supremacist ideology taken to its logical exterminationist final solution.

So that we might be properly undeluded, *Gravity's Rainbow* typically inscribes signs of domination and extermination either within or immediately adjacent to scenes of the Romantic Zone. Just before Geli Tripping's remarks about the Zone's "unorganized" and liberating spatiality, for example, Slothrop notices emaciated old refugees flitting nearby, along with former Dora camp "slave laborers" and homosexual inmates still wearing "175 badges" on the chests of their camp pajamas (289). With such instances of total dominion thus stalking the edges of perception, the incisive question is: How are the apparatchiks of absolute sovereignty served by such romantic fantasies? Late in part 4, the narration says of Gottfried that he "believes he exists *for Blicero* . . . that in the new kingdom they pass through now, he [Gottfried] is the only other living inhabitant" (721). And this passage further illustrates precisely what Arendt and then Agamben, fifty years later in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, define as the apotheosis of the slave's or camp inmate's mentality: a person inculcated with and disciplined to the perverse belief that submissive abjection constitutes his proper and just condition, and ultimately that his transformation into what Arendt names "inanimate man" (569) and Agamben the *homo sacer*, will join one to something singular and transcendent. In Gottfried's case, the narrative represents this fantasy as growing from Blicero's schooling the boy in late-romantic *Jugendstil* fantasies of the solitary *Wandervogel* alone in his mountain wilderness, precisely the anti-industrial ideology encapsulated by Rilke's lyrics yet made to serve the project of this boy's total *immachination*.

In a telling observation, Agamben warns that the spaces sovereignty carves out during colonialist adventuring as well as during emergencies and wars must never be mistaken for some originary, preromatic state in which a fullness of executive power seemingly anterior to law enacts all by itself the functions normally reserved to other governmental branches. He shows that all such spaces are always already coded into law as emergency powers, the

“state of exception.” Hence any belief that they are just returning power to its full and originary juridical condition amounts to nothing other than “a legal mythologeme analogous to the idea of a state of nature” (*State of Exception* 6). As a particular chronotope of state power, the Romantic Zone constitutes the sort of myth that will, we are told in one of Pynchon’s moments of second-person address, make “you lindy-hop into the pit by millions, as many millions as necessary” (472).

Pynchon shares with Arendt and Benjamin a critical (and in his case, satirical) rejection of the Romantic chronotope. The Zone is for him, as for Arendt, always historically contingent; and ever since *V.* he has taken pains to depict accurately the Germans’ inaugural *Konzentrationslager* in Southwest Africa, just as in *Gravity’s Rainbow* he further details the Dora camp. Represented in Part 3 as a space to contain and regulate the flows and labors of stateless persons, the Zone unfolds more generally in the novel as the topology within which late-modern biopolitics demolishes individuality and realizes its deepest desires for control and dominion. It is the space wherein sovereignty denationalizes and denaturalizes the subject, then achieves its abject devolution, transforming the human into a laboring machine until, its productivity exhausted, comes the time for its extermination. The novel also represents the global extension of such spaces. The “White Visitation,” so aptly named, constitutes a kinder, gentler version of The Zone, especially as it supports Edward Pointsman’s Pavlovian conditionings, a topic I want to pick up momentarily. Related to the White Visitation: that Harvard lab where Dr. Jamf evidently conditioned Infant Tyrone’s penis. The Kamikaze training facility in wartime Japan (690-91) may be read as an Asian cultural variant on the same structure. Back in northern Germany, the Dora KZ-lager clearly epitomizes such a space at the exterminationist extreme. But then there is Zwölfkinder, a mirror-image of Dora (call it a ZK-lager), yet a Zone that a society of the spectacle sets aside for the “leisure for torturing” with agonies of incest “a minor engineer” like Franz Pökler (431). Zwölfkinder even features a mock “African desert” where, “every two hours exactly the treacherous natives attacked an encampment of General Von Trotha’s brave men in blue” (422)—a reminder that all of the novel’s colonial territories in South America, Southwest Africa, Soviet Central Asia, and even Franz van der Groov’s island of Mauritius, constitute such a Zone. On Mauritius, they hunted Dodoes to extinction, but in Argentina, General Roca campaigned “to open the pampas by exterminating the people who live there, turning the villages into labor camps” (387). In Südwest Afrika, Von Trotha’s soldiers hunted the Herero nearly to extinction, while “the rest were used like animals” (323) in *Konzentrationslager* virtually invented by those “brave men in blue.” In Kirghizstan, Russian colonists “hunted Sarts, Kazakhs and Dungens . . . like wild game. Daily scores were kept . . . [while] their names, even their numbers, were lost forever” (340). These are the principal colonial spaces where the

