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# “A Temporary Dormitory for Those Who Had Nowhere to Stay”:

Undocumented Voices and Temporal Land Solidarity in *Vineland*

**Yuki Enomoto**

## Introduction

Thomas Pynchon creates an anarchistic and chaotic space, the “zone,” in his most celebrated mega-novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). He also depicts a kind of utopian space, “Shanbara” in his volume novel *Against the Day* (2006), and he expresses a cyberspace, “Deep Archer” in his latest work *Bleeding Edge* (2013). In addition, his fourth novel, *Vineland* (1990), foregrounds a hybrid, ambiguous space between life and death in Vineland, a fictional city in Northern California. In many fictional works about the United States, California is the goal of the protagonist’s process or trip. In other words, California is the end of the space, the end of the journey, the end of the end.

Pynchon published *Gravity’s Rainbow* in 1973. This mega-novel was awarded the National Book Award, identifying Pynchon as one of the greatest postmodern writers in the United States. However, after this honor, Pynchon was silent for many years. Then, seventeen years later, in 1990, his next work was finally published—*Vineland*.

*Vineland* is not that difficult to understand. Compared to Pynchon’s other novels, such as *V.* (1963), *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Vineland* is not complicated; it is not a fictional labyrinth. However, the work has received less critical acclaim than his other publications. The early reviews of *Vineland* are not positive; this is well-known in studies of Pynchon’s works. For example, Brad Leithauser says that “[i]n view of our expectation the book is a disappointment” (7), and J. O. Tate regards the novel as a “bore and a chore” (9). Edward Mendelson, one of the most important postmodern critics, who described *Gravity’s*

*Rainbow* as an “encyclopedic novel” drawing on James Joyce’s work, ironically compares *Vineland* to a kind of “catalogue of pop culture” (40). However, Salman Rushdie, the British writer of magical realism, has a different view of *Vineland*:

Vineland, Mr. Pynchon’s mythical piece of northern California, is, of course, also “Vinland,” the country discovered by the Viking Leif Ericsson long before Columbus. It is “Vinland the Good”: that is to say, this crazed patch of California stands for America itself. And it is here, to Vineland, that one of America’s great writers has, after long wanderings down his uncharted roads, come triumphantly home. (Rushdie 1)

In this quote, “Vinland the Good” is a reference to the mythical, utopian land of Vineland in Northern California. Vineland recalls the Norse myth of Vinland, discovered by the Viking Leif Erikson before Columbus arrived in North America. Rushdie uses “Vinland the Good,” this utopian phrase, to favorably describe Pynchon’s return to his homeland of America. Rushdie adds:

Thomas Pynchon is no sentimentalist, however, and the balance between light and dark is expertly held throughout this novel, so that we remain uncertain. And we are left, at the last, with an image of such shockingly apt moral ambiguity that it would be quite wrong to reveal it here. (Rushdie 1)

As this quote implies, the counterculture of the 1960s has an ambiguous relationship with the struggle of the United States under Reagan as Nemesis in the 1980s. Rushdie describes this conflict as “moral ambiguity.” But then Rushdie sums up the most fascinating point of this work: “And most interesting of all this is that the aforementioned hint of redemption, because this time entropy is not the only counterweight to power; community, it is suggested, might be another, and individuality, and family” (Rushdie 1). Here, it is not impossible to understand that Rushdie regards “the power of community, individuality, and family” as the most effective counterforce to the oppression of the United States of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

With Rushdie’s insightful, hopeful reading as a springboard, this paper will explore

the solidarity of place in *Vineland*. Thus, this essay emphasizes that community in *Vineland* is not merely a tightly knit community that can be easily politicized, but also a place that contains racial and ethical others and a past that cannot be optimistically historicized—thus, a land that coexists with ghosts. In addition, as we focus on the ethical possibilities with others, we can see, as a final goal, the possibility of the land’s solidarity, including a kind of moral difficulty.

