humanities

Keep on Rolling Under the Stars

Green Readings on the Beat Generation

Edited by

Chad Weidner

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Humanities*

www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities

MDPI

Keep on Rolling Under the Stars: Green Readings on the Beat Generation

Keep on Rolling Under the Stars: Green Readings on the Beat Generation

Editor

Chad Weidner

MDPI • Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Manchester • Tokyo • Cluj • Tianjin

Editor
Chad Weidner
University College Roosevelt
The Netherlands

Editorial Office
MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Humanities* (ISSN 2076-0787) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/green_readings).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

ISBN 978-3-0365-2341-5 (Hbk)
ISBN 978-3-0365-2342-2 (PDF)

© 2022 by the authors. Articles in this book are Open Access and distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license, which allows users to download, copy and build upon published articles, as long as the author and publisher are properly credited, which ensures maximum dissemination and a wider impact of our publications.
The book as a whole is distributed by MDPI under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND.

Contents

About the Editor . . . . **vii**

Preface to "Keep on Rolling Under the Stars: Green Readings on the Beat Generation" . . . . **ix**

Rona Cran
Poems in the World: The Ecopoetics of Anne Waldman's *Life Notes*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 50, doi:10.3390/h10010050 . . . . **1**

Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo
On Webbed Monsters, Revolutionary Activists and Plutonium Glow: Eco-Crisis in Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 4, doi:10.3390/h10010004 . . . . **15**

Henrikus Joko Yulianto
Material Overconsumption as Ecological Polemics in Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Gary Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra": Re-Envisioning Beat Critiques of Anthropocentric Materialism
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 78, doi:10.3390/h10020078 . . . . **29**

Alexandre Ferrere
Creative Environments: The Geo-Poetics of Allen Ginsberg
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2020**, *9*, 101, doi:10.3390/h9030101 . . . . **45**

Alexander Greiffenstern
Baboons, Centipedes, and Lemurs: Becoming-Animal from *Queer* to *Ghost of Chance*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 51, doi:10.3390/h10010051 . . . . **61**

Eva-Maria Hanser
'Muzak for Frogs'—Representations of 'Nature' in *Decoder* (1984)
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 67, doi:10.3390/h10020067 . . . . **71**

Antonio J. Bonome
McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 74, doi:10.3390/h10020074 . . . . **87**

Steen Ledet Christiansen
The Future of Extinction: William S. Burroughs' *The Western Lands*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2020**, *9*, 142, doi:10.3390/h9040142 . . . . **99**

George Hart
The Dark Ecology of *Naked Lunch*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2020**, *9*, 130, doi:10.3390/h9040130 . . . . **115**

Michael Amundsen
Green Jack: Naïveté, Frontier and Ecotopia in *On the Road*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2021**, *10*, 37, doi:10.3390/h10010037 . . . . **125**

Susan Signe Morrison
"[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage": The Resilience of Pilgrimage Ecopoetics and Slow Travel from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*
Reprinted from: *Humanities* **2020**, *9*, 117, doi:10.3390/h9040117 . . . . **137**

About the Editor

Chad Weidner is an American/Belgian humanist and writer, and works as Head Tutor at University College Roosevelt, an undergraduate faculty of Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He teaches liberal arts, English, and film. He was a scholar in residence at the University of Colorado. He was previously a Senior Research Fellow in the Environmental Humanities at Utrecht University, where he worked with Rosi Braidotti. His PhD was written on ecocriticism at Ghent University (Belgium), and he got his MA from the University of Nebraska. He publishes on William Burroughs, the Beat Generation, ecocriticism, and film. His books include *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* (Southern Illinois UP, 2016) and *Fractured Ecologies* (EyeCorner Press, 2020).

Preface to ”Keep on Rolling Under the Stars: Green Readings on the Beat Generation”

The Beat Generation remains a vibrant area of study, and Beat culture is deeply infused with ecological subjects. Allen Ginsberg invented the term ”Flower Power” in 1965. The expression was seized by the counterculture movement as a slogan to reject consumerism and conflict. Beat texts also deal with environmental subjects and use complex textual strategies to uncover the sources of our existential predicament. The Beats often find the source of our crisis is located within ourselves. This collection takes a line from Jack Kerouac’s On the Road as a point to begin the discussion: ”there was nowhere to go but everywhere, so just keep on rolling under the stars.” The Beats were fascinated with movement, transcendence, and nature. This diverse collection of papers from junior and senior scholars is the first to really place the Beat Generation in conversation with the environment. A diverse number of contributors from Asia, Europe, and North America address essential subjects. The hope is that this collection makes a contribution to Beat Studies and the environmental humanities and initiates more research on Beat bohemian cultures and nature.

I am grateful for the open access philosophy of Humanities.

Cover art by Marijn Adams.

Chad Weidner
Editor

humanities

MDPI

Article

Poems in the World: The Ecopoetics of Anne Waldman's *Life Notes*

Rona Cran

Department of English, College of Arts and Law, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK; r.cran@bham.ac.uk

Abstract: This essay argues that Anne Waldman's 1973 selected poems, *Life Notes*, articulates a vision of the environment that is positively and reparatively enmeshed with language and culture. Embracing the paradox at the heart of the best environmental writing, *Life Notes* reveals our natural environments to be at once legible and unknowable, and embodies this through experimental forms, language, and typography. This collection of poems, which has yet to be paid significant critical attention (despite Waldman's renowned status as a poet), artfully mediates the relationship between word and world, giving voice, shape, and form to what we might call the poet's 'ecology of knowing', per Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation. Through a sustained process of imaginative elision of the human and nonhuman, I argue, Waldman illuminates the ways in which the 'natural' world is almost always touched by the human, and refutes the widely-held cultural fantasy that nature is self-evidently restorative or redemptive and thereby somehow at a remove from humankind. *Life Notes*, I suggest, is a 'dissipative structure', critically entangled with the everyday environment out of which it emerges and with which it remains 'involved in a continual exchange of energy' (Waldman).

Keywords: Anne Waldman; ecopoetry; ecocriticism; green reading; Beat women; New York School; New American Poetry; poetry; reparative reading; environment; environmental humanities; Black Mountain

Citation: Cran, Rona. 2021. Poems in the World: The Ecopoetics of Anne Waldman's *Life Notes*. *Humanities* 10: 50. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010050

Received: 24 January 2021
Accepted: 5 March 2021
Published: 12 March 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The cover of Anne Waldman's second book of selected poems, *Life Notes*, published in 1973 by Bobbs-Merrill, is a watercolor by her friend and collaborator, the artist Joe Brainard. Brainard's drawings also appear inside the book, and his cover was one of the first designs by an openly queer artist to appear on a book put out by a major publisher. It features a solitary yellow pansy emerging from a ground of verdant foliage, the deep greens and dark blacks igniting the buttery flower so that it seems to transcend its apparent enmeshment with the page, rising toward the reader and followed, just below, by the words 'LIFE NOTES', in yellow handwritten caps, and then 'Anne Waldman', in Waldman's own yellow cursive. The cover is shimmeringly vivacious, and unmistakably aligns the book not just with the natural and the living but with the rooted (plants) and the kinetic or processual (Waldman herself, as suggested by her handwriting, and by the idea of 'notes', often written in haste or underpinned by the promise of return and development). The title juxtaposes gravity ('life') with levity ('notes', suggestive of attentive ephemerality, of musings, jottings, reminders, or passing thoughts). In doing so, it indicates Waldman's refusal (in a manner emblematic of both Beat and New York School writing) to parcel off the serious from the light-hearted. But beyond this, it also gestures toward her belief in the critical entanglement of culture with existence, or 'language ritual as open-ended survival', and to her view of herself, and indeed 'all living things', as 'dissipative structures . . . involved in a continual exchange of energy with the environment' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). Like Brainard's flower, Waldman, too, is enmeshed with both culture and nature, and the joy she takes in both suggests that the two are powerfully connected. 'I am interested in the power language has, and particularly in how I use it out of this female body and

awareness to change my own consciousness and that of the people around me', she writes in 'I is Another: Dissipative Structures', an important essay on 'feminine energy' and open systems in poetry which anticipates Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, published in *Fast Speaking Woman* in 1996 (128). These, then, are her notes for life.

