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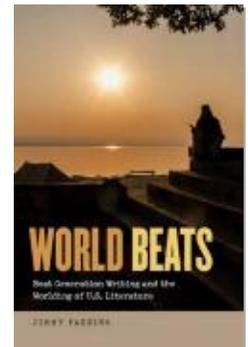
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CUT-UPS AND COMPOSITE CITIES: THE LATIN
AMERICAN ORIGINS OF *NAKED LUNCH*

Like Déjà Vu: "The Secret" and the Spatial Turn

Paralleling wider trends in literary and cultural studies, the past several years have seen a spatial turn in critical approaches to the work of “Beat Godfather” William S. Burroughs.¹ Whereas previous scholars have tended to view Burroughs’s landscapes primarily as hallucinated, nightmarish abstractions, recent critics are beginning to understand prominent settings like the Interzone of *Naked Lunch* as firmly grounded in lived space and time. Exploring the relationship of geography, history, and biography, Brian Edwards and others have shown how Tangier in particular—Burroughs lived there for several pivotal years in the 1950s and 1960s—played an active role in shaping some of Burroughs’s most important literary production and, conversely, how his work formulates a sophisticated response to the social and political realities of Morocco during the years just before and after independence from colonial rule.

In his chapter on Burroughs in *Morocco Bound*, Edwards argues that “critics have in one way or another avoided a serious inquiry into the relationship between Burroughs’s major text [i.e., *Naked Lunch*] and his response to Tangier, pushing the role of the city into the passive background” (159). He goes on to say that critics have “discounted the importance of Tangier as more than imaginative construct, even while sensing the importance of thinking about the materiality of Tangier,” which “has led to confusion about Burroughs’s political position and the Moroccan and geopolitical context of his work” (160). The “confusion” Edwards refers to is a response to the uncomfortable (from our enlightened, post-orientalist vantage point) ambivalence Burroughs seems to display in *Naked Lunch* and elsewhere toward decolonization in North Africa and

around the world on one hand and toward the United States' neoimperialist economic and military policy during the early years of the Cold War on the other. Ironically, in his efforts to resituate *Naked Lunch* within its specific historical and geographic contexts, Edwards all but ignores the novel's deep roots in other soils, specifically Latin America. I fully agree with him when he writes, "Rereading *Naked Lunch* in its Tangier context demonstrates the ways in which Burroughs's piercing indictment of a culture of control and a society of hypocrisy emerges from an especially rich global imagination that helps provide the energy and terms of his disruption" (161), but to truly grasp the richness of Burroughs's "global imagination" means locating Tangier and *Naked Lunch* in a much broader zone of reference and worlded critique.

This wider view brings the story back to a part of the world Burroughs called home in the early 1950s and had hoped to settle permanently before deciding to relocate to North Africa. Burroughs wrote three of his most important books in Latin America—*Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*—and, in a very real sense, he never left. Or better yet: Latin America never leaves Burroughs (textually speaking, at least). Long-unpublished material such as his 1953 "Latin American Notebook" and the assorted manuscripts of the "Interzone" period of 1953–58 reveal the extent to which the locales and landscapes of Mexico, Panama, and the Upper Amazon continue to dominate Burroughs's imagination during that crucial transitional period leading to the publication of *Naked Lunch* in 1959. And key scenes, images, and characters from Burroughs's Latin American works reappear not just in *Naked Lunch* but for decades to come: notably in the *Nova*, or "cut-up," trilogy of the 1960s and the *Red Night* trilogy of the 1980s. Chief among these textual recurrences is Burroughs's utopian vision of a great "Composite City," where "all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market."² Recording a dream vision that Burroughs experienced during his trek through Peru and Colombia in search of the hallucinogenic plant known as yagé, or *ayahuasca*, the Composite City scene becomes the centerpiece of *Yage*. It undergoes many permutations in later works, but it appears almost verbatim in *Naked Lunch*. The Composite City, like *Yage* as a whole, is therefore vital for understanding the author's attitude toward Tangier and Morocco. A worlded reading of Burroughs's breakthroughs in *Naked Lunch* reveals that the novel's origins lie not only in Tangier's Zoco Chico or Paris's Beat Hotel but also in the jungles of South America.

Reading Burroughs can often provoke a feeling of déjà vu. Repeated words and phrases, often entire scenes, come and go, presenting themselves as so many variations on a theme, and a familiar cast of charac-

ters, including Dr. Benway, Clem Snide, Lola the junk pusher, Hauser and O'Brien, and of course Burroughs's doppelganger, William Lee (aka Inspector Lee, Agent Lee, and Willie the Rat), all make their way on and off the stage, leaping from one book to the next over the course of decades. To some extent all writers return to familiar themes and images and even verbal formulations across different works—giving rise to what is generally referred to as an author's "style"—and this is no less true of Beat Generation writers. But in Burroughs's case these repetitions and returns appear so frequently and so intensely that anyone hoping to better understand Burroughs's corpus must try, following Oliver Harris's lead, to unlock the secret of repetition as such in his work.³

I use the word "secret" very pointedly, for Burroughs repeatedly warns readers that the allure of the secret may turn out to be a siren song or—given the Raymond Chandleresque tone of early works like the long-unpublished *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* (cowritten with Jack Kerouac in 1945) and his first published novel, *Junky* (1953)—a red herring. In *Junky* he in fact writes, "There is no key, no secret someone else has that he can give you," referring to the life of a junky and to the world of junk.⁴ Very little of what Burroughs says, however, especially about his own writing, can be taken at face value. From a certain point of view, his disclaimer would seem to be at odds with the entire motivation behind writing the book, which was to provide an unvarnished, unsentimental account of the drug underground, one that would run counter to the lurid sensationalism proffered by the mainstream press, and to attempt to correct the misinformation that had led to misguided U.S. drug policies. In the end, Burroughs both promises and withholds the truth, or the secret, of junk, offering readers a glimpse while at the same time denying access to that world.

Upon publication by Ace Books in 1953 (under the pseudonym William Lee), *Junky* was consigned to the dime-store paperback rack, ironically making Lee's hard-boiled voice and persona quite a good fit among the pulp titles of the day. This voice would become characteristic of Burroughs's writing for years to come, developing in highly innovative and imaginative ways to shape works from *Queer* and *Yage to Naked Lunch* to the *Nova* trilogy and beyond. Along with the constant repetitions noted earlier, Burroughs's distinctive voice—recognizable through all the later permutations—is a major source of the continuity that exists in his body of work as a whole. It is not surprising, then, that the "secret" alluded to in *Junky* (though defined negatively) is elsewhere closely allied with the author's voice, in particular with the experience of finding his

voice: a complicated, intimate personal history that also illuminates the most outward-looking, indeed worlded, aspects of Burroughs's work.

Burroughs's voice is itself a performance. He is a master ventriloquist, and the performative dimensions of his writing are inseparable from its power as political and cultural critique. But after *Queer*, his follow-up to *Junky*, failed to find a publisher and after he found himself in a more or less permanent exile (sentenced in absentia for the shooting death of Joan Vollmer in Mexico City), Burroughs experienced a period of uncertainty and renewed addiction. The years from 1953 to 1958 were also a time of great productivity. After leaving South America, where he had been traveling for several months in search of the mythical hallucinogen *yagé*, for Tangier, Morocco, in 1954, Burroughs produced mountains of prose. Under the working title "Interzone" and sometimes referred to as the "word hoard," this material would provide the basis for Burroughs's best-known book, *Naked Lunch*, and furnish material for his "cut-up novels" in the 1960s. In a short piece titled "The Conspiracy," cut from the "Hauser and O'Brien" scene that would appear in *Naked Lunch*, Lee writes poignantly, "Since early youth I had been searching for some secret, some key by which I could gain access to basic knowledge and answer some of the fundamental questions." Then, in language taken straight from *Junky*, he describes some of the "clues" he has followed related to pleasure and addiction before going on to say,

The final key always eluded me, and I decided that my search was as sterile and misdirected as the alchemists' search for the philosopher's stone. I decided it was an error to think in terms of some secret or key or formula: the secret is that there is no secret.

But I was wrong. There *is* a secret, now in the hands of ignorant and evil men, a secret beside which the atom bomb is a noisy toy. And like it or not, I was involved. I had already ante'd my life. I had no choice but to sit the hand out.⁵

Tracing the contours of an overarching plot that unites "Interzone" and *Naked Lunch* with everything that follows would reveal an unceasing struggle to wrest the secret away from these "ignorant and evil men." This struggle is fought in the past, present, and future simultaneously, in lands known and unknown, with weapons familiar and undreamed of. Burroughs's novel *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), with its protagonists the loosely federated band of pirates and partisans living under the "The Articles" and battling, as ever, the agents of Control—the enemy figured, significantly, in the novel as a colonial power—concludes by imagining

an all-out arms race reminiscent of the passage from “The Conspiracy” (cons-*piracy*) just quoted: “I have blown a hole in time with a firecracker. Let others step through. Into what bigger and bigger firecrackers? Better weapons lead to better and better weapons, until the earth is a grenade with the fuse burning.”⁶

Cataclysm isn’t always a bad thing in Burroughs, and the final lines of *Cities* can be read as downright utopian. The future is unknown, but the freedom fighters of the novel, like the Wild Boys, like Agent Lee fighting the Nova Mob, are attempting to *create* the future through (sometimes violent, sometimes tender) acts of transgressive performativity and utopian world making. Gilles Deleuze has referred to the act of writing as “creating a weapon,” and it is hardly a coincidence that Deleuze found Burroughs’s writing to be a source of such fascination and generative potential.⁷ For Burroughs, finding one’s voice in writing, which amounts to finding the secret, transforms not just the self but potentially the world. Or to put it a slightly different way, the repeated trope of the secret—as an example of the dense layers of connection and continuity in his work and as the very image of that continuity—overlays an intimate, interpersonal set of concerns and another, equally important set of concerns grounded in political and historical forces on the largest scale.