### **1. Promises and Betrayal and Light and Darkness in California**

In their introduction to *Pynchon’s California*, Scott McClintock and John Miller describe the cultural meaning of California in American literature:

The idea that California holds out a promise of reinvention, of second chances, of alternative native lifestyles is a cultural stereotype; and the betrayal of that promise has become a literary convention, most distinctly articulated in the “noir” stance from the 1930s fiction of Cain, Chandler, Himes, and others, and the Hollywood wood fiction of Fitzgerald, West, and Schulberg. (3)

Here, it is significant that the land promising a second chance and an alternative lifestyle can also betray that promise. Ironically, the promise can be violated whenever it is spoken. *Vineland* also highlights the theme of betrayal in the behaviors of the main characters.

For example, the ex-hippie musician Zoyd Wheeler pretends to be mentally ill so he can receive money from the government to support himself and his daughter. Zoyd’s dependent relationship with the government is, in a sense, a betrayal of countercultural ideals of the 1960s that criticize and attack the established regime. Frenesi Gates is another example of a character who betrays the cultural and political ideals of the 1960s. Frenesi, a member of the countercultural film group 24-fps, surveys the revolutionary student community, the Rock and Roll Republic, that is active at South California University. Frenesi develops an intimate relationship with Wheed Artman, a leader of the community, who is also a professor at the university. However, Frenesi also has a secret bond with the wicked federal agent Brock Vond, who finally exposes the corruption of the Rock and Roll Republic. Frenesi’s betrayal

destroys the hope of a revolution. In this work, promises and their betrayal are ambivalent and inextricably linked, drifting through the air like echoes.

The betrayal discourse can also be observed in the national imagination. As Shawn Smith points out in “Simulated History” in *Pynchon and History*, the alternative origins of a nation such as Vineland inevitably echo imperial discourses, such as the idea of manifest destiny (98). As we know, America repeatedly rules the innocent, utopian land. So, the Vineland that Pynchon depicts here is dominated by America’s imperialist destiny. The continuous and repeated imperial history of the United States has no outsides and no path—this is the problem that *Vineland* addresses.

Next, let us observe how the landscape of Vineland is depicted in this work. Pynchon depicts the landscape of Vineland as multi-layered and multi-historical. The fictional land Vineland, which is located in Northern California, was originally habituated by a Native American tribe called the Yurok. As the narrator explains, a document written about the land by a white tourist describes Vineland as a mysterious place, “a harbor of refuge.” In Vineland, the legacy of the Great Depression can still be seen: “being graceful examples of the concrete Art Deco bridges built all over the Northwest by the WPA. During the Great Depression”; there is also “a tall power-plant stack” emitting smoke that often brings rain. Beyond that, there are “wood Victorian houses,” and “postwar prefab ranch and split-level units, little trailer parks, lumber units, little trailer parks, lumber-baron floridity, New Deal earnestness,” and “a black fence that stood off to the side.” In addition, “[t]he federal building, jaggedly faceted, obsidian black, standing apart” was, as Zoyd’s friend Van Meter says, “built overnight.” Zoyd fears that this land will, like other lands, become a “Vineland megalopolis...[b]ut for now the primary sea coast, forests, riverbanks and bay were still not much different from what early visitors in Spanish and Russian ships had seen.” This is also where “the Yurok and Tolowa people” lived. Furthermore, “the light in these pictures could be seen even today in the light of Vineland, the rainy indifference with which it fell on surfaces.” The narrator also calls the land “territories of the spirit.” This representational and visualized history of the landscape reminds the reader of what has happened to Vineland. And, as the last of multiple layers, there is the present Vineland Zoyd sees now—in this work, the land is a medium of memory that still retains traces of the past.

On the other hand, Vineland is also a space of “transition”; all kinds of buildings and

infrastructures have been created one after another. It is a continuum of domination; the ruler of the space has shifted his authority from Native American to Puritan to modern American. In other words, the utopian hope represented by light and the dystopian despair illustrated by transition coexist simultaneously.

The federal office building, which Van Meter describes as having been “built overnight,” exemplifies a landscape that shifts with dizzying speed, such that one recognizes the change only after it has occurred. Certainly, Vineland’s light paradoxically embodies the unchanging slowness that contrasts with these quick transitions, but the reader’s attention is also drawn to the existence of darkness that the light cannot dispel. How, then can we see the true shape of this darkness? I believe that this darkness is nothing other than voices.