What is at stake for Waldman in *Life Notes*? The book appeared halfway through her tenure as Director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, and relatively early in what has been a long and successful career as a poet, activist, performer, teacher, and cultural organizer, whose work has been associated with the Beats, the New York School, and Black Mountain, in addition to being both framed and acknowledged as 'Outrider' and fundamentally experimental. Typically of Waldman's work in poetry across her oeuvre, *Life Notes* is informed in various ways by a broad intersection of her political, philosophical, and creative preoccupations. Dedicated 'to all the lively ladies', *Life Notes* announces itself as a feminist project, in keeping with its author's modelling of feminism-through-practice in her leadership of the Poetry Project and editorship of *Angel Hair* and *The World* magazines, as well as her subsequent clear positioning of texts including the epic poem *The Iovis Trilogy* Waldman (2011) and *Trickster Feminism* Waldman (2018) as feminist undertakings. The collection pre-dates by about a year Françoise d'Eaubonne's coining of the term 'ecofeminism' in *Le Féminisme ou la* Mort (1974), but it shares d'Eaubonne's understanding of the intractable enmeshment of patriarchy and the oppression of both women and the natural world, and puts into dialogue Waldman's views on the rights of women and her attentiveness to her environment. It is also underpinned by her Buddhist sensibilities (she first became a student of Buddhism in the late 1960s) and by her related critique of war and industrialization. Thematically, *Life Notes* is aligned with the New American Poetry in its 'powerful hunger for closer contact with the most taken-for-granted and familiar aspects of the quotidian, a desire for greater knowledge [. . .] of our daily lives' (Epstein 2016, p. 4). Formally and stylistically, it is experimental, employing what Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies elsewhere in Waldman's work (to my knowledge, *Life Notes* itself has not until now been approached critically) as 'tactics of heterogeneity of diction and allusion, and an enhanced textuality as the page of poetry holds more than usual—more space, marks, non-letters, pictures, gestures, diagrams' (DuPlessis 2006, p. 180). In its emphasis on close observation, its efforts to fuse word and world, and its flowing composition by field (an approach Waldman describes as 'really catching the world as it flies with its minute particulars' (Waldman 1998, n.p.)), *Life Notes* also bears the influence of Charles Olson's paradigm-shifting manifesto 'Projective Verse' (1950). This manifesto, like *Life Notes*, emphasized the rejection of received poetic structures and argued for the elevation of sound over sense and for the transmission of movement and breath through a poetic engagement with typography and shape. Of course, with its numerous references to 'men', 'boys', 'brothers', and so on, in 'Projective Verse', as DuPlessis notes, 'poetry and poetics are gendered male . . . and the speaking female is missing' (DuPlessis 1996, p. 46). Waldman's *Life Notes* (in addition to her more canonical works such as *Fast Speaking Woman* and *The Iovis Trilogy*) can also therefore be read as a feminist re-imagination or re-enactment of Olson's manifesto, asserting the existence of a fluid poetic energy engaged in complex and active thought about the relationship between language, gender, personhood, and the environment.

The cumulative effect of writing at such an intersection is a collection of poems that is more than the sum of its parts—*Life Notes* is a moving, witty, and attentive examination of the environment (human and nonhuman, or more-than-human) in which Waldman writes and lives. It too is a 'dissipative structure': 'a flowing apparent wholeness, highly organized but always in process' (Waldman 1996, p. 127), and akin, in its radical decentering of human consciousness and 'dense, rhizomic web of inputs and interactions among all life forms' (Fazzino 2016, p. 22), to Jakob von Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt* (or environment). More than this, it breaches the gap between word and world, giving voice, shape, and form to what we might call the poet's 'ecology of knowing', per Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation. Waldman, like Sedgwick, 'doesn't want to draw much ontological distinction

between academic theory and everyday theory', and 'has a lot of concern for the quality of other people's and [her] own practices of knowing and experiencing' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 145). The result, given this, and (perhaps unsurprisingly) also given Waldman's feminist, Buddhist, anti-war, and anti-industrialization credentials, is an ecopoetic, ecofeminist text that enacts a 'poetics of presence' (Knickerbocker 2012, p. 8)—in other words, it manifests a quiet green politics in calling attention to our everyday environments and asserting or revealing them as being worth paying attention to.[1]

Life Notes takes note—abundantly but without sentimentality—of the nonhuman world, from the cattle, fish, and birds of the untitled opening poem, to the moths, bees, and beetles of the titular long poem 'Life Notes', via lakes, mountains, stars, and the elements. Waldman's poems are not always directly about environmental or ecological degradation, but they are rarely *not* about that either—her attention to and celebration of her environments can be read as a model for how to productively engage with our surroundings, even when those surroundings (and the animals within them) appear mundane or banal. Waldman's ecology in *Life Notes* is not one of Siberian tigers or polar icecaps; in the poems, the more dramatic or eye-catching aspects of nature are suborned to what humans tend to see as less interesting, including insects, snakes, worms, germs, fish, shells, and coral. (Elsewhere in her oeuvre, however, we do encounter the kinds of creatures and environments that the human world is conditioned to think of as spectacular, particularly in the context of her writing about humankind's exploitation of nature—including the barracuda of *Iovis II*, the 'mysterious manatee, the endangered mammal of coastal waters, and the grey wolf' (Waldman 2009, p. i) which inspired *Manatee/Humanity*, the plutonium-ravaged environs imagined in the 1982 video-poem *Uh Oh Plutonium*, and the 'Extinction Aria' of (Waldman 2020)'s collaborative album *Sciamachy*. This, however, is not the project of *Life Notes*.) Ecopoets, as J. Scott Bryson reminds us, 'render their conceptions of the world in such a way that their poems become models for how to approach the landscape surrounding us so that we view it as meaningful place rather than abstract space' (Bryson 2005, p. 12)—in other words, framing our environment as somewhere where we might *stop* and *be*, rather than simply as phenomena *through which we move*. That said, Waldman conceives of space as that which moves *around and through her*—and her model of space is not one of abstraction, but is closer to Foucault's view that 'we do not live in a homogenous and empty space, but in a space that is saturated with qualities' (Foucault 1984, p. 46). She meaningfully inhabits (and, like Brainard's yellow pansy, is rooted within) her qualities-saturated environment, placing herself and her poems in the world in order to mediate and better understand her (and our) relationship with the nonhuman. In repeatedly eliding conceptions of the human and the nonhuman, as I will discuss, she illuminates the ways in which the 'natural' world is almost always touched by the human, and refutes the widely-held cultural fantasy that nature is self-evidently restorative or redemptive and thereby somehow at a remove from humankind (she does not 'go to it'—the natural world is always already a part of where she is). *Life Notes* manifests the ecocritical notion of the world as a precarious community of creatures that, tenuously and never straightforwardly, includes humans. As Bryson explains, in *The West Side of Any Mountain*, drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's famous dichotomy of space and place,

[1] As this special issue of *Humanities* suggests, ecocritical or 'green' discussion of Beat writing remains an emergent field. Environmental scholarship in this area has historically tended to focus on those writers whose pastoral and/or environnmental visions have been more explicitly articulated or have formed a focal aspect of their work, notably Gary Snyder, Joanne Kyger, Michael McClure, and, to a lesser degree (despite their more canonical status), Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Anne Waldman. However, this frame of enquiry is expanding its focus to include both canonical and marginal texts which take a variety of environmental political positions (from *Naked Lunch* to *Life Notes*) that have hitherto escaped attention. Recent scholarship exploring the relationship between Beat writing and ecological and ecocritical matters, or (more broadly) reading Beat work for its treatment of the natural world, includes Sarah Daw's *Writing Nature in Cold War American Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), Chad Weidner's *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecocritical Mind* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (Dartmouth College Press, 2016), and Paige Tovey's *The Transatlantic Eco-Romanticism of Gary Snyder* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). As I have indicated in this essay, Waldman's oeuvre is consistently ecofeminist, ecopoetic, and ecodidactic, warranting further critical discussion in this regard—not least of the key works including *Uh Oh Plutonium* Waldman (1982), Manatee/Humanity (2009), *The Iovis* Trilogy (2011), Gossamurmur (2013), and *Extinction* Aria (2017).

> ecopoets offer a vision of the world that values the interaction between two interdependent and seemingly paradoxical desires, both of which are attempts to respond to the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature: (1) to create place, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us; and (2) to value space, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable (8).

Although Waldman's environment as presented in *Life Notes* is indeed such a fusion (and acknowledgement) of the known and the unknowable, enacted through her language and poetic forms, she also asks us to move away from a dichotomous, human-centred understanding of space and place, not least through her consistent troubling of a stable, human, lyric subject. She shares Nieuwenhuis and Crouch's view of space as 'multiple, differential, personal, experiential, and playful' (Nieuwenhuis and Crouch 2017, p. xix). She also anticipates feminist geographer Doreen Massey's argument, posited some twenty years after *Life Notes* was published, that the 'view of place as bounded [. . .] as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' is fundamentally inaccurate (Massey 1994, p. 1), contending instead that places should be viewed as 'open and porous', with 'unfixed, contested and multiple' identities (Massey 1994, p. 5). Because of this, Waldman engages in a form of writing that ecocritic Scott Knickerbocker terms 'sensuous poesis', or 'the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature'. Such writing, Knickerbocker argues,

> undo[es] simple oppositions between humans and nature; sensuous poesis operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable from the rest of nature. Rather than attempt to erase the artifice of [. . .] poems (to make them seem more natural and supposedly, then, closer to nature), [such poetry] unapologetically embrace[s] artifice—not for its own sake, but as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world (2).