novel represents technocratically sponsored biopower hard at work, each one a seed-crystal for the exterminationist logic of biopower reimported to Europe during the twentieth century, as Arendt had argued. Back home they assume a myriad of avatars: for example, Gerhardt von Göll's movie-sets and film work, with their extraordinary uses of sadomasochism. Indeed, sadomasochism appears throughout the novel as an allegory of fascist sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

As a mode of biopower, this topology of dominion must finally be inscribed on bodies and programmed in mentalities. Slothrop, remarks Sir Marcus Scammony at the close of Part 3, was first sent out in the Zone "to destroy the blacks"; indeed as a kind of terminator robot he was, says Marcus, "a good try at a moderate solution" to the Herero Problem (615). As an instrument of state power, Slothrop's body reproduces at a micro-level the spatial logics of Imperialism. With his well-conditioned cock working "like an instrument installed, wired by them into his body as a colonial outpost" (285), and thus with his penis programmed to signify in the "kingly voice of the [A-4 rocket] itself" (470), it should have taken Allied powers straight to the quintuple zero rocket and the Herero who seek its duplication. By the end of Part 3, however, Slothrop's constant sidetrackings, his "mindless pleasures," have demonstrated that, in the words of Sir Marcus, "it's obvious . . . he won't do the job" (615). By novel's end he's become a hunted prey like those Hereros and Kazakhs, just another instance of naked life to be "broken down instead, and scattered." It's a plotline for which, our narrator remarks, "there ought to be a punch line . . . but there isn't" (738).

Aside from these functions of control and extermination, Pynchon is also quite specific about the form of politics emerging from the Zone. In a telling remark at the end of Part 3, set on a Lüneberg Heath where the streaming of "skeleton-functional" refugees (611) is punctuated by well-fed Soviet and American rocket and Herero hunters, our narrator frets over the fate of a makeshift DP village amalgamating "A dozen [former] nationalities." Considering its hybridity and spontaneity he wonders, with an eye on coming repressions, just what the Zone's new authorities will "think of such a community like this in the middle of their garrison state?" (613). Will such groups "crystallize into sects," eliminating themselves through infighting; or will it be necessary "to send in combat troops" (614)? Thus even beyond May 8<sup>th</sup>, as Pynchon writes elsewhere, The War as sovereignty's ultimate, state-of-exception logic continues the work of subjection in new guises, continues especially as a series of police actions revealing how "truce" was merely a dissimulating public ritual.

This realization—or rather, *prediction*—of the total state's perpetuation of "emergency" was a principle thesis of sociologist Harold Lasswell's influential 1941 essay, whose title first introduced to political theory the concept of "The Garrison State." Lasswell realized even before the United States had joined



the conflict that world powers had entered an age of permanent strife in which militarized modern states, including western democracies, would radically revise and extrapolate the monarchical/imperial form of sovereignty. Looking to the garrisoned territories of colonial empires, Lasswell theorized a new “national security state” whose driving needs are a ceaseless defense posture combined with aggressive expansion. This new polity would synthesize the industrial state, operating on a basis of contract, with the military state that operates according to coercion. Lasswell’s garrison state would centralize government bureaucracies, create a universally regulated, military-driven economy, and establish state-monopolization over all means of coercion including police power and “compulsory labor camps” (460), an effort requiring especially the expertise of elite industrial managers capable of fully rationalizing production and effectively deploying materials and forces. Wimpe, the IG Farben agent or *Verbindungsman*, catches the essence of Lasswell’s argument when he looks out over The Zone with Tchitcherine and prophesizes to his communist counterpart that “our little chemical cartel is the model for the very structure of nations” emerging from the War (349). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, chemical cartelization and Rocket manufacturing are models of this synthesis, and the Zone is precisely the “cauldron” out of which this newly synthesized, post-imperialist state emerges. Twenty years to the month after Lasswell’s essay, in his Presidential Farewell Address of 1961, Ike Eisenhower warned against this synthesis, under the now-familiar rubric of the “military-industrial complex.”