In another piece from the “Interzone” period, Burroughs discusses the unique status of Tangier, his new home, in the run-up to Moroccan independence from colonial rule. He writes, “It is frequently said that the Great Powers will never give up the Interzone [i.e., Tangier] because of its value as a listening post. It is in fact the listening post of the world, the slowing pulse of a decayed civilization, that only war can quicken. Here East meets West in a final debacle of misunderstanding, each seeking the Answer, the Secret, from the other and not finding it, because neither has the Answer to give.”⁸ Similarly, in *Queer* he writes, “The Westerner thinks there is some secret he can discover [from the East].”⁹ Once again taking language more or less straight from *Junky*, Burroughs is now using the trope of “the Answer, the Secret” to interrogate and confound orientalist discourses of the relationship between East and West, self and other, that have long served to naturalize Western imperialism and colonial domination. More immediately in this passage the secret has to do with Cold War geopolitics at the moment of decolonization in Africa and elsewhere. As “the listening post of the world” (65), Tangier fits into his worlded view of political maneuvering and political unrest; for Burroughs’s Interzone to be grasped in its full complexity and critical force, it must be understood as one locus in a much wider spatial network.

In a 1955 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs explains the ongoing “Interzone” project, writing, “This novel is a scenario for future action in the real world. *Junk*, *Queer*, *Yagé*, reconstructed my past. The present novel is an attempt to create my future. In a sense it is a guidebook, a map.”¹⁰ Here, too, I hesitate to take him entirely at his word. Given the massive overlap and continuity evident in *all* of Burroughs’s work, a strict delineation cannot be made between past and future. The formal and thematic breakthroughs of what would become *Naked Lunch* have their origins precisely in those earlier texts that Burroughs mentions to Ginsberg and in a sense tries to disown by relegating them to his past. Critics have tended to follow his lead, however, in downplaying the role and even the visible traces in *Naked Lunch* of the early trilogy.¹¹ Burroughs’s entire body of work can be read as “a guidebook, a map.” And for Burroughs, as for Kerouac, Joans, Lamantia, and other Beat writers, writing is a mapping procedure that performatively creates the time and space it endeavors to describe.¹² Insofar as he seeks to describe what amounts to entire worlds: the junk world, the yagé world, and so on, writing for Burroughs becomes nothing less than a process of active world making.

The repetition in Burroughs’s work has a thematic basis, as the author returns obsessively to the scene of the crime, revisiting the same images, the same turns of phrase, the same narrative situations in book after book. The repetition in Burroughs’s work is also an artifact of its textual history, which has slowly been uncovered in recent years as assiduous editors, critics, and archivists like Oliver Harris, James Grauerholz, Bill Morgan, and Barry Miles have pieced together letters, journals, and unpublished manuscripts to reveal a much fuller picture of Burroughs’s method as a writer and of the complicated backstories of his best-known works. The editorial sleuthing and profound insights of Harris in particular have been indispensable to my own understanding of Burroughs’s corpus as a vast, rhizomic network of intertextual reference and worlded concern. He has highlighted both the continuity and the “sheer contingency” of much of Burroughs’s published work in terms of what has gotten published when and where and as what.¹³ Portions of the *Queer* manuscript, for example, were removed and added to the Mexico City section at the end of *Junky*. Burroughs meant *Queer* to be an immediate sequel to *Junky*, but it would not be published for another twenty-five years. When *Queer* was finally published, an epilogue was added to make up for the pages cannibalized by *Junky*. This epilogue, titled “Mexico City Return,” was not originally written for *Queer* but for Burroughs’s next project, began in 1953 and published ten years later as *The Yage Letters*.

There is evidence to suggest that Burroughs imagined all these pieces as facets of a single work in progress, “a series of seemingly cryptic notes” from his 1953 “Latin American Notebook,” where, as Harris writes, “he plots out an entirely different future for his material.”¹⁴ Burroughs’s notes are as follows: “When Lee quit junk—unexpurgated version—First trip to S.A. with Allerton. Return to Mexico. Left out—Allerton goes and returns—Back to S.A. No word from Allerton, S.A. trip and back to Mexico. Everything lost.”¹⁵ By the time *Yage* was published in 1963 in its (mostly) final form, readers had already encountered some key scenes, in only slightly amended form, in *Naked Lunch* (1959), which was assembled mostly from the mass of writing Burroughs had produced during the Interzone period of 1953–58. Nonetheless, the notebook solidifies the importance of Latin America to Burroughs’s development as a writer, not just in the early work but in everything that comes after. Covering the second half of 1953, that is, the period immediately following his initial composition of the *Yage* manuscript, the notebook bridges the gap between the more straightforward, naturalistic early writing and the outrageous experiments of *Naked Lunch*, underscoring the crucial role of the Latin American context in catalyzing those experiments.

Burroughs’s work offers a different take on a possible theory of Beat travel and Beat space. Harris writes that “Jack Kerouac’s journeys on the American road made travel central to beat writing, but of the three major figures the real travel writers were Burroughs and Ginsberg. They journeyed further and for longer, nomads geographically and imaginatively, because each knew they were internal exiles—aliens in their own land, even in their own bodies.”¹⁶ Deleuze’s definition of writing—drawing in large part from the example of Beat writers—as a creative line of flight certainly fits Harris’s assessment of Burroughs and Ginsberg, but Burroughs’s “exile” in South America was also very real indeed: he had fled Mexico City after the tragic shooting death of his wife, Joan Vollmer. The immediate cause of the yagé travels, however, is mostly occluded from *Yage*. The only reference comes when Burroughs writes to Ginsberg from Lima, “which is enough like Mexico City to make me homesick,” telling him, “Mexico is home to me and I can’t go there. Got a letter from my lawyer—I am sentenced in absentia. I feel like a Roman exiled from Rome” (34). Vollmer’s absence from both *Yage* and *Queer* is troubling and conspicuous; it also helps structure the whole of Burroughs’s early work. Her death, as Harris points out, is the “Left out” written into the textual itinerary Burroughs maps in his “Latin American Notebook.”

So perhaps “the secret” can be formulated otherwise; it is necessary

to return to the beginning—and isn't this fitting—and look *again* at the déjà vu brought on by reading Burroughs. As Freud has said, déjà vu is an experience of the uncanny. It is the uncanny return of the repressed and the compulsion to return again and again to the scene of the crime. The scene of originary trauma in Burroughs's life as a writer is undoubtedly Vollmer's death, and this may account for the compulsive repetitions seen everywhere in his writing and—his skepticism about Freud and psychoanalysis notwithstanding—go some way in explaining the entire manifestation of Latin America in work after work.¹⁷ At the very least, and in truly Freudian fashion, one can say that he sublimates his guilt over his wife's death by writing. He says as much in his introduction to *Queer* when the novel was finally published in 1987, where he notoriously writes, "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out."¹⁸ This is a stunning admission, to be sure. And difficult to reconcile with the fact that Joan is almost completely absent from the writing her death has apparently motivated. He can now safely point to this tragic event as the catalyst for all the writing to come, and he confesses that it was Brion Gysin who forced him to recognize the truth and full weight of Vollmer's death, which had been repressed both psychically and textually for a long time.¹⁹ It would not be too much of a stretch to say that the death of Joan Vollmer speaks to a much larger dynamic concerning women and Beat Generation writing. They drive the plot but must themselves remain silent. But the specter always returns, and Vollmer's spectral presence in Burroughs's writing (like the spectral presence of *Yage* and Latin America running all throughout *Naked Lunch*) is profoundly felt.²⁰

Text and Drugs: Generic Transgression in Burroughs

Adding yet another layer of complexity (and contingency), Burroughs at this time was increasingly relying on letters, especially to his friend, agent, editor, and former lover Allen Ginsberg, to generate material. He even tells Ginsberg, referring to what would become *Naked Lunch*, that "maybe the real novel is letters to you."²¹ This statement, and his use of letters in general in the creative process, speaks to the intensely interper-

sonal nature of his writing. As Burroughs also says in relation to *Queer* (another text with a strong epistolary basis), he writes to “contact” another.²² Such statements, then, make *The Yage Letters* a very strange case. Originally conceived of as the third installment of a trilogy that also included *Junky* and *Queer*—an excerpt was published in 1958 as “Naked Lunch, Part III: In Search of Yage”—*Yage* would seem to take Burroughs’s penchant for filling his letters to Ginsberg with material that would find its way into a later manuscript to its logical extreme, with Burroughs now simply publishing the letters themselves. But once again, nothing can be taken at face value, for the epistolary trappings of *Yage* mask a supreme fiction, and the strategic manipulation of genre in *Yage* raises questions of paramount importance for unlocking “the secret” of Burroughs’s work taken as a whole.

Transnational studies must incorporate a theory of transgression, a means of understanding how the physical act of crossing borders (as of a nation-state) bears a complex and intimate relation to other kinds of transgression (racial, ethnic, political, sexual, and so on). The borderlands critique of Gloria Anzaldúa and José David Saldívar, like Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonial critique, interrogates power dynamics that are always involved in crossing borders of one kind or another. As (mostly) white, male, and American, Beat writers possessed a certain privilege to cross freely, and as Harris, Edwards, and others have pointed out, this fact was not lost on Burroughs. Much of the complexity and ambiguity of his “travel writing,” whether he is in Morocco or Mexico, stems from Burroughs’s ambivalence toward the relations of power that have resulted in such privilege. At times, Burroughs (often in the guise of doppelgänger William Lee) clearly relishes playing the role of “Ugly American,” but the crucial point is that he sees it precisely as a *role*. Burroughs is performing the ugly American routine, exaggerating it to grotesque proportions to expose its ideological underpinnings. To miss this point is to remain forever dissatisfied with Burroughs’s politics.