Waldman uses figurative language and experimental forms and typography in an ecopoetic ambition to 'help us experience the world as more than inert, unresponsive matter' and 'to deepen thinking about the relationship between language and nature' (Knickerbocker 2012, pp. 6, 8). She personifies or part-personifies nonhuman actors in her poetry, giving voice to insects, birds, even to the moon, suggesting (perhaps following, perhaps expanding on Uexküll) that all natural phenomena should be understood as subjects. She manipulates her forms, which are motile, expressive, and energetic, so that her poems *look like* nature as well as being *about* nature, modelling (however abstractly) ecological processes (not least through her use of echoes, patterns, and repetition, as well as line placement and drawings). She disintegrates, fragments, or disorients the lyric subject—per Olson, she 'get[s] rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego' (Olson 1997, p. 247)—in order to simultaneously assert and disavow monolithic authorial positionality, blending the poetic self with her environment (the human as both distinct and inseparable from nature, the poet as both distinct and inseparable from her readers or listeners). In this way, the gap between world and word is mediated and broken down, 'the interconnections between nature and culture' held up to the light (Glotfelty 1996, p. xviii), the world read ecologically and as a poem, laying 'bare the contingency between poem and world; both are environments in which we live' (Selby 2013, p. 128). Poem and world, culture and nature, *Life Notes* insists (akin to Bruno Latour's conceptualisation of the hybridity of 'nature-culture' (Latour 1993, pp. 7, 87)), are non-dichotomous and at once real and constructed.

Such writing is inevitably demanding and disorienting in its deviancy. Reading it, our position is continually—and productively—uncertain. At times, we are situated in the role of a listener, as when we 'hear' the long poem 'Life Notes', a poem which, Waldman writes, is 'meant to be sung' Waldman (1973, p. 35), and which even gives us something to sing along to in a section that reframes the well-known spiritual 'Dem Bones' ('mountain bone connected to the valley bone/valley bone connected to the soil bone' (55)). We are also,

of course, 'singing' 'Life Notes' ourselves, as we read, and this shifts us simultaneously into the tenuous liminal space of the ever-precarious lyric 'I', the poem functioning as thought-writing which we as readers must articulate. Sometimes we appear to be the object of direct address; sometimes, per John Stuart Mill, to be overhearing 'the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind' (Mill 1976, p. 12);[2] and sometimes to be *looking* (at the 'enhanced textuality' of the pages or at the drawings, by Brainard, George Schneeman, and Waldman herself, that punctuate the text). Waldman's poems enact what Timothy Clark, in *The Value of Ecocriticism*, calls the 'art of the human limit or border', in which 'language and thought become defamiliarised precisely as they move towards experiences beyond the human scales and norms which they usually express' (Clark 2019, p. 62). This is, of course, one of ecopoetry's crucial ambitions. To borrow from Leonard M. Scigaj, ecopoetry aims 'to challenge and reconfigure the reader's perceptions so to put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment of firsthand experience within nature's supportive second skin and to become more responsible about that necessary second skin' (Scigaj 1999, p. 41).

Life Notes bears out Scigaj's notion of the challenge and reconfiguration of readers' perceptions of their everyday lives that he sees as integral to ecopoetry. Such challenges and reconfigurations indicate the need for readers to approach poems differently, rejecting the view that they are mysteries waiting to be solved using preconceived ideas and perceptions or that they somehow offer what Arthur Davison Ficke, in a 1912 sonnet, called 'a refuge from the stormy days' (Ficke 1912, n.p.)—in other words, an escape from the 'real' world. Instead, like Sedgwick, *Life Notes*—in its 'flowing apparent wholeness, highly organized but always in process' (Waldman 1996, p. 127)—asks that we position ourselves 'reparatively' in order to maintain an openness to the 'realistic and necessary' possibility of experiencing surprise (Sedgwick 2003, p. 146). A reparatively positioned reader, in Heather Love's useful take on Sedgwick's theory, 'stays local, gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions [. . .] prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy and making whole' (Love 2010, pp. 237–8). Reading *Life Notes* reparatively, in this way, consolidates the collection's ecopoetic credentials and reveals it to be more than just American nature writing, even if human exploitation, destruction, or abuse of the natural world—or what Juliana Spahr refers to as 'the bulldozer off to the side' (Spahr 2011, p. 69)—isn't always clearly visible or expressly articulated in the poems. This is because reparative reading is contingent on the surprise of hope. As Sedgwick explains:

> Because there can be terrible surprises [. . .] there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did (146).

Life Notes, fractured and full of part-objects that readers must try to organize, is energized by the cohering hope engendered by good surprises: from the aural image of return in the 'distant haunting sounds of geese/retracing paths across northern skies/at sunset' (2) to the smile-inducing purring of a cat ('motor of cat/cat motor' (44)) subtly introduced as a counterpoint to the 'obnoxious' accumulated sound of boat engines on Lake Owassa; from the '(silent)' speech of the moon (68) to the surprising revelation that

> A late autumn honeybee
>
> entering a period of relative inactivity

[2] In his 1833 essay, Mill writes: 'Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener'.

within the winter hive

may stay alive for 6 months or more (38).

Such hope, such surprises, suggest the possibility of an ecological and environmental future quite different from the one we are always already on the cusp of experiencing—indeed, bringing to pass. In this world—and also, crucially, in the world of *Life Notes*, of Anne Waldman's New Jersey childhood, summers spent at Lake Owassa at the foot of Kittatinny Mountain; of Anne Waldman's adulthood, summers in Bolinas, California or the Caribbean islands—not only is a new kind of futurity possible but the past is suggested to 'have happened differently from the way it actually did'. 'Life Notes' begins with an incantatory, even polyphonic, evocation of the landscape, as if Waldman is attempting a kind of spell, in order to conjure it into existence for readers. 'The Lake Beyond the Hill', or Lake Owassa, and Kittatinny Mountain, which feeds it and which 'rises/rises/rises', are introduced in a section which ends with the word 'means', repeated three times, the words placed one above the other on the page (36–7). If ecopoetry '"mean[s]" the world around us' (Lysaght 2011, p. 82), then it holds that the world around us also 'means' poetry, as here, each giving meaning to the other—and the world in both contexts, therefore, matters, signifies, and has value. The incantation, the 'meaning' of Lake Owassa, is swiftly intruded upon by the sound of a 'loud indoor TV', by the sight of a 'horrible stinking swimming pool' (37), and, before too long, by the 'incredible roar' of 'the noisy obnoxious motorboats/pulling along these hotshit guys going/water-skiing' (43–4). The poem ends with an oblique meditation on the possibility of 're-entry'—of reclaiming not just the future, but the past too, through a process of revisitation of experience and phenomena in the hope that they might be, or become, different:

Man grappling with wasp, Bolinas Summer 1968

is not the same man grappling with the same

wasp, Bolinas Summer 1971

same man, different wasp

*

Beware the different wasp

& his bite

*

I bite into my sandwich with gusto

put my swim suit on

& reenter (72)

Here, Waldman gestures to the repeated failures of humans to meaningfully encounter the animal world—year after year, people feel the need to 'grapple' with summer wasps. Counterpointed with this 'same man', who is unable to learn from past encounters, to change, or to adapt, is a 'different wasp'—literally, the wasp is different, but Waldman, in warning of what she calls 'his bite' rather than, as we might have expected, of his sting, suggests that he is also a kind of hybrid wasp, a wasp species that has evolved and grown teeth. The 'man', meanwhile, has remained the 'same'. It is here that Sedgwick's notion of hope and surprise is apposite. The wasp's surprising 'bite' becomes Waldman's own, as she bites into her sandwich, partially eliding the distinction between the human and the nonhuman, before she dons her 'swim suit' and prepares to 'reenter'. We are not told into what or where she plans this re-entry, but the implication is that she's going back in the water, once again immersing herself in that very different world (which is also, of course, a part of 'our' world) in which very different creatures exist much more successfully than humans ever could there.

There is a clear connection, here, between this moment of re-entry into the water at Bolinas and the bodies of water with which the poem began—'The Lake Beyond the Hill' and the 'horrible stinking swimming pool'. Is she bound to re-swim in both? Perhaps—

such is the trauma of hope. Yet 'reenter' also suggests motion, connection, and repetition, as does Waldman's implied correlative link with those earlier moments in her poem, and this further unravels the damaging separation of humankind from nature, implicit in much environmental writing. She writes in 'I is Another': 'look at the way nature is [. . .] alive with pattern. [. . .] At the deepest level of nature, nothing is fixed' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). Waldman's pattern of behavior, and pattern of language, re-entering the water in the world of the poem, evokes those unfixed but nonetheless patterned aspects of the natural world: 'insect colonies, cellular interactions, pulsar and quasar stars, DNA code, memory patterns in human minds, and the symmetrical exchanges of energy in the collision of subatomic particles [. . .] highly organized but always in process' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). To 'reenter' also suggests determination and commitment, and there is a further tonal connection here to the untitled opening poem of *Life Notes*, in which, in contrast to a sequence of innocently somnolent 'cows', 'fish', and 'birds', Waldman is watchfully, determinedly, emphatically, worriedly, (and, in italics) '*not sleeping*' (1), as indeed she is at crucial moments in 'Life Notes', too ('I'm not sleeping but/I'm being still/I'm being still/I'm being very still' (52)).

Waldman's preoccupation with the spirit of determination, commitment, and repetition associated with the idea of re-entry and the mysteries of the natural world emerges at intervals throughout *Life Notes.* The imagist three-line poem (it is not quite a haiku) 'Distant Haunting Sounds of Geese' evokes the ethereal, but nonetheless relatively common (in North America), sound of migrating geese. The poem presents an auditory moment, an image that is heard as well as seen:

DISTANT HAUNTING SOUNDS OF GEESE

distant haunting sounds of geese

retracing paths across northern skies

at sunset (2)

Just as the geese return from migration, 'retracing paths across northern skies', so too the poem's title retraces itself in the first line, enmeshing the returning flight of the geese with the language in which they are evoked. The poem's form also suggests movement and return—not only are the lines placed in such a way that they draw our eyes across the page but they also leave open the possibility of reading in reverse, of retracing our readerly path through the poem: 'at sunset/retracing paths across northern skies/distant haunting sounds of geese'.