This emergent corporatized power has little to do with traditional forms of sovereignty and explains why the figures of Churchill, Truman, and Stalin appear in *Gravity’s Rainbow* only as simulacra: as enormous chromolithographs decorating Berlin’s Potsdamerplatz (373), or—still more satirically—as figures on “square after square” of toilet paper on board the *Anubis*, each decorated “with caricatures of Churchill, Eisenhower, Roosevelt” (450). Pynchon’s text thus understands all too well the ways that heads of state in late-modernity merely encapsulate, or may just dissimulate, sovereignty’s real workings. In fact, I think this is just where Arendt’s 1951 study offers so much, when read alongside Pynchon’s novel. Her principal goal was to rebut claims that, after all, concentration camps were superfluous because unnecessary strategic facets of Nazi totalitarianism. And she accomplishes this aim first by leaving almost entirely aside the figures of Hitler and Goebbels and then by arguing that the camps must be seen as forms of bureaucratized sovereign power developed in European colonies, particularly those in South Africa, then imported back home. “Continental Imperialism” is her term for this return, which answered the problem of European “Minorities” left uprooted after World War I. Then examining how the major continental powers all moved to denationalize their own minority populations in the 1920s and ‘30s, Arendt narrates how the re-importation, especially from Africa, of colonialist white supremacy

served the project of legitimizing not only the newly imposed statelessness of Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies, but of deploying “race” as *the core issue* of post-Great War power struggles. As a prescient early example, Arendt points to the 1922 decision by French authorities to garrison the occupied Rhine River zone with twenty-thousand black troops imported from Africa, forces intended to humiliate German racial sensibilities as well as to remind them of their lost colonies in the *Südwest*—a moment Pynchon mentions in the text (377). More importantly, the power to denationalize whole populations implied a state structure which, Arendt argues, even if it were not yet a fully totalitarian garrison state, had already constituted itself around the essential operating principal of such a state. Denationalization and forced emigration demonstrated that not only in times of war, but even during a supposed peacetime, the rights of legalized citizens could be zeroed-out. The camps, Arendt argues, were thus not only spaces for quarantining newly rootless former citizens but also for making the state of exception permanent and for realizing the principle that stateless persons (in her words) “belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to humans” (582). Arendt variously names these inmates “living corpses” or “inanimate man” (569), apt synonyms for what Agamben, using Roman juridical discourse, terms *homines sacri*: the being who cannot be sacrificed to divinities because he bears within him no human spark of transcendence, and who may therefore be killed with impunity because he lacks that human spark. The *homo sacer* is, therefore, just that form of humanity against whom all citizens are sovereign like their emperor, in being authorized to eliminate the *homo sacer* by whatever means: exclusion, enslavement, incarceration, or mass murder.

Arendt analyzes how realizing this form of the total state necessarily entailed a vast bureaucratization of power, when managers inevitably rationalized the instrumental value of “inanimate man.” His necessary “devolution” as camp inmate would suit him perfectly to the work of enslaved labor, she recognizes; and here Arendt makes a move that must have resonated deeply with Pynchon. As she puts it, in realizing the devolution of inmates the camps constituted a “ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something even animals are not; for Pavlov’s dog, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang” (565). In the last chapters of *Origins* Arendt returns repeatedly to the trope of Pavlov’s dog as exemplary case of the total state’s desire, as she puts it later in the book, to mobilize on behalf of the military-industrial complex great masses of men constituted as “bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way” (587).