Worlded space—with its fluid, polyvalent interplay between the local and the global, with its lack of respect for borders whether national or otherwise—is at its core transgressive space. As if to disavow or somehow make up for the privilege bestowed on them as Americans traveling abroad (often in the “third world”), Beat writers *performed* transgression: to be sure, through sex and drugs, and in Burroughs’s case guns, but also through their writing. Beginning with the Composite City comprising “all human potentialities,” Burroughs begins to imagine radically transgressive—particularly queer—identities, and after *Naked Lunch* (namely in the *Nova* and *Red*

Night trilogies) his work becomes increasingly invested in queering revolution by revolutionizing queerness.

Moreover, the formal innovations of Beat writing, whether it be the jazz-chorus notebook-sketch form in the poems of Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*, the "routine form" that Burroughs began experimenting with in Mexico and would perfect in Tangier, or the "cut-up method" that Burroughs and Brion Gysin developed together in Paris (Gysin had lived in Tangier for a number of years), are unthinkable without the Beats' worlded and worldly travels. Burroughs's work is perhaps most interested in genre and generic transgression. Critics still refer to *Naked Lunch* as a novel only for lack of a better term; he professed to have little need for quaint notions like narrative stability or authorial integrity. Burroughs's two most important innovations where form is concerned are the routines, which Jennie Skerl has described as "satirical fantasies"—brief, self-contained literary grotesques—and the cut-ups, whose lineage extends at least as far back as Dada experiments with chance and found writing.²³ (A contemporary analogue can be found in the lettrist/situationist practice of *détournement*, which recontextualizes language with humorous and often subversive results.) But his breakthroughs don't end there, and *Yage* comprises a set of texts with an especially high degree of formal and generic experimentation.

Yage's epistolary form masks a fiction: the fiction being that although it has all the trappings of real correspondence, and although much of the text did originate in actual letters written to Ginsberg from South America, the *Letters* as finally published in 1963 are a literary construction. As Harris puts it in his excellent introduction to the 2006 *Redux* edition of *Yage*, "Burroughs fabricated its epistolary appearance by adding such as the letter's formal tops and tails, by changing the tense to create an improvised effect of reporting live, and by cutting out tell-tale lines."²⁴ The question then becomes, what did the epistolary form allow Burroughs to do that could not have been done otherwise? Throughout the *Letters* are intimations that Burroughs could find meaning in his "exile"—as he refers to it in the May 5, 1953, letter from Lima—only in interpersonal or relational terms, with Burroughs playing the part of sage and Ginsberg that of willing pupil. The two shared an intense but short-lived love affair upon Burroughs's return to New York from South America, lending a certain emotional urgency and need to *get across* in the letters. Such a fraught narrative context nonetheless creates an immediate and intimate connection between author and audience; at the same time, the intimacy of the epistolary form assures readers that they are getting the unvar-

nished, uncensored truth about ayahuasca, about South America, and about the author's ordeal in the Amazon. The illusion of the letters also provides an imagined connection to home, or at least to an "elsewhere." They emphasize Burroughs's distance from the United States, from the "beat scene" that was beginning to form in his absence. Finally, plot becomes much less of a priority in the epistolary form; Burroughs is free to experiment with narrative and other literary conventions. If a plot does emerge, it can be more fragmentary and selective.

Insofar as *Yage* promises an unvarnished account of his travels and of the ayahuasca experience, it shares that motivation with the earlier *Junky*. Both are written as a kind of exposé: *Junky* gives readers the truth about the heroin underground; *Yage* reveals the secrets of a more exotic drug. And both texts share the same clear-eyed, hard-boiled, dime-store tone. Ginsberg's surmising, then, however spurious, that Burroughs first heard about ayahuasca in "some crime magazine" or "goofy tabloid" is revealing.²⁵ One of the voices that Burroughs assumes in *Yage*—one that he had already employed in *Junky* and would continue to refine in *Naked Lunch* and later works—is that of the pulp novel or dime-store rag. One could imagine (as Ginsberg himself does) the lurid tales of yagé madness penned in a style much like Burroughs's. But like Burroughs the ugly American, this voice is at the same time a put-on, a ventriloquism. In his "January 15, 1953" letter, the first of the series published in *Yage*, Burroughs deflates the genre while admitting its strange allure: "I had a magazine article with me describing a joint outside Panama City called the Blue Goose. 'This is an anything goes joint. Dope peddlers lurk in the men's room with a hypo loaded and ready to go. Sometimes they dart out of a toilet and stick it in your arm without waiting for consent. Homosexuals run riot'" (4). While in Panama, Burroughs cannot resist seeing the Blue Goose for himself, even as he points out the obvious absurdity of the magazine article.

If he first learned about ayahuasca from a similar article, what can that possibly say about the likelihood of success in his impending yagé quest? In truth, relatively few lines are devoted to describing the actual yagé experience. Burroughs's several accounts are contradictory and inconclusive—a great deal depends on preparation, dosage, and the presence of a second, catalyzing compound (just as Ginsberg catalyzed Burroughs's writing of the *Yage Letters*)—and, with one notable exception, are written with the same economy and matter-of-factness as those letters describing the most mundane aspects of his travels. I suspect that one who reads the *Letters* solely for vicarious "yagé kicks" will be dis-

appointed, but any withholding of knowledge or failure of insight on Burroughs's part should be read as a failure only in terms of our earlier notion of a *productive* failure that allows for a much greater insight to arise. The following section shows that the letter beginning, "On my way back to Bogota with nothing accomplished" (16), leads almost immediately to one of the most cogent and piercing critiques of the prevailing world order to be found anywhere in Beat writing; what seem at first like dead ends in *Yage* will sometimes open onto considerably more expansive vistas than at first imagined.

Apart from, but in fact not wholly unrelated to, the dime-store style, another kind of writing that Burroughs lampoons while still utilizing to great effect is the ethnographic report. Burroughs studied anthropology as a graduate student at Harvard in the late 1930s and later took classes in Mesoamerican archaeology at Mexico City College. While in South America he even accompanied renowned Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Schultes on one of his Amazon expeditions. It was with Schultes that Burroughs records his first experience taking yagé, and an early, non-epistolary draft of the *Yage* manuscript looks very much like ethnography. Through this lens, *Junky* begins to resemble a ethnographic report—from a native informant, no less—on the heroin subcultures of New York and New Orleans, and readers will recognize something of the anthropological in Burroughs's later depictions of Interzone in *Naked Lunch* or the civilization described in "The Mayan Caper" episode from *The Soft Machine* or the six "Cities of the Red Night" in the novel by that name.

Burroughs's "scientific" account of yagé and the native rites surrounding it may be as much a fiction as the letters themselves. The opening lines of "In Search of Yage" (the name of the original batch of 1953 missives from Burroughs to Ginsberg) suggest as much. He begins, "I stopped off here [Panama] to have my piles out. Wouldn't do to go back among the Indians with piles I figured" (3). Harris suggests that with this frank admission Burroughs immediately relinquishes any claim to objectivity in what follows.²⁶ But at a deeper level what this too-personal tale calls into question is the entire notion of scientific objectivity and transparent ethnographic knowledge. Burroughs thus anticipates the breakthroughs of poststructuralist anthropology by some years, whose practitioners (Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, among others) would seek to account for the power differential inherent in the relationship between observer and subject, questioning the ideological assumptions that shape all knowledge of the Other.

The first edition of *Yage*, published by City Lights in 1963 (ten years

after Burroughs's journey through the Amazon) is a textual assemblage that brings together not only the original set of "letters" but also a second section, "Seven Years Later," which includes Ginsberg's long letter from 1960 detailing his own ayahuasca experiences, as well as Burroughs's cryptic reply; and a 1963 "epilogue" containing "I Am Dying, Meester?" a cut-up largely assembled from fragments of the 1953 letters. By 1963 portions of the text had appeared independently in such places as *Black Mountain Review*, *Big Table*, and *Kulchur*. In 1961 LeRoi Jones and Diane di Prima, coeditors of *The Floating Bear*, were arrested on obscenity charges for publishing a particularly daring bit of text called "Roosevelt after Inauguration," (In an earlier issue of *Floating Bear* Jones and di Prima had published Burroughs's 1960 reply to Ginsberg, which provides instructions for the cut-up method that he was then developing with Brion Gysin.)

Although "Roosevelt" was not finally published with the rest of *Yage* until the 1988 *City Lights* edition, readers of earlier editions would have found the piece referred to in Burroughs's "May 23, 1953" letter, where he writes, "Enclose[d] a routine I dreamed up. The idea did come to me in a dream from which I woke up laughing," and a footnote most likely written by Ginsberg himself reads, "This is Burroughs's first routine, 'Roosevelt After Inauguration.'" The form then took on a life of its own, like the talking asshole in *Naked Lunch*; subsequent letters to Ginsberg developed much of the material of that volume.²⁷ "Roosevelt" may have been the first *published* routine, but by the time of its composition in 1953 Burroughs had been working out the routine form since at least the previous year when he was writing *Queer*. The routine happens to be the defining innovation of Burroughs's long-published second novel: a verbal high-wire act that protagonist Lee employs in a series of increasingly desperate attempts to "contact" Allerton, the reluctant object of Lee's desire. But it is not until *Yage* that the routine appears *as such*. In the actual May 23 letter that Burroughs sent to Ginsberg containing the text of "Roosevelt," he calls it a "skit" ("Enclose a skit I dreamed up").²⁸ Together, these additions and inventions—"Roosevelt after Inauguration," the 1960 reply to Ginsberg, "I Am Dying, Meester?"—all point to the fact that *Yage*, as a hybrid and highly performative work, is able to contain the entire sweep of Burroughs's experiments from the routines to the cut-ups.