In 'Icy Rose', a poem preoccupied with the idea of 'feeling space' (11), form similarly shapes meaning: once again, Waldman's 'tactics of heterogeneity' draw our eyes back and forth, up and down, across the page, as motile, unfixed, fragmentary lines intrude upon or meet one another, and meet, too, with extended spacing, multiple repeated question marks, unclosed parentheses, lines presented in caps, and assorted dashes and lines. The poem addresses the mysteries and ultimate unknowability of the natural world, asking determinedly:

but WHO ARE YOU?

& why do you dress so strange?

& who are your parents?

& whence have you come? (13)

The poem intimates themes of loss and disappearance, yoking language to the loss of biodiversity through yet more freighted questions:

where has that last sentence (speaking—you were speaking—gone?

& where have the birds really gone?

& where is the Ice Age now?

& who does this poet think he is?   or she is? (11)

The questions preoccupying the speaker are of a piece with the experience of reading 'Icy Rose', which feels abstract, provoking more questions than it answers (the poem

contains 27 question marks). Once again readers are offered an opportunity to engage in the 'fracturing', 'traumatic', but also surprising and hopeful project of organizing 'the fragments and part-objects' we encounter (this approach also occupies *The Iovis Trilogy*). What does it mean to 'feel space'? How *does* one 'feel space'? Who is the 'I', 'this poet', the 'you' in this poem? Waldman's mercurial lyricism, multi-positionality, polyvocality, and multiple angles enable her to blend herself with others, human and nonhuman, both within the context of the poem and externally, and, of course, with her environment ('I danced with the big brown bear . . . I ran thru the snow like a young puppy' (12)).

There is hope in the simultaneous ambition of both return and of progress—of the past meeting the future in a spirit of attentiveness, of 'being affected, taking joy, and making whole' (Love 2010, pp. 237–8)—and in the possibility of the removal of obstructions between the demonstrably interdependent human and nonhuman worlds. In a section near the end of Part One of 'Life Notes', Waldman suggests that 'Health/Long Life/Peace' are not only associated with 'birds/flowers/big rain showers', but are actually dependent on them for survival.

Health
Long Life
Peace
birds
flowers
big rain showers
Sailors whistling for a wind . . . .
Hopis dancing for the beans to sprout
& they do sprout
for you see
Man is Alone
but he has Nature around him
if he sees
&
if he doesn't
he's through (51)

The poem's 'enhanced textuality' and form is key to this section, which is once again fragmentary and motile, the lines placed at erratic intervals across the page, a graphical ensemble over which our eyes must widely roam, again requiring 'the reparatively positioned reader [. . .] to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 46). It is suggestive of contingency, and also, therefore (again), of hope ('*if* he sees')—hope that the future might be different from the past, that the past itself 'could have happened differently from the way it actually did', that 'Man' ('connected to the sun bone' (56)) might learn to meaningfully engage with the nonhuman world, and that readers might yet learn to live reparatively, to 'put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment', becoming 'more responsible about that necessary second skin' (Scigaj 1999, p. 41).

Waldman's sense of the possibility of a synergetic relationship with the nonhuman world—that 'necessary second skin'—is articulated in different ways in several key poems in *Life Notes*. In the eponymous poem, in a clear instance of the urban pastoral, we read of 'the timeless bird', existing in the context of 'asphalt', 'a school built recently', and 'Avenue A':

the timeless bird
& now I hear little sparrow

New York City
. . .
he is always
in some city long ago (54)

The lines 'he is *always*/in some city *long ago*' confirms the bird's 'timeless' quality: like the wasp, 'he' is of course not the same bird that is 'always in some city', but the poem transfigures him into a kind of mythic, immortal creature whose existence transcends that of the human inhabitants of the city.[3] In 'Crazy Without You' (22–25), Waldman evokes a human relationship mediated by its connection with, observation of, and attentiveness to the natural world, cosmic order, and weather patterns. The poem, which opens with a twenty-line celebration, in the form of a descriptive list, of the very brightest stars in the galaxy, from 'the ruby-red Beta Pegasi' to the 'bright white diamond dog-star Sirius', has at its heart an image of

you & I
arms around each other
trying to understand
what is happening (23)

The poem is marked by a yearning to connect, physically and emotionally, across distances (both real and metaphorical) and to use natural phenomena to do so: 'how long does it take for me to get to you?/star/& why so hard?' the speaker asks. They also press for meteorological details, enquiring 'raining where you are?/is it snowing?/cloudy?' This poem, too, frays the margins between human self and wild creatures. Inhabiting the wolf, the speaker proclaims: 'I'll be in/(howling Yosemite moon)'—the parentheses here suggesting an awareness of the ultimate inviolability of such a boundary (more of which later in this essay). The margin between human selves and the cosmos is also blurred, as the poem ends with a couplet that imaginatively transcends the toil (emotional, literal) of 'fighting thru the dark years', in which the couple in question have become stars themselves:

me the purple troubled one
& you the bluest of the blue (25).

In '26′, Waldman uses a wind motif to weave a connection between the human and the nonhuman. 'warm in bed', there is 'no more wind', and yet the poem itself belies this, moving like the wind, back and forth across the page as Waldman evokes another relationship that exists both *with* and *because* of the natural world. 'no more wind' could be a plea or a statement: the ambiguity evokes the intensity of wind, and, by extension, the elements; and, further, as the poem indicates, the togetherness and the synergy that the elements enable.

I see us as being at one point
in the wind
I see us as being at one point cloudy
at one point clear & bright
I give myself to you
before the light
I see us as being together
before the wind (21)

[3] He is also related to the 'Wood Thrush', who also appears in 'Life Notes' and who is similarly abiding, being the subject of poetry by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Browning, Hardy, Dickinson, Thomas, Lorde, and Hughes, among others.

Once again, the nature of the lyric 'I', 'us', and 'you' remains abstruse, frayed, and fugitive, whilst beings here are framed as skies (stars and clouds) and the effect of the lines '*before* the light' and '*before* the wind' (my italics) is to animate and part-personify the elemental, giving it life, giving it subjectivity, and again blurring the boundary between human and universe.

An early poem in *Life Notes*, 'Pressure' (3–10), works to achieve this effect in a different way. 'Pressure' is a list poem that declaims 'no way out' of, 'no way off', or 'no escape from' over 150 natural, semi-natural, and fully human-made (both physical and social) environments, asking us to wonder about the connections between such a range of places of apparent irrevocable entrapment. The places and spaces listed, both tangible and incorporeal, include the mundane ('the motel room', 'the department store', 'the print shop'), the magisterial ('the formidable mountain', 'the glistening valley', 'the Great Barrier Reef'), the galactic ('the moon, the sun's radiant energy' 'the cosmic mudhole'), the urban ('the noisy bar', 'the World Trade Center', 'the glossy IBM retail showroom on William Street'), the rural ('the barn/the farm, the chicken coop'), the academic ('the doctorate the MA the BA', 'the history of music', 'structural anthropology'), the cultural ('the Donizetti opera', 'Joan Sutherland's astounding voice', 'the numerous art galleries of New York and L.A.'), the animal ('the barking dogs chasing the deer weakened from/a long winter', 'whippoorwills swallows gulls'), the social ('the family dinner/the cocktail party/the birthday celebration'), the specifically unspecific ('amazing grace', 'my sneakers', 'progress'), and more. As the poem's form suggests, 'pressure' is something that builds, accumulates, and often needs to be released: the poem's length, quick pace, and the relentless following of one seemingly inescapable environment with another, over and over, creates the sensation of being on a fast-moving train, unable to get off. From the cosmic mudhole' to 'the telephone booth', 'the White House' to 'the Amazon', Waldman moves swiftly, explanations for connections between environments sometimes immanent in the poem (for example, 'the starry night' is followed by 'the Louvre', gesturing to Van Gogh, the suggestion being, as on Brainard's cover, that art or culture is the connection between the natural and the manmade worlds) but always intuitively and never explicitly. The extraordinary levelling effect of this—placing a widely divergent range of environments in the same linguistic space and suggesting that it is possible to experience 'pressure' at being in or on all of them—enacts a refusal to fetishize the natural or to see it as somehow disconnected from or inherently better than the manmade or the human (as much nature poetry has tended to do, from Wordsworth's *Prelude* onwards). This is the quintessential poem in the world. Natural environments, from the earthly to the galactic, are shown to be inextricably entangled not just with physical manmade environments but with art and history and politics ('the history of Russia no escape/China, Japan/the history of music, no escape/the voices of Pygmies singing in the rain forest'). From 'the rain forest' to 'the Met', these are our contexts, the things and places and spaces we live with and in and around and because of and for:

> the Great Chain of Being, no escape
>
> the Magnetic Field, no escape. (9)

Waldman returns to this theme in 'Life Notes', in which, as I have suggested, human and nonhuman contexts are once again enmeshed in various compelling ways. Early in the poem, the 'young & amorous' speaker asks

> Can you lend me money?
>
> Can you lend me music?
>
> Can you lend me ear?