Indeed I think that, when read alongside *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* must be seen as seminally important to the political subjects of Pynchon’s novel. *Origins* yielded up a host of minor as well as

certain major figurations for Pynchon's great story, from its lists of stateless refugees in the Occupied Zone of 1945, to the 1922 *SCHWARTZE BESATZUNG AM RHINE* (327) allusion, and even the all-important trope of Pavlovian-style pseudo-sciences of control. More significantly, Arendt's core analysis of the Third Reich's re-importation of colonialist domination and how that promoted both a white supremacist ideology and a vast bureaucratized project for the ever-expanding sovereign production of *homines sacri*, offers a cognitive map for reading many of the novel's essential plot moves: its analepses to colonial territories as well as its many excursions into operant conditioning and the full immachination of the human subject, to mention the most obvious.

Finally, too, I think Pynchon's novel joins hands with Arendt's text in another critical respect. She concludes her study with a warning that statelessness, the space of the Camp or Zone, and extermination are all realizations of a new mode of total sovereignty, a corporatized garrison state likely (in Arendt's concluding phrasing) "to stay with us from now on" (616). *Gravity's Rainbow* shares this dark pessimism, despite or perhaps even because of what is represented by the humorous movie-theater hand-holding and blithe yet mechanically orchestrated chorus of its closing page.

These stark forecasts of Arendt and Pynchon are important just now, when thinkers are predicting that a rapidly globalizing capitalism ultimately spells the demise of sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> Yet Arendt's and Pynchon's historical masterworks insist that capitalism is like the transmission linked to the engine of sovereignty, which together drove events through epochs of colonialism and cartelization. The question today is whether those epochs have ended, or merely morphed. Pynchon clearly represents the latter interpretation. Like Arendt (and others), Pynchon's novel represents statelessness and camp existence in terms of a topological paradox which continues to function as the axle of state power. Again: in exchange for his merely nominal representation within the order of the human, *homo sacer* pays by being totally stripped of *any* symbolic representation. Thus Arendt's understanding of such persons as being reduced to existence on a sort of sub-psychological plane is telling; indeed, it tells why Slothrop is eliminated from the aesthetic form representing him.

Analogous to Slothrop's representational zeroing-out, the ever-expanding multitudes of *homines sacri* streaming within the twenty-first-century global marketplace spell the expulsion of entire constituencies from politics as such, and now in exponentially rising numbers that need have nothing any longer to do with ethno-racial identities. Not even whiteness, as we noted from Pynchon's long sentence, offers a sure sanctuary. This is precisely why camps threaten to proliferate outside the one-way windows of Richard M.'s aptly selected *Volkswagen*, as it leaves behind the Watts ghetto for the Los Angeles suburbs. Indeed, those satirical scenes put the sharp accent on liberalist political economies as the new, post-war sovereigns of The Zone. Such representations point out how, these days, the still-increasing

global production of *homines sacri* or “surplus humanity” in second- and third-world exurban slums follows directly—as Mike Davis’s recent *Planet of Slums* so powerfully demonstrates—from the collusion of global businesses, transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and neoliberal political economies such as the United States or the European Union.<sup>5</sup>

When we look closely, *Gravity’s Rainbow* reveals its grasp on that collusion, which originated during the 1950s and ’60s. In the novel, whenever Pynchon capitalizes the word “State” it is because he intends to specify a similar transnational sovereign entity wielding ultimate powers over natural dominions and human life and death, powers reserved traditionally to kings and presidents. Often his usage points unequivocally to emerging, multiplexed global interests, in phrases like “corporate State” (419) or “a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome” (566). Moreover, Pynchon consistently ascribes to these new corporate powers expansionist, post-colonialist desires extending beyond the animate and into the inanimate. Thus Laszlo Jamf lectures students at the *Technische Hochschule* against covalent bonding, against the weak sovereignty of organic syntheses, and ultimately for the replacement of Carbon by Silicon—all occurring in what Franz Pöckler envisions as “a Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power” (577-78). Developing Imipolex-G as an electrically responsive prosthetic skin for purposes of control, instrumentalizing the “consciousness of rock,” or even colonizing the Moon each illustrates this broader thematic, involved finally with the corporate-technological elimination of Nature as last remaining ground of singularity and mystery. Or, as a last hope for justice.