Given both the tortuous textual histories of individual texts in the Burroughs corpus—their extreme instability or contingency—and the exceptional continuity across texts, it can be dangerous to ascribe primary importance to any one or another of them. Some have pointed to *Junky*,

with its major themes of addiction and control, as the key to unlock all the others; some, like Harris, have argued for *Queer's* elevated status, especially in terms of a more politically and historically grounded understanding of Burroughs.²⁹ Some consider the *Nova Trilogy* to be the fullest expression of the author's postmodern transgression; and Ken Kesey has even declared *Cities of the Red Night* to be Burroughs's "best work."³⁰ In some sense, though, these are all attempts to wrest the spotlight away from *Naked Lunch*: a recognition that his widely declared masterpiece was not created *ex nihilo* or, as Burroughs once claimed, in an extended state of delirium of which he has no recollection.³¹

Rather than ascribe a special status to any particular work, existing as they do in a rhizomic network of dense intertextuality, I prefer to highlight particular *moments* in Burroughs's writing that make possible the densest connections, the most active linkages across an entire text-network. This network extends well beyond the limits of Burroughs's oeuvre; it extends beyond the literary altogether. The moment I am most interested in is his depiction of the Composite City. Its world-conjuring potential and deep resonance with themes that will occupy Burroughs for decades to come make the Composite City a singularly compelling creation. It has the capacity to reshape and maybe even resolve some central questions and debates involving not just Burroughs but Beat writing as a whole.

*From the Composite City to the Cut-Ups:
Development of a Method*

After Burroughs's first, inconclusive experiment with ayahuasca—he accuses the medicine man of "misappropriating half the vine"—he recounts a curious dream that clues us in not only to the fiction of the "letters" but also to what, for Burroughs, becomes the real significance of the yagé experience. He writes, "That night I had a vivid dream in color of the green jungle and a red sunset I had seen during the afternoon. Also a composite city familiar to me but I could not quite place it. Part New York, part Mexico City and part Lima which I had not seen at this time. . . . I cannot say whether these dreams had any connection with Yage. Incidentally you are supposed to see a city when you take Yage."³² Harris points out that, in the world of the letters at least, Burroughs will not see Lima for another two months.³³ The temporal slip in the dream report, however, also makes for a clever bit of foreshadowing that could not have been achieved otherwise. The "Composite City" he refers to will become the setting for the extended yagé sequence in Burroughs's final letter from

South America. I would argue that the Composite City provides a model for the Interzone in *Naked Lunch* and later works, providing key images, characters, and even phrases that appear again and again in Burroughs. He is being disingenuous when he suggests that “these dreams” (now plural) may or may not have “any connection with Yage”; his vision of the Composite City—meaningful in terms of its spatiality and its hybridity—is utterly inseparable from his conception of the drug. But this is not to say its status as a dream should be discounted.

Throughout *Yage* Burroughs consistently presents dreams and dream states as radically generative. His initial Composite City vision could still be said to arise from the dream rather than the drug. “Roosevelt after Inauguration,” which anticipates the stylistic of *Naked Lunch* by several years, likewise came to him in a dream. The last yagé sequence begins, “Last night I took last of Yage mixture. . . . This morning, still high. This is what occurred to me: Yage is space time travel” (50). Whether Burroughs’s further insights into the nature of the Composite City were also dreamed is again inconclusive, but something is nonetheless happening in these visions that aligns pharmacological experimentation and oneiric revelation with spatial mapping and literary invention. Yagé is best understood, then, as a trope. Like travel itself, it is that which creates a maximum of connections, casts the widest net, or whatever allows one to *make contact*.

The author’s fullest description of the Composite City appears in a (real) letter he wrote to Ginsberg from Lima on July 10, 1953. After five months in South America and mostly frustrated attempts to discover the secrets of yagé, Burroughs was finally getting somewhere. He had learned about the crucial addition of a second plant to catalyze its psychotropic properties and had now consumed the yagé mixture several times. In his July 10 letter he prefaces the passage in question by telling Ginsberg that it was “like I was taking dictation.”³⁴ (He uses the same “dictation” metaphor in *Queer* to describe his routines and in reference to composing parts of the “Interzone” manuscript.) The Composite City passage was the first portion of what would become *Yage* to be published, in the spring 1958 issue of *Black Mountain Review*, which was coedited by Allen Ginsberg and featured the work of several Beats.³⁵ Burroughs’s piece ran under the heading “From Naked Lunch, Book III: In Search of Yage.” The passage as finally published by City Lights begins,

Yage is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain

Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized passes through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants sprout out of your cock and vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of the body), across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market. (50)

I imagine, however, that most readers encounter the Composite City in *Naked Lunch*, where Burroughs's yagé vision is reproduced in full in the chapter titled "The Market." There, Burroughs draws a direct link between the Composite City and Interzone, writing, "Panorama of the City of Interzone. Opening bars of East St. Louis Toodleo . . . at times loud and clear then faint and intermittent like music down a windy street. . . . The Composite City where . . ." So when he goes on to describe a landscape of "minarets, palms, mountains, jungle," it would in part seem to evoke Tangier (although he did not set foot on Moroccan soil for another six months after composing the original passage). After a couple paragraphs the back story is alluded to in the form of a heading: "Notes from Yage State." Burroughs then restarts the entire passage, beginning with "The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion."³⁶ To further synchronize the Composite City passage with its new setting in *Naked Lunch*, the author interpolates this line about halfway through: "In the City Market is the Meet Café" (98). In its Tanjawi context, "City Market" would refer to the Zoco Chico with its bustling cafés, but the market is already a central image in Burroughs's original vision of the Composite City. When the Meet Café is described in greater detail a little later on in *Naked Lunch*, many of those details are again derived from *Yage*. It is clear that Burroughs's perceptions of Tangier as recorded in *Naked Lunch* are heavily filtered through his experiences in Latin America.

Apart from individual images and motifs—many of which reappear in later works with predictable regularity—the Composite City connects to Burroughs's project as a writer on another, much deeper level. Harris's greatest insight into *Yage* has to do with the fundamental *textuality* of the yagé experience. Referring to the "July 10" letter, Harris writes that

yagé is dramatically defined as "space time travel." This in turn became Burroughs' definition of *writing*, and the rest of his oeuvre is governed by this understanding. It is therefore essential to recognise the particular textuality of this extraordinary drug-inspired vision. In this phantasmagoric scene, meeting point of "the unknown past and the emergent future," the

experience of traveling in space and time is not only described but actually *produced* for the reader, who encounters a collage of phrases and images taken from the preceding letters. Creating uncanny flashbacks, this literally composite text is a special kind of “travel writing,” and an augury and precedent for [later] experimental practices.³⁷

Those “experimental practices” include the cut-ups, which precede the publication of *Yage* by half a decade. As Harris has written elsewhere, the “collage aesthetic” of the Composite City letter “renders the *yagé* experience of visionary possession by being based on the wholesale recycling and transformation of phrases already read in the earlier letters, so generating cumulatively an uncanny sense of *déjà-vu*.” *Déjà vu* indeed—Burroughs will take these operations a step further with the 1963 text “I am Dying, Meester?” which is a more extensive cut-up of the original *yagé* material, and Harris argues that the inclusion of both the “July 10” letter and the cut-up text “invites the reader to see Burroughs’ cut-up technique as a systematic development of the earlier, *yagé*-inspired, bricolage text, and so recognize cut-up as the textuality of *yagé* experience.”³⁸

Understanding the *yagé* experience as primarily a textual experience offers a useful framework for reading Burroughs’s work as a whole. Thinking about his first novel, one could say that *junk* is also a textual experience. It is certainly a linguistic experience: as an ethnography of the criminal underworld, the novel is especially interested in capturing the junky argot. It ends with a glossary of terms, after all, and Lee the narrator delights in explaining things like “When I first hit New Orleans, the main pusher—or ‘the Man,’ as they say there—was a character called Yellow.” The scene in a ward at the Lexington Narcotic Farm is a pastiche of junky lingo that approaches a distinctly cut-up aesthetic.³⁹ The emergence of the routine form in Burroughs’s next novel, *Queer*, is a similarly textual affair. (In the opening pages of *Naked Lunch* he will ask, “Ever notice how many expressions carry over from queers to con men?”)⁴⁰ Even though Lee’s elaborate linguistic performances are born out of “a desperate need to maintain some special contact with Allerton,” his love interest, the routines begin to take on a life of their own—even in the absence of Allerton or any listener at all (besides, of course, the reader). Burroughs foregrounds this complicated narrative situation:

Lee paused. The routine was coming to him like dictation. He did not know what he was going to say next, but he suspected the monologue was about to get dirty. He looked at Mary. She was exchanging significant glances with Allerton. “Some sort of lover code,” Lee decided. “She is telling him

they have to go now.” Allerton got up, saying he had to have a haircut before going to work. Mary and Allerton left. Lee was alone in the bar.