'I need I need', she continues;

> I need you, outer space
>
> I need you, deciduous forest
>
> & you, California sunshine

& you, the wise old owl (Robert Nighthawk) (38)

Waldman frames her need for the trappings of humanity (from money to music to simple human contact) as being just as significant as her need for natural wildness (space, forests, sunshine, and wildlife), drawing an illuminating parallel between the 'wise old owl' and legendary blues musician Robert Nighthawk. Later in the poem the lines 'ok kids/my name is Joanne/*/ok kids my name is Ocean' (43)[4] further destabilize both lyric ego (per Olson) and the human-centred hierarchy educed by the water-skiing frat boys on Lake Owassa. This levelling elision between human and ocean works to present the world as a community that is, to borrow from Bryson, 'just that, a community, rather than a world of creatures and natural beings with whom the privileged human self interacts' (3). Time and again, Waldman uses her poetry to examine the possibility of stepping outside of the role of privileged human being self-interacting with nature, as we can see in these lines, also from 'Life Notes'.

Unless a woman approaches the things that matter
with quiet in her heart
with singleness of heart
leaving herself outside the door

How can her mind enter the rain or the sun
the corn or the snake
without breaking down that door?

*

of course

but *no* door

*

dance the Dance of Life! (49)

Once again, she is, here, 'leaving herself outside the door', working to move between the human and nonhuman worlds, the world of doors and the world of rain, sun, corn, and snakes ('but *no* door') in an effort to remove barriers between the human and nonhuman ('with quiet in her heart/with singleness of heart'), wanting to be at one with, to be a part of, 'the rain or the sun/the corn or the snake'. It is worth noting again that, like Rachel (Carson 2000) in *Silent Spring* (first published in 1962), Waldman is interested in thinking about the importance of the generic, non-specific, and undramatic parts of the nonhuman world, the crucial implication being that the small, the local, and the unglamorous aspects of nature are equally as valuable to the sustenance of all life on earth ('the Dance of Life!') as those more immediately beautiful or vulnerable creatures or environments that tend to inhabit the imagination more strongly when we think about conservation or habitat destruction. Waldman variously refers to herself as both animal—'Lucky animal!' (40)—and vegetable—'vegetable silence indicates vegetable "ME"' (47)—further disrupting the human/nonhuman binary hierarchy. In doing so, she enacts a version of Jakob von Uexküll's imaginary stroll through a flowering meadow, 'vividly imagin[ing] . . . each animal's environment' in the understanding that in doing so 'the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured' (Uexküll [1934] 2010, pp. 43, 70). Finding a moth in her closet, she not only personifies her as a 'pretty dusky maid' (70) but she describes her using the same phrase she used earlier in the poem to evoke *herself* as a child—'spacey & free'—once again collapsing the distance between human and nonhuman by placing herself in the same referential frame as an animal. Just as Waldman was 'spacey & free' as a little girl, so the moth is now, suggesting both meaningful philosophical kinship and a kind of mutual spiritual inhabitation. This moment in *Life Notes* anticipates the

[4] This is likely a reference to Joanne Kyger, who as Waldman notes in her Introduction to Kyger's *Strange Big Moon*, was nicknamed 'Miss Kids' in 'the highly competitive gossipy community around The Place, a bar in North Beach' (Waldman 2000, n.p.).

similar minute detail and breadth of range in Waldman's *Iovis Trilogy* (the end of chapter XV, Book II), in which she inserts a prose story by her son Ambrose, called 'A Day in the Life of a Malaria-Carrying Mosquito', told from the perspective of a female mosquito who drinks some blood, suffers an insecticide-related bereavement, and eventually dies (swatted). As Alice Notley has suggested, this could be 'any being's life story, insect, fish, mammal, perhaps even star' (Notley 1998, p. 123). In sharing the identity of the moth and assuming the identity of the mosquito, these poems explore the notion of a meaningful estrangement from self—not in the sense of being unmoored, but, rather, as an opportunity for cross-species empathy and identification.

The 'pretty dusky maid' is the second moth to appear in, and shape, the narrative of 'Life Notes'. Some twenty pages prior, a different moth, 'careening in air', flits manically 'at my window screen', yet another instance of the nonhuman world colliding, in this case literally, with the human.

> he want the light & he want it now
>
> so pretty
>
> so dumb
>
> so blind
>
> uncontrollable muscle urge to LIGHT
>
> brief light go out when I sleep
>
> brief life go out
>
> batting my screen
>
> ah flippy so flippy!
>
> *
>
> I comment on the animals
>
> & they withhold comment (48)

Waldman's evocative depiction of an experience so common as to render it otherwise unremarkable exemplifies Andrew Epstein's observation that the 'New American poetry differs from modernism in that it inaugurates a new, more extreme orientation to everyday life *as* everyday, in terms of both form and content' (8). It is also an illustration of the close, empathetic attention Waldman pays to the less obviously spectacular aspects of the natural world. The act of making her environment, and the animals within it, a meaningful part of her everyday is also an act of both empathy and love. Here, the moth is again personified, the nonhuman is again given voice and subjectivity, these lines suggesting a concerted effort to approach and to imagine the psyche of the 'batting' moth, to understand his motivations, his 'uncontrollable muscle urge to LIGHT'. As with the later moth, who 'stares out' at her from the closet space, Waldman attempts to see, and to depict for her readers, per Uexküll, the world as it appears through insect eyes.

This isn't easy, or even possible, as well she knows. 'I comment on the animals/& they withhold comment', she writes, acknowledging that this iteration of the 'ecology of knowing', of human relationships with the nonhuman, is, as far as we can tell, often an overwhelmingly—and frustratingly—one-way process. Part way through 'Life Notes' there is an empty page, save for two words: 'tap tap' (41). The sheer amount of empty space on this page is a further example of yet more 'enhanced textuality', and the words 'tap tap' (keeping in mind that this poem 'is meant to be sung') are disorientingly liminal—we simultaneously *hear* and *read* them. This is, in Clark's formulation, 'art of the human limit or border'. In defamiliarising language and thought in this way, 'precisely as they move towards experiences beyond the human scales and norms which they usually express' (62), Waldman indicates that the attempt to communicate with that which withholds comment, which will not or cannot communicate back in the way we desire, which is in all kinds of ways beyond human experience, is akin to the wildly popular nineteenth-century practice of table-tapping—a fantastical group effort to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

And yet the phrase 'withhold comment' suggests agency and choice on the part of the animals—it implies the possibility that an active *decision* has been made, somewhere, somehow, to remain silent, inscrutable, and out of reach. Humans, by contrast, are shown in the lines immediately following this couplet to rely on the nonhuman, on 'the animals', in order to articulate key aspects of themselves:

> BIRDS, BEES & STORKS is an animated film
> in which the narrator provides the voice of
> an embarrassed father struggling to tell his
> teenage son the facts of life. He manages
> to communicate very little information (49)

Here, Waldman ironically gestures toward the ways in which humans use the nonhuman to articulate natural processes of life: too uncomfortable with our own animality, we repeatedly, sometimes nonsensically, turn to the nonhuman world in an effort to explain it. As Bryson has argued, ecopoets are faced with a paradoxical challenge: to make 'a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us' whilst also 'recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable'. Knickerbocker, too, draws attention to this paradox, noting that 'humans are distinct yet inseparable from the rest of nature'. For Waldman—whose *Life Notes* embodies just such a paradox—language and culture, specifically the 'field' of the poem (even poetic terminology tends to be green), hold the key to broaching what can seem like an inexorably inalienable divide between the human and the nonhuman, in order to envision, if not ensure, the survival of both.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Acknowledgments: The birds of the Bow Back Rivers, the River Lea, and Victoria Park, London, were instrumental to the writing of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1996. Manifests. *Diacritics* 26: 31–53. [CrossRef]

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 2006. Anne Waldman: Standing Corporeally in One's Time. In *Don't Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing After the New York School*. Edited by Daniel Kane. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, pp. 173–94.

Bryson, J. Scott. 2005. *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Carson, Rachel. 2000. *Silent Spring*. London: Penguin.

Clark, Timothy. 2019. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Epstein, Andrew. 2016. *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fazzino, Jimmy. 2016. *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature*. Dartmouth: Dartmouth College Press.

Ficke, Arthur Davison. 1912. Poetry. *Poetry*. 1. n.p. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20569620 (accessed on 10 March 2021).

Foucault, Michel. 1984. Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias. *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5: 46–49.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. 1996. Introduction. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, pp. xviii–xix.

Knickerbocker, Scott. 2012. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Love, Heather. 2010. Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading. *Criticism* 52: 235–41. [CrossRef]

Lysaght, Seán. 2011. What is Eco-Poetry? *The Poetry Ireland Review* 103: 74–82.

Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Malden: Polity.

Mill, John Stuart. 1976. What Is Poetry? In *Essays on Poetry*. Edited by F. Parvin Sharpless. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Nieuwenhuis, Marijn, and David Crouch. 2017. *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn between Disciplines*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Notley, Alice. 1998. Review of Iovis Omnia Plena. *Chicago Review* 44: 117–29. [CrossRef]

Olson, Charles. 1997. Projective Verse. In *Charles Olson, Collected Prose*. Edited by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 239–49.

