The 1970s were characterized by the ascendency of a particular breed of right wing conservatism that advanced neoliberal reforms and precipitated the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan. As an economic theory, neoliberalism proposes that the government de-regulate markets and ease financial burdens on corporations thus enabling wealth to be evenly distributed across the social spectrum by natural market processes. In practice, these reforms were carried out in the name of political correctness for these policies mobilized religious and nationalistic rhetoric, caused an abiding cultural shift, and resulted in numerous economic crises and inequitable concentrations of wealth. Our project conducts an analysis of Thomas Pynchon’s novel Vineland in order to derive insights into this transformation of America. Published in 1990, the scope of Pynchon’s novel encompasses both the hippy movement that peaked in the late 60s and the rise of neoliberalism up through the middle of the Reagan administration in 1984—the year in which the novel takes place.

Pynchon’s work is exemplary of what is called postmodernity— the defining literary genre of the period which in many ways is unique precisely because of its political engagement with post-industrial capitalism—and, as such, encapsulates perhaps better than any writer the effects of neoliberalism. Our project has produced an essay and a poster that is comprised of three sections: An economic, cultural, and historical exploration of neoliberalism—so investigation of Pynchon’s novel, the media as it works to assimilate citizens into the cultural hegemony—and Pynchon’s critique of the ideologies and policy decisions surrounding the then contemporary environmental movement.

Vineland is a novel that reflects on the historical and socio-political shifts of the Nixon through Reagan administrations in the late 1960s and 1980s in a partially fictionalized setting. Throughout the work, Thomas Pynchon constructs an intricate web of flashbacks in which recollections provide detailed narratives that concurrently uncovery the plot through intertwining storylines. He frequently switches perspectives among characters—both smoothly and abruptly, whether or not primary or secondary to the plot’s development—in ways that defy the chronological arrangement of time and confuses the distinctions between past and present.

The plot mainly circles around a teenager named Praxie who learns about her mother, Praxeni Goues, in a series of recollections told by former friends of her mother’s. Thus, the central action of the story centers on the political dignity of Praxeni, who was a 1960s revolutionary film documentarian, and her cousin by Brock Vond, a prosecutor working with the D.E.A. Praxeni’s production crew, named 24Spats, stands at one fork of violent government responses to peace movements as a means of informing the American public of State violence. Vond, however, seduces Praxeni so as to manipulate her into killing Wurl-Arman, the leader of a university-based student group named PR³. Praxeni, who has a child with Vond, covers her manipulations and escapes from his influence by marrying Zoel Wheeler, a naive hippie who initially believes Brock Vond’s child, Praxie, to be his own. Praxeni, however, abandon her family and family to become a government informant, yet the job position was altered due to budget cuts by the Reagan administration. Now, chased from the nation’s protection services, she seduces her new husband, Flash, and pursued by her past lover, Brock Vond. Praxeni returns to the familial structure for support. Her estranged and daughter, Praxie, goes to live in a small community named Vineland— an oxymoron, displaced as Vond searches through the Northern California landscape to kidnap Praxie, Praxeni, and Zoel all meet at a silent family reunion, where Brock Vond comes very close to abducting Praxie, until his government mission (i.e., "The War on Drugs") is suddenly recalled. He later leaves his base on an independent mission and leaves Praxie and her parents behind, a reflection in an emotionally implausible and cliché Hollywood description of a happy ending, as the family continues the mission.

A major subplot involves Praxeni’s best friend, a member of 24Spats and female ninja named DL, who plans to assassinate Vond but through various machinations by forceful entreaty to her, accidentally but family becomes an innocent Japanese civilian named Takeshi, with a martial art attack called the Vingtane Paws, which will see Takeshi dead within the year. As a punishment for her reckless and selfish-driven violence, her secret ninja society, which can cure Takeshi, forces her to become Takeshi’s servant and business partner. Together, they run a business in which they balance the karmic energy of a ghostly community of Northern Californians, called the Thanatoids. This group of individuals is comprised of generations of physically displaced and emotionally scarred ghosts who tell victim to the corrupt policies implemented by the American government.

REFERENCES