The monologue continued.⁴¹

Language in Burroughs’s novel is “queered” in the sense that it is no longer a simple, straightforward matter of communication between sender and receiver. Lee’s failure to contact Allerton is sublimated and redeemed through the birth of Burroughs the author, and the dictation metaphor consistently signals key breakthroughs in his development as a writer: the routine form, the Composite City vision, the Interzone manuscript. And at every turn a primary concern with textuality reestablishes itself. With *Naked Lunch* the routines steal the show, functioning like variations on a theme that never cease calling attention to themselves as textual constructions. The cut-up novels of the 1960s, then, become a logical extension of this desire to foreground of the materiality of language.

And yet Burroughs’s obsession with language *as such* does not amount to mere abstraction. As Harris puts it, “Nothing Burroughsian is abstract: the force of his ideas will not be separated from the effects of his words. That is why his work can be so potent and so extraordinary, stamped as it is with a strictly literal, overpoweringly *visceral* force.”⁴² His work seeks to activate the transgressive power of language, not neutralize it. When Burroughs says in his 1974 *Rolling Stone* interview with Bowie, “Writing is seeing how close you can come to make it happen,” and that “the artists should take over this planet because they’re the only ones who can make anything happen,” he points to exactly this performative dimension of artistic and literary creation.⁴³ When leftover material from the “word hoard” of the Interzone years would eventually appear in the *Nova* trilogy, it is now also shaped by the cut-up techniques Burroughs had been developing in Paris with Gysin at the Beat Hotel.⁴⁴ Now that the raw material has been radically decontextualized and transformed by their cut-up techniques, text has become theme and form has become content. Burroughs continues to write against “Control” in all its forms, but now with the cut-ups, the word itself—its material presence—is being deformed and deployed as a weapon in that struggle. His war against the “word virus,” central to *Nova*, requires a defetishization not only of the author-function but also of the text as autonomous and self-sufficient. The word virus is itself an attempt on Burroughs’s part to materialize language, and the cut-up method is one tactic among others that have existed in “larval form”—as Burroughs himself might have put it—from his earliest days as a writer.

Within this swirling matrix of themes and concerns from throughout Burroughs's corpus—textuality and performativity, genre and voice, identity, transgression of all kinds, travel and temporality—the Composite City exists as a key nodal point. It draws attention to the importance of *Yage* as a whole; in turn, and in truly worlded fashion, that “epistolary” account of his four-month trek through Peru and Colombia sheds light on the vexing matter of Burroughs's Tangier politics. Burroughs's quasi-ethnographic travelogue is full of barely concealed political content. Burroughs arrived in Bogotá in the midst of Colombia's long-simmering civil war (known as *La Violencia*), and in *Yage*, he takes every opportunity to criticize U.S. military and economic policy in Latin America. The predation described throughout *Yage* is characteristically set in sexual terms but represents world-historical forces, which appear as the not-so-hidden underbelly of Wallerstein's world-system, or a sinister variation on Dimock's deep time. After his first, failed trek into Colombia's Putumayo region, Burroughs recounts,

On my way back to Bogota with nothing accomplished. I have been conned by medicine men (the most inveterate drunk, liar and loafer in the village is invariably the medicine man), incarcerated by the law, rolled by a local hustler (I thought I was getting that innocent backwoods ass, but the kid had been to bed with six American oil men, a Swedish Botanist, a Dutch Ethnographer, a Capuchin father known locally as The Mother Superior, a Bolivian Trotskyite on the lam, and jointly fucked by the Cocoa Commission and Point Four). Finally I was prostrated by malaria. (16)

Not only have the power relations between predator and prey been inverted in Burroughs's getting ripped off by the “local hustler,” but in one long parenthetical aside he lays bare the entire colonial and postcolonial history of oppression and exploitation in the Americas: economic, political, religious, and otherwise. And by including the “Swedish Botanist” and “Dutch Ethnographer” in his litany, he even foregrounds the notion of scientific knowledge as epistemological violence of a kind his own narrative is attempting to circumvent. It should come as no surprise that he recasts this history in terms of (queer) sexual violation. Throughout *Yage*, sexuality in general carries with it the potential for a deeper and more human understanding of one's environment and encounters—what Burroughs calls “making contact.” Again and again, upon meeting someone new, he asks himself, *is so-and-so queer?* and *would I go to bed with him?* It is therefore quite telling that whenever discussing Colombia's civil conflict, Burroughs makes sure to point out that the Liberals are much more

attractive than the Conservatives, and that the “Policia National [*sic*] . . . is the most unanimously hideous body of young men I ever laid eyes on, my dear,” adding, “I only saw one I would consider eligible and he looked ill at ease in his office. If there is anything to say for the Conservatives I didn’t hear it. They are an unpopular minority of ugly looking shits” (10–11).

Both as an individual—“I thought I was getting that sweet backwoods ass”—and as an American citizen, Burroughs, through the persona (Lee) that emerges in his narration of *Yage*, writes himself into this long history of domination and abuse. Harris writes, “The Lee who unites with the anti-colonial aspirations of Latin American peoples . . . is also the Lee who plays the imperialist Ugly American abroad,” concluding, “Such contradictions give his writing its unsettling power.”⁴⁵ A further contradiction is that the force of Burroughs’s critique derives in equal measure from his complicity and from the critical distance provided by his status as an “exile.” If utopian literature is always a comment on extant social institutions and norms, then travel writing is always directed homeward; as critical as Burroughs often can be of the people and places he encounters in *Yage*, he reserves his sharpest commentary for the United States, using South America as a foil or contrast to critique *yanqui* culture and especially U.S.–Latin America political and economic dynamics. He does not seem to mind the privilege his gringo status affords him. But more often than not, Burroughs is *playing* the ugly American, and for very strategic rhetorical purposes. In a telling series of episodes, Burroughs is mistaken for “a representative of the Texas Oil Company travelling incognito” and “treated like visiting royalty,” explaining that the “Texas Oil Company surveyed the area a few years ago, found no oil and pulled out. But everyone in the Putumayo believes the Texas Company will return. Like the second coming of Christ” (24). Burroughs fails to correct anyone and instead uses these instances of misprision to expose the profound psychic consequences of economic imperialism. He sees U.S. interests in Latin America as overdetermining all sorts of interpersonal relationships as well. When a customs agent “who had fought in Korea” tells him, innocently enough, “I like you guys,” Burroughs reflects, “I never feel flattered by this promiscuous liking for Americans. It is insulting to individual dignity, and no good ever comes from these America lovers.” It is worth noting that when Burroughs criticizes the locals, he rarely does so in an absolute sense; he is more critical of the effect, corrupting or otherwise, that their region’s relationship with the United States seems to produce in them. When Burroughs writes of “the predatory toothless

smile that greets the American all through South America (111), he merely describes the sad inverse of a very real history of neo/imperialist predation in Latin America and around the world.

Viewed as a whole, *Yage* gives the lie to the common complaint that Burroughs was either uninterested or simply unaware of the contemporary sociopolitical situation of the places in which he traveled and lived. This point of view is well represented by Barry Miles's contention—only half correct—that Burroughs and his compatriots at the Beat Hotel “could have been living anywhere.”⁴⁶ It is true that in his writing Burroughs almost instinctively transforms his immediate surroundings into something approaching a surrealist dreamscape, but this process of geographic transmutation is what gives Burroughs's travel writing (in the broadest sense) much of its critical force. As critics like Harris, Edwards, and Hibbard have been increasingly at pains to show, the author's “landscape[s] of ideas” are deeply informed by the specificity of local histories and contemporary political struggles. In the Tangier context, disappointed readers may feel that Burroughs's apparent ambivalence toward Moroccan nationalism is no more than an apology for colonial rule, but in *Yage* Burroughs's politics are unambiguous. His treatment of the causes and outcomes of Colombia's armed conflict are especially significant when considering the extent to which *Yage* set the stage for *Naked Lunch* and the all writing to come. Throughout *Yage* Burroughs gives constant reminders of the precarious political situation in Colombia while repeatedly expressing his solidarity with the Liberals and, by extension, the Colombian people. “The majority of Colombians are Liberals,” he notes (113). This is to suggest that conservatism is something, like Christianity, imported from Europe, while the natural disposition of South America is liberal.

At one point in the narrative, prevented from leaving the town of Puerto Asís while his tourist card is set in order, Burroughs muses, “If I was an active Liberal what could I do . . . aside from taking the place over at gun point? (22–23), implying that he *is* one in spirit or sympathy and that it would not take much to force him over the line. This sentiment is echoed in a (real) letter written to Ginsberg at the time; Burroughs tells him, “Wouldn't surprise me if I ended up with the Liberal guerillas,” a statement that anticipates his “Jihad Jitters” routine. Musing to Ginsberg in a 1956 letter about the possibility of rioting and revolution in the streets of Tangier, Burroughs writes, “If they stage a *jihad* I'm gonna wrap myself in a dirty sheet and rush out to do some jihading of my own.”⁴⁷ Keeping *Yage* in mind here could impart some nuance to what appears to

be a mocking and reckless response to the Moroccan situation. Later on in *Yage* Burroughs writes, "What *we* need is a new Bolivar who will really get the job done."⁴⁸ The author's disdain for the Conservative Party stems largely from its association with the Catholic Church, agent of deathliness and repression and a most "sombre" bearer of "the dead weight of Spain" (10). He recounts watching a Conservative propaganda film featuring a Catholic priest who "sat there in his black uniform nakedly revealed as the advocate of death . . . exuding a musty odor of spiritual decay." Burroughs's description hints at the deeper meaning of his own superficiality (i.e., the Liberals are better looking than the Conservatives) as having more to do with appearance versus reality. The ugliness of the Conservative Party and its allies is hypocrisy shining through the facade, revealing "cancerous activity sterile and blighting" in the place of so-called social progress or good works (13).