Scigaj, Leonard M. 1999. *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 123–51.

Selby, Nick. 2013. Ecopoetries in America. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*. Edited by J. Ashton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 127–42.

Spahr, Juliana. 2011. *Well Then There Now*. Boston: Black Sparrow.

Uexküll, Jakob von. 2010. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. First published 1934.

Waldman, Anne. 1973. *Life Notes*. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

Waldman, Anne. 1982. *Uh Oh Plutonium*. New York: Hyacinth Girls Music, Video.

Waldman, Anne. 1996. *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants and Essays*. San Francisco: City Lights Books Pocket Poets Series No. 33.

Waldman, Anne. 1998. Interview by Eric Lorberer. *Rain Taxi*. Vol.3. No.4, #12. Available online: https://www.raintaxi.com/an-interview-with-anne-waldman/ (accessed on 3 March 2020).

Waldman, Anne. 2000. Introduction to Joanne Kyger's. In *Strange Big Moon: Japan and India Journals, 1960–1964. Jacket 2, 11*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Waldman, Anne. 2009. *Manatee/Humanity*. New York and London: Penguin.

Waldman, Anne. 2011. *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.

Waldman, Anne. 2018. *Trickster Feminism*. New York and London: Penguin.

Waldman, Anne. 2020. *Sciamachy*. New York: Fast Speaking Music, Record.

humanities

MDPI

Article

On Webbed Monsters, Revolutionary Activists and Plutonium Glow: Eco-Crisis in Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman

Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo

Department of Modern Languages, Polytechnic University of Cartagena, 30202 Cartagena, Spain; estibaliz.encarnacion@um.es

Abstract: Though green readings of Beat works are a relatively new phenomenon, the Beat aesthetic easily meets Lawrence Buell's criteria for ecocritical texts. Indeed, many writers associated with the Beat movement, such as Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, often use their work to give shape to environmental concerns. This article studies the development of a green poetics in the work of both di Prima and Waldman. Focusing on works spanning four decades including *Revolutionary Letters* (1971), *Loba* (1998), *Uh Oh Plutonium* (1982) or *The Iovis Trilogy* (2011), to name a few, the article analyzes the poets' use of utopian and dystopian images through which they develop a poetics of eco-crisis that opposes the conformism and political tension of the American postwar and its aftermath.

Keywords: Beat women; eco-criticism; green reading; Diane di Prima; Anne Waldman

Citation: Encarnación-Pinedo, Estíbaliz. 2021. On Webbed Monsters, Revolutionary Activists and Plutonium Glow: Eco-Crisis in Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman. *Humanities* 10: 4. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010004

Received: 12 November 2020
Accepted: 21 December 2020
Published: 28 December 2020

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

When Ernest Callenbach published *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Nelson* (Callenbach 1975), a novel that helped introduce the ecological turn in utopian writing, many of the writers associated with the Beat generation had already expressed the urge to establish "greener" modes of interrelation between humankind and nature. While Callenbach's ecological utopia imagines a way of using technology as an ally, in *STEPS* (weiss 1958), ruth weiss's first published collection, the poet depicts a San Francisco whose closeness to nature is under the growing menace of a "webbed monster" (n.p.n.) that threatens with alienating a city that remains oblivious to what is happening: "you have invited the webbed monster to connect you he has a cement and steel-greedy eye" (n.p.p). About a decade later, Diane di Prima used the cool and detached beatnik argot to oppose the technological revolution with one based on environmental responsibility in Revolutionary Letter # 34: "hey man, let's make a revolution, let's/turn off the power, turn on the/stars at night, put metal/back in the earth" (Di Prima [1971] 2007, p. 47). Just like di Prima, ecological concerns and green movement politics are present in the works of many other poets and writers associated with the so-called Beat movement, often times used to contest their own socio-political position, and to imagine a more harmonious way of living with nature.

An impressive array of Beat associates and aggregates, including Joanne Kyger, Ed Sanders, di Prima, Gary Snyder and Michael McClure featured in issue number 25 of the seminal interdisciplinary literary journal *Io*—edited by the ecological anthropologist Richard Grossinger. Entitled *Ecology and Consciousness* (Grossinger 1978), the volume collected texts on the verge of the 1980′s that contained "eloquent examples of the literature of doom and darkness [. . . but also] literature against such premature darkness" (back cover). Much like the poets in this collection, Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman develop in their work an ecological awareness manifested in both images of ecological doom and ecological hope that often stem from their own environmental activism. Indeed, cemented by poets like Michael McClure—who recited his poem "For the Death of 100 Whales" at the legendary Six Gallery reading in 1955—the thematic centrality of nature and ecology

informs not just the poetical output, but also the environmental activism practiced by many poets associated with both West Coast and East Coast literary groups such as Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman and Sister Mary Norbert Körte. This political engagement, which is present in the work of both di Prima and Waldman, has often been diluted—if not ignored—by the ecocritical discourse[1] in part due to the aesthetic romantic naiveté, as well as the privileging of the white male perspective, of some of the encounters with nature portrayed in the work of these writers[2]. Nevertheless, an although green readings of Beat works are a relatively recent phenomenon[3], the heterogenous and expansive Beat aesthetic does sit quite comfortably with Lawrence Buell's ecocritical criteria for nature writing[4] (Buell 1995), as it often emphasizes the presence of nature as an independent entity and stresses the interconnections between humankind and the environment. Drawing on such green interconnections and points of entrance, this article studies the prevalence of eco-concerned poetics in the work of Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, two poets who, beyond sharing the inevitably synthetic and often externally imposed Beat label, participated actively in cultural and civil practices that shaped their political and ecological thinking. Though separated by a decade, both poets grew in artistic spheres dominated by men, which led them to adopt a fiercely autonomous stance that allowed them to rise above the rigidity of Cold War gender roles and collaborate with men, as di Prima puts it in her memoir, "beyond their one-upmanship" (Di Prima 2001, p.107). Furthermore, the poets' long-time friendship spans their participation in the Beat generation, forging their alliance through their shared interest in and study of Buddhism, as well as through their work at Naropa Institute and the Jack School of Disembodied Poetics (founded in 1974). Focusing mainly of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* (Di Prima [1971] 2007) and *Loba* (Di Prima 1998), and Waldman's video-poem "Uh Oh Plutonium" (Waldman 1982), the article analyzes how utopian and dystopian images, rather than succumbing to romanticized discourses, help the poets develop an aesthetic of eco-crisis that opposes the conformism and political tension of the American Cold War and its aftermath.

2. The Revolutionary, the She-Wolf Goddess and the Green Look in Diane di Prima

Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, a collection she started publishing in the late 1960s but expanded periodically, shows a strong preoccupation with ecological issues. Using a discourse heavily embedded in utopian thinking, di Prima combines incendiary, hands-on poems where she calls for a revolution, with poems in which she offers glimpses of a utopian post-revolutionary world, as well as dystopian descriptions of her own society[5]. Diluted through these different approaches, green concerns help the poet shape her revolution from the opening "April fool birthday poem for grandpa", a poem dedicated to her maternal grandfather and highly influencing figure, Domenico Mallozi[6]. Establishing the revolution as part of the anarchist lineage, this poem anticipates the ecological emphasis

[1] In this article I use "ecocriticism" as well as "ecofeminism" as umbrella terms that include a range of theoretical and practical positions. See Buell's useful "Glossary of Selected Terms" (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Buell 2005)) for a description of related terms.

[2] Discussing the work of writers such as Edward Abbey, Aldo Leopold or, among others, Gary Snyder, Ursula Heise notes in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (Heise 2008) that "[w]hite male environmentalist writers between the 1950s and the 1970s often put the emphasis on the (usually male) individual's encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild rather than rural or urban." (29).

[3] The most recent and comprehensive study of eco-consciousness in Beat writers—Burroughs is this case—is Chad Weidner's *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecocritical Mind* (Weidner 2016). Before Weidner's analysis, most ecocritical studies had concentrated on Gary Snyder (see Murphy 2017; Tovey 2013; or Chen-Hsing Tsai 2012). Though not exactly from an ecocritical perspective, Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (Fazzino 2016) does offer apt readings of the treatment of nature in works by Ginsberg and Burroughs.

[4] Namely, 1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.; and 4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 1995, pp. 7–8).

[5] For a study of Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* as a critical utopia see Encarnación-Pinedo's "Utopia in Progress in di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*" (Encarnación-Pinedo 2016).