## 2. The Poetry of Historical Voices

In this work, native people are not depicted or visualized, but they are heard. Certainly, the Puritan settlement plays an extremely important role in this history of domination. However, this novel identifies the Yurok, a Native American tribe that is neither Puritan nor Spanish Catholic, as the “first settlers.” Before the arrival of the Yurok, this place was inhabited by small dwarf spirits called Woge. But when the Yurok arrived, the Woge disappeared: “Before the influx, the Woge withdrew” (186). And it was the Yurok who moved in to take their place—but they, too, are no longer here. They no longer have a material, physical presence in Vineland, but their voices are still present. The Yurok people are often depicted as a ghostly presence or as spirits inhabiting the river. And at the end of the story, what appears to be the Yurok exacts revenge on the evil federal agent Brock Vond by forcing him to cross the river (the other side of the world is called “the third world”) by pulling out his bones. This scene emphasizes that “the voice echoes forever.” Why, then, did Pynchon depict this dark history as embodied in a voice?

Although it is rarely included in analyses of *Vineland*, Pynchon wrote a review of García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* for the *New York Times Review* in 1988, two years before the publication of *Vineland*. In this article, Pynchon describes an episode in García Márquez’s childhood: his grandmother told him a story similar to Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis.” Pynchon describes Márquez’s style, magical realism, as “the presence of

the grandmotherly voice.” Needless to say, Márquez’s grandmother is not present in *Cholera*. In other words, this “grandmotherly” voice is the medium through which something that is not supposed to be present, or that has been snatched away, is made manifest or magnified. In his review of *Cholera*, Pynchon comments that “flying old man” and the “talking dead,” which were so striking in Márquez’s masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, appear less frequently in *Cholera*. Regarding this change, Pynchon writes:

...at the edge of the Caribbean, the history of the individual dead, or rather those who could not speak, or those who spoke but were not heard, or those who were heard but were not recorded, haunts the shores of the Caribbean. And this is the “consensus of reality” of those who live there. (47)

In this review, Pynchon finds the literary significance of *Cholera* in the poetry of voices that are rooted in the land. This theme of “voices that are rooted in the land” is further explored in *Vineland*.

*Vineland* also illustrates the lives of those who are oppressed by irrational violence. One of these is Frenesi’s grandfather, Jess Travers. He used to run a forestry business, but he became dissatisfied with the ill treatment of forestry workers, including himself, and tried to form a workers’ union. However, Scantling, the president of the forestry association, does not take kindly to this and arranges for a tree to fall on him, paralyzing Jess from the waist down. However, Jess’s is accidentally and mysteriously avenged when a truck carrying a piece of wood collides head-on with Scantling. At the end of the book, Jess Travers, who has lived such a life, makes a speech at the outdoor party hosted by the Travers family deep in the forest of Vineland:

Where Jess and Eula sat together, each year smaller and more transparent, waiting for Jess’s annual reading of a passage from Emerson he’d found and memorized years ago, quoted in a jailhouse copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James Frail as the fog of Vineland, in his carrying, pure voice, Jess reminded them, “Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors

and monopolists of the world in vain set their Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.” He had a way of delivering it that always got them going, and Eula wouldn’t take her eyes off him. “And if you don’t believe Ralph Waldo Emerson,” added Jess, “ask Crocker ‘Bud’ Scantling.” (*Vineland* 369)

Of course, the quote from Emerson effectively clarifies Jess’s justification of this retribution, but, in fact, the performative aspect of this discourse is more important than the content of Emerson’s lecture. First, as Jess says, this is not a direct quote from Emerson’s work. The quote is from William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902); James quotes Emerson, and Jess quotes James. This second repetition of Emerson’s/James’s written words is presented in Jess’s voice. Then, his wife Eula is drawn to her husband’s voice. It is not just the literary content of Emerson’s/James’s words that Eula is clearly moved by. What is significant here is that the voice makes it possible to superimpose one’s own existence on the words of others, even while maintaining the otherness of the words. The audience can see the ghostly presence of Emerson and James behind these words, but they can also hear them as words about the life of an old man, Jess, apart from the author’s original intention. In other words, through this repetition of words in the speaker’s own voice, the words create multilayered discourse spaces.