One recurring allusion in Pynchon’s work is to a paragraph from an 1878 Ralph Waldo Emerson essay entitled “The Sovereignty of Ethics.” At a key moment in *Vineland* the passage is quoted at length, a replay of it after a more veiled usage in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. There it’s used to introduce a “balancing” act of justice ostensibly visited on Lyle Bland for having called upon “machineries committed to injustice as an enterprise” (580) in the plot to sell Infant Tyrone into the bondage of his operant conditioning. The Emerson essay recycles familiar themes from the breadth of American romanticism, as he poses in the place of divine justice a wellspring of balancing forces in Nature, imagined as source of a “latent omniscience not only in every man but in every particle” (175). This organic omniscience invests all natural being with sovereign powers to rectify Evil. For Emerson, indeed, Nature’s beneficent sovereignty was ultimately attested in the history of warfare, from “Savage war” that gives way to strife predicated on “limitations and a code,” thus to yield in a utopian twentieth century “the finer quarrel of property, where the victory is wealth and the defeat of poverty” (179). I have argued that *Gravity’s Rainbow* militates against this dream. The rise of a fully corporatized garrison state, its

deployments of biopower, and finally its extensions of this instrumentalizing sovereignty over all of Nature, including atomic particles whose detonation haunts the novel . . . all of this attests to the fully realized, ghastly sovereignty of Dominus Blicero—a stubborn survivor and clandestine immigrant to corporate, post-war America, and himself a symptom we ought not forget, for he reminds us how the romance of capital rendered “Nature” a ravaged husk.

No more can “Nature” save us. Romantic fantasies of all-powerful sovereign subjects still plague political thought, both then, during the Vietnam era when *Gravity’s Rainbow* was written, and as we read it now, while another US executive tries to prop up a sovereign state—another bloody fantasia that might be entitled *Die Weise Sandwüste von Iraq*, with race and ethnicity yet again haunting the spectacle.<sup>6</sup> One reason, then, why *Gravity’s Rainbow* stakes its claim to enduring significance is that Pynchon so powerfully identifies and satirizes this persistent, essential paradox of modern statecraft: politics churn out ever-greater masses of non-political subjects. Nations have become machines for making ever more bare life. What Walter Benjamin wrote in 1942, as challenge to his own political thought, remains just as immanent today: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that accords with this fact” (qtd. in Agamben, *State of Exception* 57).

Death rules. “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.”

—Southern Methodist University, Dallas

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Khachig Tölölyan was the first to treat the Camps at any extent; in “War as Background in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” To date however, the most historically well informed and theoretically careful treatment of the figure of the Camp in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the essay by Luc Herman and Bruno Arich-Gerz, work that shows the closeness of Pynchon’s research on that Nordhausen KZ-Lager.

<sup>2</sup> See also the remarks of Der Springer, filmmaker Gerhardt von Göll, to the Argentine anarchist Squalidozzi: “I can take down your fences and your labyrinth walls. I can lead you back to the Garden you hardly remember” (383).

<sup>3</sup> Consider especially Miklos Thanatz’s ruminations on how state power regulates sado-masochism because it “needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away” (731). On masochism in its relations to nostalgia, sentimentality, and the political see Attewell (esp. 38-43).

<sup>4</sup> See for example the 2005 special issue of *Foreign Policy* devoted to sovereignty’s reputed demise. In general, the approaches of historians and policy experts range from the argument of J. L. Gaddis that the only essential change in the mode of sovereignty during an age of counter-terrorism is that the principle of the absolute sanctuary of

an executive or of individual groups within the borders of a nation-state has been evacuated; to the call by Hardt and Negri for an eviscerated sovereignty that would yield to a constituent democracy. In between these poles, the research Nordstrom has reported in her essay is especially interesting for how she describes transnational flows of capital and persons, occurring wholly outside the authority of international law and amounting to shadow sovereignties that effectuate the needs and policies of global conglomerates, even to the extent of sponsoring private, mercenary armies and of putting themselves in the service of traditionally constituted sovereign states.

<sup>5</sup> See also David Harvey, who argues that since 1970 the deeply authoritarian, antidemocratic regimes propped up by first world powers together mask the "highly racialized" (202) nature of poverty and disfranchisement with "utopian rhetoric" (203).

<sup>6</sup> On the intersections of race, sovereignty, and the masking of U.S. proto-fascism see my essay "Faulkner in Baghdad."

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