[6] *Revolutionary Letters* is dedicated to Bob Dylan and di Prima's grandfather.

of the collection as the poet follows the teachings of her grandfather, who "pulled [her] hair when [she]/pulled the leaves off the trees so [she'd] now how it feels" (5). After a catalogue of anarchist and revolutionary figures such as Carlo Tresca, Sacco and Vanzetti, Trotsky or Jean Cocteau, di Prima dedicates the revolutionary effort in the collection to "the stars over the Bronx/that they may look on earth/and not be ashamed." (6) To attain this vision, the poet creates an image of humankind as one big organism, an approach influenced by the counterculture lifestyle di Prima took part of in the late 1960s—specially through Timothy Leary's experimental community at Millbrook (New York), as well as her collaboration with the radical community-action group the Diggers. Through this view, and in keeping with a de Tocquevillian reading of individualism as self-centered and egotistical, di Prima denounces in letter #2 "the value of an individual life" as "a credo they taught us/to instill fear, and inaction" (8). Instead, and knowing full well that the changes called for by the revolution necessitate a collective effort, the poet asks revolutionaries-to-be to see themselves as one "Tribe/an organism, one flesh" (8) so that the actions started by one, can be ended by others if need be. Through the unifying and ordered action of this social organism—the "million earthworms/tunneling under this structure" (16) of letter #7—the poems call for organized action to "reclaim the earth" (letter #29, 42) in a movement that is described in marked ecological terms in subsequent letters:

> the earth cries out for aid, our brothers
> and sisters set aside their childhoods, prepare
> to fight, what choice have we but join them, in their hands
> rests the survival of the very planet, the health
> of the solar system [. . .]
> we must reclaim
> the planet, re-occupy
> this ground (letter #35, 48)

Having established the green revolutionary positioning of the collection, the letters provide an array of answers to the different questioned raised by the previous poem; namely, why is earth crying? How can we ensure the survival of the planet? Or even should we reoccupy earth? All these questions are answered using the utopian/dystopian discourse through which the poet delineates the revolution. For instance, a set of letters offer a depiction of contemporary society in which nature is visibly endangered. In keeping with Buell's third criterion, which foregrounds "[h]uman accountability to the environment [being] part of the text's ethical orientation" (Buell 1995, p. 8), just as di Prima endows humankind with the power and even the obligation to "reclaim/the planet" (48), she also holds people accountable for the damage they inflict on nature. Letter #16, as a case in point, opens up with a direct *mea culpa* that reads "we are eating up the planet" (28). This "we", in addition, is specifically located in the USA, a country which as the poet notes "has 5% of the world's people uses over/50% of the world's goods" (28), and whose "garbage/holds matter for survival for uncounted/'underdeveloped' nations" (28). The anti-consumerist thinking behind these statements, as well as the direct correlation between consumerism and pollution, are further developed in the collection. In letter #17, the poet warns the reader about the sacrifices people will need to make to ensure the continuity of the planet, arguing that "simply/the planet will not bear it" (29); and in letter #31, subtitled "*for The Poor People's Campaign*" in reference to the movement organized in 1967 and 1968 by Martin Luther King, the poet goes beyond the campaign's basic claims to boldly denounce that "if what you want is jobs/for everyone, you are still the enemy" (31). In this poem, the legislations to secure basic needs such as access to employment and affordable housing sought by the campaign are watered down and ultimately discarded as it means, in the eyes of the revolutionary, sacrificing "the planet for a few years of some/science fiction utopia" (31). A big part of this science fiction utopia, notoriously built around economic prosperity and individual well-being, is refashioned in other letters through dystopian sketches that dismantle the alleged development of the poet's contemporary society. In these poems

the poet refers to civilization as "the cancer" (letter #32, 45) and laments how the city—as an entity—"consume[s] the air and water/for miles around it" (45). Although not exactly resorting to a pastoral mode, di Prima often launches an offence against a very particular type of city; a city that in letter #60 pushes the poorest to the margin, and in letter #54 provides women and men with a four-step recipe to become alchemical experiments:

> eat *mercury* (in wheat & fish)
> breathe *sulphur* fumes (everywhere)
> take plenty of (macrobiotic) *salt*
> & cook the mixture in the heat
> of an atomic explosion (letter #54, 69)

The toxicity of contemporary life, and its connection to the industrialization and technologization of society, leads the poet to a reconceptualization of social life in greener, less scientific, terms. This envisioned world is often depicted through highly utopian and romantic lens, and more often than not, it includes a nostalgic look back at past times. In letter #13, for instance, the poet calls for a collective wishful thinking to "put back the big trees/put back the buffalo [. . .]/put fish in clean Great Lakes/desire that all surface water on the planet/be clean again" (24–25). In keeping with this vision of a simpler way of life closer to nature, the poet constructs post-revolutionary images where she presents alternatives to improve society; letter #22, for instance, introduces the need to rethink education. Fueled by the realization that there is more to earth than human beings—the poet condemns lives lived "as if the planet were no more than a vehicle/for carrying our plastic constructs around the sun" (35)—the revolutionary delineates a new teaching system by which children are taught hands-on, almost out-in-the-woods survival skills, outside the "cement box called 'school'" (35). While in poems like this and others the poet uses a naive and ahistorical discourse to build her utopia—for instance, perpetuating the traditional and often essentialist view of women as nurturers closer to nature in letter #44—many other letters in the collection explicitly situate the action in more tangible spheres. In letter #9, as a case in point, opposition to the government translates in the direct targeting of "the head of Dow Chemical" (18), the American multinational chemical corporation which managed for over twenty years the Rocky Flats Plant (discussed later on) and manufactured napalm B compound during the Vietnam War. The centrality of the environmental discourse and the denunciation of specific consequences is also present in letter #42, where the poet discredits the "'overpopulation' problem" (55) and denounces sterilization campaigns targeted at the less privileged such as women from India through the creation of the "sterilization bonus" (55)—a reference to one of the incentives put forward by the National Program for Family Planning.

Independently of the use of direct or indirect references, or the construction of the revolutionary discourse through vague or particular examples, di Prima keeps centering the crisis around the exploitation of nature. For instance, while in letter #73—subtitled "Dream poem about Reagan & Co" (100)—the poet forecasts the death of nature at the hands of politicians without pinpointing exactly how the crime is committed, in letter #61, she enumerates and details the list of effects of the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources. Written at the onset of the oil crisis, the poem includes exploitative actions done "regardless of consequences" (78) such as offshore drilling, crude and shale oil extraction, or the creation of coal plants occupying Cheyenne territory. In letter #80, written in the early 1990s, the exploitation of nature is paralleled to injustices against minority groups and the less privileged as the poet expands the definition of "terrorism":

> Are you afraid to go out, to walk in yr city, yr suburb, yr ountryside?
> To read, to speak yr own language, wear yr tribe's clothes?
> Afraid of the thin-shelled birds w/ twisted necks
> poisoned by nitrates, by selenium?
> Afraid that the dawn will be silent, the forest grey?

Is it terrorism to fill the Dnieper River w/ radiation?
or heat the ionosphere w/ magnetism 'to see what will happen'? (116)

These rather dystopian poems are interwoven throughout the collection with utopian counterpoints of the revolutionary's reimagined society; an example being letter #81, where the poet reinvents a road trip back home to portray a world where people live in harmonious union with one another and with nature—"On the way home/it will be easy to find pure water, organic tomatoes, friendly/conversation" (119). Although the revolutionary is also skeptical about the actual extent to which poetry can have an effect on the world[7], the letters—even in their more utopian or naive version—do function as some kind of acts of environmental imagination which, as Lawrence Buell has noted, "whatever anyone thinks to the contrary, potentially register and energize four kinds of engagement with the world" (Buell 2001, p. 2). These engagements include different ways through which acts of the imagination such as novels or poems can indeed impact the physical world by stirring consciousness, changing attitudes or even calling people into action. The potential of these acts, as Buell writes, includes directing "thought towards alternatives futures" (Buell 2001, p. 2) and affecting "one's caring for the physical world: make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable" (Buell 2001, p. 2), two actions rather clearly intended by *Revolutionary Letters*. This reading is further supported by a historicized approach that takes into consideration di Prima's participation in the activist countercultural action carried out by the San Francisco Mime Group and the Diggers, two groups which fed into each other quite frequently. In this sense, the work of activist and Diggers co-founder Peter Berg helps situate di Prima's utopian vision within the framework of environmental activism. An environmental writer and bioregionalist, Berg complicates the naive reading in texts such as "Green City" (1986), where he describes the origins and development of the concept of a green city. Having been invited to speak at a rock concert in Golden Gate Park, Berg uses the opportunity to ask the audience to help him realize his "vision called green city" (in Glotfelty and Quesnel 2015, p. 86). Building his green city through audience participation—much like di Prima plots a collective revolution—Berg shows, in his own words, "how successful being naive can be" (in Glotfelty and Quesnel 2015, p. 85). This individual and communal envisioning, in addition, does not stop at the level of conception, but also leads to careful planning and designing aimed at taking action. This is the case of "A Metamorphosis for Cities: From Gray to Green" (first published in 1990), a text which reads like an agenda in outline form to make cities livable and that is also reminiscent of the revolutionary tips di Prima includes in her letters.

In this light, the Digger's catchphrase "do your thing", outlined by George Metesky[8] in "The Ideology of Failure" (Metesky 1966) is mimicked or paralleled by di Prima's "ask for everything" (Letter #19); a move that, more than a mere utopian stance, is intended to bring about a social revolution. As such, the evaluation of Diane di Prima's eco-concerns in *Revolutionary Letters* through utopian and dystopian sketches surpasses the romanticized or the pastoral modes in favor of a much more political position. This position, as the example of the Diggers shows, is impregnated by the age of revolt in which the poems were written, and which led to a number of activist groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Environmental Justice Movement, or the Free Speech Movement as well as Timothy Leary's "Turn on, turn in, drop out" axiom.