Worst of all, the Conservatives have managed to suffuse the entire country with an atmosphere of paranoia and dread. Describing the capital of Putumayo, Burroughs writes,

Mocoa has about 2000 inhabitants and sixty nacional cops. One of them rides around all day through the four streets of the town on a motor bicycle. You can hear him from any place in town. . . . The police have a brass band they bang around three or four times a day starting in the early morning. I never saw any signs of disorder in this town which is well out of the war zone. But there is an air of unresolved and insoluble tension about Mocoa, the agencies of control out in force to put down an uprising which does not occur. Mocoa is The End Of The Road. A final stalemate with the cop riding around and around on his motor bicycle for all eternity. (17)

The Policía Nacional, which Burroughs described earlier as "the Palace Guard of the Conservative Party" (10), have created the kind of surveillance state that will become an obsession in Burroughs's writing. Phrases like "final stalemate" and "for all eternity" also seem to suggest that the malaise he sees all around him runs much deeper than the immediate political straits.

This much longer, multilayered history becomes visible in the palimpsest of Beat travel writing, and a markedly expansive view of South American culture and human history pervades *Yage*. Burroughs is traveling in southwestern Colombia and stopped over in the Andean town of Pasto when he writes, "I went into a cantina and drank aguardiente and played the mountain music on the juke box. There is something archaic in this music strangely familiar, very old and very sad. Decidedly not Spanish in

origin, nor is it oriental. Shepherd music played on a bamboo instrument like a panpipe, pre-classic, Etruscan perhaps. I have heard similar music in the mountains of Albania where pre-Greek, Illyrian racial strains linger. A phylogenetic nostalgia conveyed by this music—Altantean?” (14).⁴⁹ Like Kerouac’s “Fellahin Indians,” the “Illyrian racial strains” Burroughs hears in this “mountain music” is straight out of Oswald Spengler, and the notion of an aboriginal race that remains outside of history and so survives the rise and fall of Western civilization undoubtedly informs Burroughs’s characterization of Latin America. The status of music in this passage—its ability to convey a “phylogenetic nostalgia”—is also worth remarking, as is the reference to a “panpipe,” which resurfaces in the following chapter in reference to both Gysin and Paul Bowles. The same charges of orientalism that apply to Kerouac’s essentialist depiction of the indigenous Mexicans he encounters in *On the Road* could certainly apply here, but the following passage works to temper such a viewpoint:

Nothing human is foreign or shocking to a South American. I am speaking of the South American at best, a special race part Indian, part white, part God knows what. He is not, as one is apt to think at first fundamentally an Oriental nor does he belong to the West. He is something special unlike anything else. He has been blocked from expression by the Spanish and the Catholic Church. What we need is a new Bolivar who will really get the job done. This is I think what the Colombian Civil War is basically about—the fundamental split between the South American Potential and the Repressive Spanish life-fearing character armadillos. I never felt myself so definitely on one side and unable to see any redeeming features in the other. South America is a mixture of strains all necessary to realize the potential form. They need white blood as they know—Myth of White God—and what did they get but the fucking Spaniards. Still they had the advantage of weakness. Never would have gotten the English out of here. They would have created that atrocity known as a White Man’s Country. (38)

Burroughs’s South Americans are now portrayed as actors in their own history (i.e., “the Colombian Civil War”). With this shift, he has introduced a good deal of history contingency, not just in terms of Colombia’s immediate conflict but also in terms of the entire colonial history of Latin America. The “Myth of White God” refers of course to Cortés as the embodiment of the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl. When Burroughs suggests that indigenous Americans “need white blood as they know,” he again acts to restore to them a certain agency, for however spurious the interpretation may be, in Burroughs’s mind it’s the Aztecs’

myth, not the Europeans'. When he adds, "and what did they get but the fucking Spaniards," he reminds us that things could have gone another way. Most important in this passage, however, is Burroughs's insistence on South American hybridity, his claim that "South America is a mixture of strains all necessary to realize the potential form." This notion of a genetic assemblage, of humanity as "composite," form the basis of key passages describing not only the yagé experience but also the Interzone of *Naked Lunch*. Just as Burroughs asserts the historicity and historical contingency of those he encounters in his yagé quest, he also conceives of their future: one in which we all have a stake in realizing the potential human form.

The future envisioned in Burroughs's Composite City is worlded and worldly, composed of "the blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized" (50). Such potentialities are expressed in transgressive combinations of mongrel hybridity, and the "market" in *Yage* and *Naked Lunch* is the locus and mechanism of that expression.⁵⁰ The transactions that take place there are not calculated or calculable in economic terms; they are negotiations in the Deleuzian sense of engendering mutual transformation and leading to unpredictable outcomes. And, like everything Burroughsian, these take on a (geo)political edge. According to Brian Edwards, in *Naked Lunch* Burroughs "stages" an anal economy that, in particular, queers the "American supremacist logic" of the Cold War period.⁵¹ Site of bizarre fetishes and "obsolete unthinkable trades," the Composite City's market, which becomes Interzone's City Market, perverts the flow of capital and commodities between core and periphery, North and Global South, and mocks the acquisitiveness of a Cocoa Commission or a Texas Oil.

The yagé vision comprises a vast geography, and Burroughs uses the force of that vision to direct a (by now familiar) process of psychic and linguistic remapping. Its terrain is reminiscent of Kerouac's worlded landscapes in *Mexico City Blues* and in the passages from *On the Road* explored in chapter 1. But while Kerouac is concerned with "the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches like a belt across the equatorial belly of the world," Burroughs's city, with its "vast silent market" of "human potentials," is dynamic and mutable and open to the unknown possibilities of a future-to-come.⁵² Far from imaginary, Burroughs's vision arises and is formed from the very real geography, history, and politics of South America. The "mountain music" he heard

earlier on the cantina jukebox gave him a similar kind of “phylogenetic nostalgia” (14) as his yagé visions, and what he later calls “the South American at [his] best, a special race part Indian, part white, part God knows what” (38) is a manifestation *in time* of the generative, even utopian, hybridity of the Composite City.

For Burroughs, yagé (like writing, like traveling) is about making connections, making contact. When he met Doc Schindler—the figure of ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes, who traveled extensively in the Amazon researching indigenous use of hallucinogenic plant species—the first thing Burroughs asked regarding ayahuasca is “about the telepathy angle” (9), which he had already made reference to in both *Junky* and *Queer*. The potential for a deeper kind of interpersonal communication to develop through its use is in large part what compelled Burroughs to seek out the drug. The fictive audience for his yagé letters, Ginsberg, as friend, lover, protégé, enables Burroughs’s epistles to become a kind of telepathy as well. In *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* and elsewhere, Harris highlights the negative potential of the “telepathy angle.” Indeed, the first mention of yagé in the final pages of *Junky* connects the drug to “Russian experiments on slave labor,” writing, “They want to induce states of automatic obedience and literal thought control. The basic con. No build-up, no routine, just move in on someone’s psyche and give orders.”⁵³ His “no routine” reference is fitting: as Harris notes, “Lee’s fantasy of controlling and objectifying Allerton through yagé” in *Queer* also motivates his increasingly elaborate verbal routines in the novel.⁵⁴ Yet Burroughs ultimately views telepathy as a disruptive force, one that short-circuits the usual relations of power. Of the Soviets he writes, “The deal is certain to backfire because telepathy is not of its nature a one-way set-up, or a set-up of sender and receiver at all.”⁵⁵ This last statement, while it seems to foreclose what Lee says he’s after in *Queer* and *Yage*, also points to the positive, liberatory potential of telepathy—along with everything that Burroughs might substitute for telepathy in a metonymic chain that includes, finally, writing itself. In *Wising Up the Marks*, Timothy Murphy places the emphasis on telepathy’s connective and even community-forming potential, although he notes its provisional status in Burroughs’s oeuvre: “The ‘telepathic community’ will become a limitation for Burroughs later, but for now [in *Queer*] it suffices.”⁵⁶

Understanding yagé is a matter of recognizing and uncovering hidden linkages and relationships. Describing the *brujo* who initiates his first successful (if rather overwhelming) ayahuasca experience, Burroughs writes, “The medicine man was around 70 with a baby smooth face. There was a

sly gentleness about him like an old-time junkie” (25). The medicine man is a Beat character, no doubt. But what Burroughs continues to stress is the insistently geographic (and worlded) character of the yagé experience. There with the *brujo*, feeling the first effects of the ayahuasca, “The hut took on an archaic far-Pacific look with Easter Island heads carved in the support posts” (26). The journey to Easter Island, this time “in an outrigger canoe” (50), will be retraced in the final Composite City episode: another example of the subtle interplay of space and time in *Yage* and one that points to a dense network of worlded energies suffusing the very landscape of South America.

The Composite City is a “collage of phrases and images taken from the preceding letters,” but one that cuts across not just *Yage* but Burroughs’s entire body of work.⁵⁷ In an addition to the original scene in his “Notes from Yage State” in *Naked Lunch*, he mentions a further yagé-becoming: “I feel myself turning into a Negress, the black color silently invading my flesh” (99). In *Yage* Burroughs had declared, “The only element in Panama I contact are the hip spades” (5). The strange condition called “Latah,” which is first described to Burroughs by Doc Schindler in these terms: “Latah is a condition occurring in South East Asia. Otherwise normal, the Latah cannot help doing whatever anyone tells him to do once his attention has been attracted by touching him or calling his name” (30) that appears throughout *Naked Lunch* is one facet of that novel’s exploration and interrogation of “Control.”⁵⁸ Without downplaying the importance of Morocco and International Tangier in the years just prior to independence to the creation of *Naked Lunch*, in a Burroughsian world-imaginary where textuality and geography, text and world, are co-constitutive, one must recognize the Interzone as a vastly more complex spatial configuration. It is Tangier, but it is also Latin America, and given Burroughs’s rather unambiguous politics in *Yage*, readers must also reconsider any easy conclusions about his politics in *Naked Lunch*.