In Pynchon’s work, the theme of voices may not seem like a new topic. For example, as Hanjo Berressem and others have pointed out, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) highlights the “cry” of the auctioneer, as the title suggests, and in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon says, “Screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (1). The aural quality of the “screaming” of the V-2 rocket, which exceeds the speed of sound, determines the symbolic aesthetic of the work, which propagates beyond meaning. However, these works refer only to sounds. In contrast, *Vineland* highlights the voices of the people who speak. We can see a shift from an emphasis on the aesthetics of sound to the poetry of undocumented historical voices.

In the party scene in “The Traverse Family Summer Gathering,” “oppressive American history” is spun by voices as nameless generations of participants from nowhere whisper to each other: “A Traverse grandmother somewhere was warning Children against the October



blackberries of this coast”; “skeptical adolescents weaved in her voice’s spell”; “and other grandfolks could be heard arguing” (371). The conspiracy theory that emerges from the accumulation of these generations of voices is ultimately presented in the following way:

One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began—some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia—Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remotenesses of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (*Vineland*, 372)

This “last unfaceable American secret,” a political history of darkness that evades the direct gaze, is created by the whispering of “generations of voices.” The political history of darkness, which seems to block direct view (“unfaceable”), permeates the land, the leaves and trees, and the depths of the earth with many different voices. Here, we can see the peculiar spatiality of this work, as if the history of darkness, which is never recorded, is, in the form of these voices, collected into the earth and woven into its depths.

Pynchon analyzed García Márquez’s literariness in terms of the history of Caribbean lands, but the voice of the conspiracy that *Vineland* tries to tell here is also assimilated with the voiced memories that lie deep in the land. In other words, when the voices tell the history, it is the place of *Vineland* that records these undocumented pasts. Then, what kind of community do the characters build in *Vineland*, a place where ghostly voices float around?

### **3. Solidarity of Place: “A Temporary Dormitory for Those Who Had Nowhere to Stay”**

Zoyd and Frenesi’s daughter Prairie Wheeler, the true protagonist of *Vineland*, mourns her mother’s betrayal of her friends in the 1960s, but Prairie also fears that she, too, is destined for betrayal. Sure enough, after Vondo leaves, she says, “Okay, come on. Come

on, come on in. Come back. Take me away” (384). Like her mother Frenesi did, Prairie then seeks out the evil federal agent. As mentioned earlier, this could be viewed as a seduction to her authority or as an incident of betrayal in the promised land. Prairie, too, is forced to confront her inevitable fate, as well as the deception of domination and exclusion in the space of Vineland.

However, this is why, in the last sentence of the book, the face of her dog Desmond reflects, in Prairie’s mind, multiple images from her past: the faces of her grandmother and Blue Jay, her mother Frenesi: “It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-fay feathers” (385). This ghost-like awareness of her family that Prairie identifies with Desmond is not simply an optimistic celebration of her family. More than anything else, Prairie is tormented by the ghostly otherness of her hereditary past, in which she betrayed herself. At the same time, however, this struggle with the ghosts of the past is the beginning of self-actualization as an individual who accepts the past, who can dwell in a land of ghosts.

The most significant scene depicting this dialogue with the past is Prairie’s encounter with Weed Artman, the former leader of the Rock and Roll Republic. Frenesi indirectly killed Weed, and he is now a zombie called Sanatoid. In this scene, the daughter of the perpetrator (Frenesi) and the victim have a conversation. Prairie confronts Artman:

“That case, shouldn’t somebody be goin’ after that Rex guy, the one who did it?”

“Rex, why? He’s only the ceremonial trigger-finger, just a stooge, same as Frenesi. 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.”

*He looked so forlorn that by reflex she took his hand.* He flinched at her touch, and she was surprised not at the coldness of the hand but at how light it was, nearly weightless. (*Vineland*, 365-6; emphasis added)

Here, Artman cannot understand why he was killed; he cannot understand what kind of

man or system killed him. Seeing Artman at such a loss, Prairie genuinely and reflexively reaches out to the “forlorn” and abandoned figure. Of course, Artman is startled by her touch and turns away. There is no easy reconciliation of the past and the present here. But Prairie is close to Artman, able to touch him. She feels sorrow for him. Here we see a moment of Prairie’s sympathy, which is fostered by spatial proximity.