Interzone Intertext: Burroughs and Artaud

The *Yage* text-network extends beyond Burroughs’s writing alone. In his Latin American notebook, for example, he writes, “St-Perse. *This is Yage poetry*,” referring to French diplomat and Nobel Prize winning poet Saint-John Perse.⁵⁹ But there is a more significant, though mostly unremarked, precursor to Burroughs and the yagé quest, and that is Antonin Artaud, who is turning out to be a major reference point in worlded Beat writing: influencing Baraka and his Revolutionary Theatre, inspiring

Michael McClure's plays and Allen Ginsberg's poetry, and informing the hieratic syncretism of Philip Lamantia's lifelong vision quest. I would like to suggest that *Yage* is a rewriting of Artaud's *Voyage au pays des Tarahumaras* (published in English as *The Peyote Dance*), which documents his 1936 travels through Mexico's Sierra Madre in search of the nearly lost peyote rites of the Tarahumaras. The striking parallels between these two texts involve far more than a shared interest in hallucinogens, and just as reading *Naked Lunch* through *Yage* has opened up new readings of both, reading *Yage* through *Peyote Dance* clarifies even further the stakes of their worlded imaginaries.⁶⁰

If *Yage* is structured by a performative and parodic ethnographic knowledge, Artaud plays the role of junky archaeologist. After being waylaid in Mexico City for some weeks, he is finally on his way to meet the Tarahumaras, traveling on horseback and wracked by the pain of opiate withdrawal. He records visions of oddly shaped stones peering out at him from the forest, writing, "The land of the Tarahumara is full of signs, forms, and natural effigies which in no way seem the result of chance. . . . Of course, there are places on the earth where Nature, moved by a kind of intelligent whim, has sculpted human forms. But here the case is different, for it is over the whole *geographic expanse of a race* that Nature *has chosen to speak*." Artaud goes on to say, "If the greater part of the Tarahumara race is indigenous, and if, as they claim, they fell out of the sky into the Sierra, one may say that they fell into a *Nature that was already prepared*."⁶¹ Artaud refers to these "natural effigies" of tormented and crucified human forms throughout his writings from the Sierra Madre. For Artaud the archaeologist, the earth reveals *itself*, and his intensely paranoid anthropomorphism wants to suggest the closest correspondence between the Tarahumara and the land they inhabit. Perhaps too close for comfort, from our vantage point, wary of the "orientalist trap"—as when Artaud claims that the Tarahumara live somehow outside of history, one with the earth—but Artaud's essentialism becomes much more interesting when we see what it is pitted *against*.

The habitually destitute Artaud financed his trip to Mexico by traveling as a cultural envoy of the French government. It was the French Ministry of Education that organized a series of well-attended lectures delivered by Artaud at the National University in Mexico City. The best known of these is titled "Surrealism and Revolution." In it, he described his break with André Breton and the surrealists a decade earlier, precipitated by Breton's growing allegiance to the Communist Party. Artaud declared that Breton's surrealism had itself "become a party."⁶² He de-

scribed Marxism as a kind of spiritual imperialism, another nefarious product of Artaud's dirty word: "civilization." He likewise took the opportunity to speak directly to the "youth of Mexico" (as he repeatedly, almost affectionately, called them), urging them to abandon Marx and instead embrace the native traditions of their land. This is a theme Artaud will return to again and again in his writings from Mexico: the need to refound the revolution on indigenous principles that, for him, will lead to a much more profound revitalization of the human spirit and become a model for the rest of the world.

For Artaud, the need for a third term, or a way out, is especially acute because the "progressive" forces of nationalist Mexico have proven as hostile to indigenous, and potentially subversive, cultural practices as the Spanish missionaries before them. One local government official he befriends told him, "The trouble is that when they have taken Peyote, they no longer obey us."⁶³ Artaud reports that a peyote crop had recently been destroyed by federal soldiers under orders to prevent its cultivation, and in an open letter to the governors of Mexico, published in *El Nacional*, he extols the virtues of their native cultures and pleads with them to help preserve these cultures. In this, Artaud's project is remarkably similar to that of Paul Bowles when he travels around Morocco in the late 1950s, recording indigenous music for the U.S. Library of Congress, native cultural traditions he felt were under threat of extinction amid the modernizing fervor of many Moroccan nationalists.

This all may sound rather presumptuous: Western Man come to restore the native to his or her proper, essential way of life. Artaud asked in despair, "And all this, for what? For a dance, for a rite of lost Indians who no longer even know who they are or where they come from and who, when you question them, answer with tales whose connection and secret they have lost" (46). Yet Artaud's dual mission in Mexico—his participatory psycho-ethnography among the Tarahumara and his polemical instigations among the students and intelligentsia in Mexico City—remains significant in that reconciling or aligning modern political history with more ancient struggles and ways of being is central to his entire project as a writer and artist. His gaze cast back over the millennia is also forward-looking, and in this way the Tarahumara and their mysteries constitute a middle path, or a third term, for Artaud: between colonialism and nationalism, capitalism and Marxism, culture and civilization.

When he named a chapter of his Tarahumara book "Supplément au voyage au pays des Tarahumaras," Artaud placed himself in a tradition of travel writing as social critique that stretches back to the Enlightenment.

The reference is to Denis Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772), a satirical "addition" to Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's famous travelogue. Along with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) and similar works, Diderot's *Supplément* makes it clear that, just as utopia is at some level a critique of the world *as it is*, every travel narrative is also about one's place of departure. What is so remarkable about Artaud's "Supplément" is that he turns his critical gaze back on himself and acknowledges the epistemological limitations of his peyote quest. Like *Peyote Dance*, Burroughs's quasi-ethnographic travelogue is full of barely concealed political content, taking every opportunity to criticize U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. But he makes that critique all the more trenchant by recognizing and then refusing to disavow his own complicity.

A worlded critique is one that looks beyond the nation-state and toward a totality not yet captured by the deracinating transcendence of the global and globalization. From Mexico in 1936 Artaud offers us a prescient warning about the consequences of our ever-flattening world. In another piece written for *El Nacional*, he writes, "The present civilization of Europe is in a state of bankruptcy. Dualistic Europe no longer has anything to offer the world but an incredible pulverization of cultures. To extract a new unity from this infinity of separate cultures is a necessity. . . . Although there may be a hundred cultures in Europe, there is only one civilization—a civilization which has its own laws. Anyone who is not provided with machines, guns, airplanes, bombs, and poisonous gases inevitably becomes the victim of his better-armed neighbor."⁶⁴ Artaud specifically refers to the recent invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy. He suggests, however, that in the face of Western hegemony, Mexico possesses the "secret of its eternal culture" that will render it invulnerable. Artaud, in other words, uses the very rootedness and singularity of the Tarahumara to suggest how we might achieve the furthest reaching social transformation. In his second Theatre of Cruelty manifesto, composed three years before his trip to Mexico, Artaud had already demonstrated his conviction that indigenous beliefs and ways of being were the only possible antidote to the culturally bankrupt West. Burroughs echoes Artaud's cataclysmic sense of the future when he writes of Tangier as "the slowing pulse of a decayed civilization, that only war can quicken."⁶⁵

Recent critics interested in how *Naked Lunch* has been informed by its author's Tangier milieu have registered a deep ambivalence on Burroughs's part when it comes to Morocco's struggle for independence. This

ambivalence often hinges on a distinction between his sympathy with the oppressed Moroccan people and his contempt for what he felt were the self-serving interests of nationalist party leaders—a conflict that in *Naked Lunch* plays out between the Party Leader and the “Ordinary Men and Women” in the routine by that name. As Allen Hibbard puts it, “On the one hand, in contrast to some of his fellow expatriates who seemed to lament the loss of the colonial period, Burroughs remained open to possibilities for change; on the other, he registers a degree of skepticism toward the nationalists’ motives.”⁶⁶ Critics have also noted that Burroughs’s ambiguous attitude toward Moroccan independence stems from a more fundamental critique of the nation-state itself: “His disapproval of the nation form,” argues Edwards, “extends to the Maghrebi nationalists’ projected imposition of a new nation and culture of control to substitute for French colonialism.”⁶⁷ For Burroughs, a victory for nationalist Morocco would be no victory at all, and this sentiment aligns him with Artaud and Bowles and their sense that the nation form is ultimately incompatible with what Marx once called our “species-being.”

Especially vexing is Burroughs’s response to the civil unrest in the turbulent years prior to and following Moroccan independence: the riots that swept across Morocco and threatened to erupt in Tangier as well. In a letter to Ginsberg meant to allay Kerouac’s fears about traveling there, he writes, “TANGER IS AS SAFE AS ANY TOWN I EVER LIVE IN. . . . ARABS ARE NOT VIOLENT. . . . Riots are the accumulated, just resentment of a people subjected to outrageous brutalities by the French cops used to strew blood and teeth over a city block in the Southern Zone.” In an earlier letter to Ginsberg, he writes, “The possibility of an all-out riot is like a tonic, like ozone in the air. . . . I have no nostalgia for the old days in Morocco, which I never saw. Right now is for me.”⁶⁸ At moments like these Burroughs is clearly sympathetic to the Moroccans’ anticolonial aspirations, but he can also be cynical and mocking; in *Naked Lunch* he portrays imagined riots as grotesque orgies of violence. Writing about such scenes, Kurt Hemmer is sharply critical of Burroughs’s distortions. He argues that “the violence associated with Arabs in *Naked Lunch* severs their connection to imperialism’s despotism by becoming so shocking as to eclipse any semblance to the immediate politics behind the images.” Hemmer goes on to assert that “the riots in Tangier were stimulating not only intellectually but, more important, aesthetically,” and as a result “an immediate engagement with the Moroccan revolution is lost in the excessiveness of both form and content.”⁶⁹ Nothing in Burroughs, however, is ever *merely* aesthetic, and here too the example of Artaud

can be useful. The shock of aestheticized violence in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty—inseparable from the West's original sin of colonialism—becomes a tool and a necessary first step in the revolution to come. Amiri Baraka recognized this and premised his own Revolutionary Theatre on the salutary function of performative violence. In a similar vein Burroughs's kaleidoscope of obscene violence in *Naked Lunch* is used to launch an avant-garde critique of colonialism that reverberates far beyond that one work and its immediate Moroccan context.

Allen Hibbard and Kurt Hemmer have both sought to reconsider the role played by Tangier in Burroughs's best-known novel. As Hibbard puts it, "There would be no *Naked Lunch*, at least not in the form we know it, without Burroughs' sojourn in Tangier."⁷⁰ Hemmer takes the importance of Tangier as given, but he remains less optimistic than either Hibbard or Edwards about the possibility of reconciling the novel's ambivalence toward Morocco's nationalist aspirations. "Although Burroughs might not have been completely hostile to Moroccan nationalism," writes Hemmer, "*Naked Lunch* does not make a sustained stand against colonialism and often does not resist the arrogance of imperialism."⁷¹ Further, while Hibbard and also Edwards acknowledge the importance of the Composite City vision and note its origin in *Yage*, they believe it finds its proper place, so to speak, in *Naked Lunch*. Hibbard writes, "Although Burroughs may have had a notion of the 'composite city' before he landed in Tangier, the dream-like quality of the North African city provided an ideal place for the vision to blossom" (61). And, according to Edwards, "Burroughs's vision of a zone of potential, of larval possibility, would crystallize in [Tangier]—imagined before arrival during his yagé expeditions in South America (and maintaining his prophetic descriptions of a Composite City from Peru in 1953) but developed and finding its form after Burroughs's experience with the Zoco Chico" (166).

I am reminded of the opening chapter of Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and the distinction Žižek makes between analyzing the content of dreams and the dream form itself.⁷² That is to say, I don't wish simply to replace *Naked Lunch* with *Yage* or Morocco with Mexico as the key to unlock the final significance of Burroughs work; rather, I am interested in how the *very form* of these transpositions (whether of times, topographies, genres, identities, etc.) gives rise to a worlded panorama of radical possibility throughout his oeuvre. To read *Naked Lunch* solely as depicting Tangier in the waning days of its international status is to be confounded by Burroughs's seeming unwillingness or inability to confront the realities of Moroccan independence. Reading the novel

alongside and *through* Burroughs's oeuvre taken as a whole—which the palimpsestic nature of his work encourages us to do—brings into view a complex reckoning with colonialism and decolonization.

Postprandial Reading: Burroughs after Naked Lunch

Burroughs's career as a writer tends to get read in a very un-Burroughsian manner: that is to say, a linear progression from the straightforward, naturalistic prose of *Junky* and *Queer* to the explosion of the routines in the antinarrative of *Naked Lunch* to the radical experimentation of the cut-up period and beyond. After the *Nova* trilogy, however, Burroughs largely abandoned the cut-ups that had defined him as a postmodern writer in the tradition of Beckett, Stein, and Joyce.⁷³ And his return to the routine form as the major organizing principle of his work parallels another return that actually began in *Nova*. Even if *Naked Lunch* can still properly be called his “Tangier novel,” the next work to be published, *The Soft Machine* (1961), will take readers right back to Mexico. Ian MacFayden writes of *Naked Lunch* that “Mexico is all but lost in the shuffle and cut” and yet still exists in “spectral” form; in *Soft Machine* the author supplies that specter with flesh and bone.⁷⁴ Burroughs will continue to produce challenging and innovative prose for decades to come, much of it again centering in Latin America, and tracing this post-*Naked Lunch* itinerary opens up paths first staked out in Burroughs's earliest work.

New editions of *Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express* introduce still more textual, thematic, and geographic links; Harris even cites a letter from Paul Bowles to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, suggesting that Burroughs had intended for the bulk of his “In Search of Yage” material to appear in *Soft Machine*.⁷⁵ The first of the three “cut-up novels,” *Soft Machine* picks back up with Agent Lee, who is soon marching through Mexico with a gang of wild boys—“I picked thirty of the most likely and suitable lads all things considered and we moved South up over the mountains and down the other side and into the jungle”—and battling against the forces of Trak.⁷⁶ The Latin American setting suggests that Burroughs has imperial power and anticolonial rebellion specifically in mind. Before long, they arrive at what is clearly an iteration of the Composite City: “Up a great tidal river to the port city stuck in water hyacinths and banana rafts—The city is an intricate split-bamboo structure in some places six stories high overhanging the street propped up by beams and sections of railroad track and concrete pillars, an arcade from

the warm rain that falls at half hour intervals” (36). And with the return to a familiar landscape comes a huge shift in emphasis from individual to collective action. At this particular moment, it is the “Vagos Jugadores de Pelota, *sola esperanza del mundo*,” who can call forth “a million adolescents shattering the customs barriers and frontiers of time, swinging out of the jungle with Tarzan cries, crash landing perilous tin planes and rockets, leaping from trucks and banana rafts, charge through the black dust of mountain wind like death in the throat” (37). Their literally *transgressive* acts (“shattering the customs barriers and frontiers of time”) give rise to an entire “Wild Boys” mythology in Burroughs’s work post-*Naked Lunch*. Still in a “larval state” in *Soft Machine*, this mythology bursts forth in *The Wild Boys* (1969), which also begins in Mexico, and grows ever more elaborate with the oppositional and queer communities of Burroughs’s *Red Night* trilogy.

When Burroughs revised *Soft Machine* for publication in the United States in 1966, the entirely new narrative episode “The Mayan Caper” became the centerpiece of this second edition. Harris actually dates the chapter to late 1962, which is when Burroughs was also finishing up *Yage*.⁷⁷ In it, Lee receives a body transplant and is sent back in time to destroy the Maya “control calendar,” and his preparations turn out to be a reiteration of Burroughs’s yagé experiences. (The author *has* described them as “space time travel,” and *Soft Machine* is replete with images from *Yage*.) The “Mayan Caper” chapter is made up of composites—composite words, composite images, composite bodies—as Burroughs allegorizes the transition from the yagé experience to the cut-up experience, the development of the cut-ups out of earlier textual experiments centering on the Composite City vision.⁷⁸ When Lee infiltrates the temple and sabotages the “control machine” with “sound and image track rebellion,” the machine dismantles itself (in a scene reminiscent of Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony”) with these words: “Cut word lines—Cut music lines—Smash the control images—Smash the control machine—Burn the books—Kill the priests—Kill! Kill! Kill!—” (96–97). (These last exclamations echo Lear late in Shakespeare’s play.) With the immense performative energy of the cut-ups acting as catalyst, yagé does indeed become the “final fix.”

In “William S. Burroughs and the Maya Gods of Death,” Paul Wild writes, “Burroughs had many valid reasons to cast Maya priests as emblems of control and death even though he contradicted the mid-century archaeological view of the Maya as a benevolent theocracy. In recognizing the violence in Maya culture Burroughs was remarkably prescient.”⁷⁹ Wild is generally sympathetic to Burroughs’s reading of the Maya, although he

takes the author to task for certain inaccuracies and misrepresentations. On the whole Wild is being overly positivistic. As he himself suggests, the most important question to ask is how Burroughs is *using* the Maya in *Soft Machine* and elsewhere. One thing he is not doing is romanticizing; the Maya have built up a control society on par with anything produced by the West. Burroughs's vilification of the priestly class—misplaced, according to Wild—allows him to voice a downright populist point of view that actually has a lot in common with his attitude toward the Moroccan situation (sympathy with the people of Morocco, mistrust of party leaders, etc.).

In *Yage* Burroughs expressed outright solidarity with the Liberals, also a populist gesture if we believe him that “the majority of Colombians are Liberals” aligned against the Conservatives and thus the “dead weight of Spain.” At the heart of Burroughs's work, whether it be *Yage* or *Naked Lunch* or *Nova* or the later novels, is a singular concern with imperialism and control in all its forms, and not merely in an abstract sense but in response to a very long and very real history of colonial oppression in Latin America and across the globe. *Cities of the Red Night*, a beautiful and important book that Burroughs worked on through much of the 1970s, tells the story of a loose confederation of outlaws bent on toppling Spanish and British colonial rule in the Americas. The novel's parallel plots unfold both in the sixteenth century and in what Brion Gysin calls “Present Time,” where a shadowy organization plots world domination from its South American headquarters, and one is again reminded of Artaud, who explains his imagined production *The Conquest of Mexico* by saying, “The subject of the Conquest has been chosen because *it concerns the present*.” Poised on the great world-historical moment of decolonization—the “present” of Beat writing—Beat writers are perfectly positioned to launch a postcolonial critique, and the suggestion that there exists something that might accurately be called “postcolonial Beat literature” will come to the fore in the next chapter on Gysin's novel *The Process*.