Of course, Prairie and Artman never discuss Frenesi after this. However, they do spend time together from time to time. Their ways of being are distorted. Yet Prairie and Artman continue their relationship with that distortion. Vineland is a place in the present that attempts to communicate with the spirits of the past, though it can by no means effect a fully affirmative reconciliation.

This series of encounters with ghosts is certainly a matter of personal (or familial) concern for Prairie, and these ghosts may be far from what one could call a community of solidarity. Or perhaps those who are no longer there, such as the ghosts of the Yurok tribe, are still present in that place and that community—if only in the form of their voices. However, it is certain that they do exist. This creates the possibility of the solidarity base of the trans-historical place.

Finally, although Vineland contains something rooted in the land, which could be called a spirit of the land, because the Yurok people inherited the land from the Woges, even the Yurok spirits, and even the Thanatoids, are at some point wandering migrants<sup>2</sup>. Zoyd observes the following scene at the first bus stop he visits when he arrives in Vineland: “The bus station, which took up a whole city block, was acting as a *temporary dormitory for those who had nowhere to stay* and there were plenty of these Southland transplants milling everywhere” (*Vineland*, 318; emphasis added). Due to the great hippie exodus to Northern California in the late 1960s, “the city of Vineland was on the verge of dysfunction,” and the “long-distance bus depots” all over town were full of “transplants” from the South. Vineland is a kind of “temporary dormitory” for “those who had nowhere to stay.”

The overwhelming majority of people who come to Vineland are those who have reached an impasse for one reason or another and are looking for a new space. Certainly, it is hard to say that they are guaranteed new hope in this space that will one day be under their control. However, there are those who are, or were, in the

same situation. Zoyd said, “In the end, bringing my daughter and myself to this place, jumping through the mudslides and storms into the bosom of the Vinelands in the last few years, was *the right choice for a change.*” (*Vineland*, 318; emphasis added)

Here, two points are significant: Zoyd made “a good choice”; he just got away and just stayed in this place called Vineland; Secondary, Zoyd’s “choice for a change,” the coincidence of his own choice, and the fact that he was chased and almost contingently escaped to the “temporal dormitory,” Vineland. This place is not the Calvinistic “preterite” that Pynchon describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This kind of religious-inspired solidarity is not explicitly depicted in *Vineland*. The “temporal dormitory” of *Vineland* is certainly quite a weak kind of solidarity, or perhaps not even solidarity at all. However, it is here that the migrants have the opportunity to confront their own past and the past of the place and thus to accept the memory of the repressed ghosts<sup>3</sup>. Then the weak connection among the oppressed and wounded—a fragile bond not restricted to race or kinship—emerges. This text suggests an unfinished business, a thing that has been shelved, a place where ethical conflicts never cease. But in this never-ending conflict of oppressor vs. oppressed and perpetrator vs. victim, the characters also begin a dialogue in the land of Vineland, where the voices of oppressed people echo through time.

## Conclusion

Certainly, *Vineland* foregrounds stable relationships of domination and subjugation or perpetration and victimization. On the other hand, these relationships change over time. Artman, the victim, even meets Prairie, the daughter of the perpetrator. The Native Americans were not only victims, but also perpetrators. There are moments when ideas that cannot be placed in a fixed point in history break through the possibilities of a long temporal span. This enables the “temporal solidarity of the land.” This essay has described the undocumented voices and the potential solidarity of the place of Vineland. It has also examined Pynchon’s reevaluation of community. This background can serve as a foundation for further discussions of Pynchon’s later works.

## NOTES

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- 1 The significance of community in *Vineland* has been examined more and more in recent studies. For example, Sean Carswell reads resistance to globalized American capitalism in *Vineland*, emphasizing the feminist community of kunoichi sisters, and Diana Benea positively analyzes the community of the family in this work. These studies, however, pay less attention to the Native American Yurok tribe discussed in the present essay.
- 2 Clare, a member of the Traverse family, confirms that the Thanatoids are also a kind of immigrants as following: “It was those Thanatoids, of course . . . They were just beginning to move into the country. . . .” (*Vineland*, 320).
- 3 For a study of the ghosts in this work in relation to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, see the essays of William Skip and Daniel Punday.

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