Indeed, while the more utopian and essentialist poems in *Revolutionary Letters* may wrongly lead someone to think the poems shallow or even transitory rebellious blabbering—Ron Silliman has referred to the collection as "the silliest when it comes to their actual political thinking" (Silliman 2007)—the political and environmental activism which drove this collection is recurrent in di Prima's oeuvre. As a matter of fact, di Prima revived

[7] For instance, in "Goodbye Nkrumah" di Prima jokes with the use of such revolutionary texts: "a few of us tried it, we tried to stop it with printing/we tried to protect you with mimeograph machines/green posters LUMUMBA LIVES flooded Harlem in those days/well, the best thing to do with a mimeograph is to drop it/from a five story window, on the head of a cop" (146).

[8] Pen name often used by Emmett Grogan and Billy Murcott.

the impetus behind the letters in her latest collection, *The Poetry Deal* (Di Prima 2014). In "Inaugural Address", the piece that keeps record of the speech given on account of being elected San Francisco Poet Laureate, di Prima revisited the prevailing urge to action felt during the writing of *Revolutionary Letters*:

> the possibility of actualizing some of the dreams I'd absorbed from my anarchist grandfather and hung onto ever since—the chance to actually *act* on what I believed in, to take a shot at creating the world as we dreamed it—made me eager to join these amazing folks: poets, Diggers, Panthers, Zennies, out-riders and rebels of all sorts, in the hope-filled and wild experiment that was bubbling away in this City 1968. (Di Prima 2014, p. 6)

In addition, just as she famously and loudly declared in "Rant", "THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST/THE IMAGINATION" (Di Prima [1971] 2007, p. 104), she continued to use poetry to reinvent a livable San Francisco in *The Poetry Deal*. Enacting a utopian "urban reinhabitation"—to use Buell's wording (Buell 2001, p. 86)—the poet still fathomed through poetry a city close to nature where people can live freely: "City of sunlight bounced off ocean and bay, city of kindness: of people who have time—time to look each other in the eye." (Di Prima 2014, p. 16) Imagining a "better" city, as di Prima does here as well as throughout *Revolutionary Letters*, more than a mere utopian positioning, can be analyzed as a reinhabitory effort, an effort "to imagine a city/nature as a livable, or at least survivable, habitat." (Buell 2001, p. 125). This reinhabited or *reinhabitized* city space comes hand in hand with an ecological responsibility put forward once again by poems such as "350", a poem whose title refers to the 350 parts per million carbon dioxide molecules in the atmosphere that sets the "safe" level human beings have long surpassed, and keep surpassing every year. The forty-year span covered by these two collections attests to the continued centrality of an ecological awareness in di Prima's poetry, a position the poet defended through different approaches in other works, such as *Loba*.

Loba and Nature

In addition to an open and ever-expanding nature, Diane di Prima's long epic poem *Loba* (Di Prima 1998) shares with *Revolutionary Letters* a preoccupation with ecological issues and the preservation of nature. Revisiting specific mythical and mystic narratives through the elusive and shapeshifting she-wolf goddess, di Prima's Loba appears as feminine presence, both nurturing and threatening, as well as contemporary and primitive. With book one—parts one to eight—mostly written in the 1970s, the collection is strongly influenced by Goddess Worshippers' discourse and, as such, often includes the rather problematic connection between women and nature. This move towards a union between femininity and nature is a position which, as Pramod K. Nayar notes, "is complex as a feminist image, because it naturalizes women and feminizes nature" (Nayar 2009, p. 250). Indeed, as Gretchen T. Legler points out, ecofeminists have long established the need to dissolve such connections, arguing that:

> constructions of nature as female (as mother/virgin) are essential to the maintenance of this harmful environmental ethic and are essential to the maintenance of hierarchical ways of thinking that justify the oppression of various 'others' in patriarchal culture by ranking them 'closer to nature' or by declaring their practices 'natural' or 'unnatural'. (Legler 1997, p. 228)

Despite this, the woman-nature link is a recurrent trope in ecofeminist texts and discourses "especially", as Greg Garrard notes, in "those promoting 'radical ecofeminism' and goddess worship" (Garrard 2004, p. 24). "Ave", the first poem in *Loba*, blueprints the collection's concern over women's representability, and introduces the first connections between the goddess and nature. Opening the book with the verse "O lost moon sisters," (3) di Prima invokes a multiple vision of woman shaped by different descriptions that range from mundane, everyday life situations to mystical representations of a female essence represented through nature. Using parallelism and anaphora to create rhythm

and emphasize a sense of belonging, the poet addresses all women who wander scattered around the world:

> jaywalking do you wander
> spitting do you wander
> mumbling and crying do you wander
> aged and talking to yourselves
> with roving eyes do you wander
> hot for quick love do you wander
> weeping your dead (3)

The poet keeps introducing images of women in powerful as well as in powerless positions; women who “tower above [her]” (4) or who “cower on hillsides” (4), and continues to offer multiple examples of female experience—including motherhood, abortion, gender violence, or drug addiction, to name just a few—which are expansive rather than exclusive as far as the definition of woman goes. These rather concrete and situated images, that are generalized but still easy identifiable within a specific socio-political moment, are juxtaposed with a more elusive and mystical representation of female consciousness embodied in nature and objects:

> you are hills, the shape and color of mesa
> you are the tent, the lodge of skins, the Hogan
> the buffalo robes, the quilt the knitted afghan
> you are the cauldron and the evening star
> you rise over the sea, you ride the dark (5)

Together with these verses, the reference in the opening line to a past female community of women in tune with the moon, as well as the last verses in which the poet aligns herself with the same tradition—“I am you/and I must become you/I have been you/and I must become you” (6)—frames *Loba* within the specific Mother Goddess neopagan revival of the 1970s, and advances the juxtaposition present in the collection between a socio-politically specified, or “in-context”, feminism and an essentialist, all-embracing approach that also permeates the poet’s representation of nature[9]. As mentioned above, the dichotomy nature versus culture—with the underlying assumption of a feminine nature as subjective, emotional and private, while masculine culture remains objective, rational and public (Nayar 2009, p. 250)—seems a dubious ally to both the feminist or the ecological cause. As Carolyn Merchant notes in *The Death of Nature* (Merchant 1983), perpetuating the connection between women and nature seems “to cement existing forms of oppression against both women and nature, rather than liberating either” (xvi). This connection is all the more contentious when informed by Travel Writing and (Post) Colonialist discourses, which have identified highly gendered tropes built on this division such as “the monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene by which the “[e]xplorer-man paints/possesses newly unveiled landscape-woman” (Pratt 1992, p. 213). However, and even though di Prima makes ample use of this discourse in *Loba*—something that was rather marginal in *Revolutionary Letters*—the poems in the epic effectively convey a similarly pressing and situated experience of eco-crisis. Indeed, a close look at the way in which di Prima links the essence of the she-wolf goddess to nature reveals strong connections with definitions of ecofeminism which highlight the political or activist drive behind the establishment of links between the position of women and nature. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for instance, writes that “[e]cofeminism brings together these two explorations of ecology and feminism, in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are

[9] For a detailed analysis of the various influences di Prima had in *Loba* and her overall career, see David Calonne’s *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions* (Calonne 2019). In this comprehensive study, Calonne examines, among others, spiritual interests ranging from “Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American culture, Gnosticism, Tarot, astrology, and magic” (116), many of which have a direct impact on *Loba*.

interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures"[10] (Ruether 1992, p. 2). This correlation is clearly established in poems in which the she-wolf goddess uncovers man's exploitation of nature. For instance, in "And will you hunt the Loba?" the speaker deems those who wish to hunt Loba as fools, stating that none of their techniques will work: "lance, spear or arrow, gun or/boomerang/Think you she can be caught/in nets of love" (29). Mixing the human and animal qualities of the shape-shifting goddess, the poet further exposes an androcentric exploitation of woman/nature for man's own benefit or comfort:

> Do you hope
> to wrap you warm in her pelt
> for the coming winter?
>
> Do you dream
> to chew shreds of her flesh from inside of her skin
> turn inside out her gut, suck juice
> from her large, dark liver? Will you make a cap
> of her stomach, necklace of her spine? (29)

Through Loba's human and animal qualities, the denunciation of man's abusive and profitable relationship with nature establishes intimate connections between the exploitation of nature and women in androcentric societies. This position is strengthened by many other poems in the collection in which the poet denounces the history of violence against women, such as "Loba, to Apollo, at the Fountain of Healing"—"was I not sold & sold & my daughters broken" (147). It is within this context of systematic abuse that the poet uses the linkage between women and nature to provide a means of, if not escape, at least confrontation. Facing the "fools" that wish to exploit her, Loba resorts to the mystical connection with nature to resist patriarchal assaults. Lying "on her back in the sand like a human woman" (29), she soon morphs into her animal side –"Now/she rises, like the sun, she flicks/her tail" (29)—finally disappearing in the "glassy yellow edge/of your horizon . . . " (29). At the end of the poem, Loba completes her great escape by appropriating Jesus' words upon seeing Mary Magdalene after his resurrection—"NOLI ME TANGERE" (29). This "Do not touch me" works on different levels; on the one hand, and as Helen McNeil stated, "[t]he Loba merges ancient and contemporary spirits, bringing curative powers to the diseased city, and acclaiming a female sexual potency that resists being demeaned by male aggression." (McNeil 1996, p. 208) On the other hand, and in the context of a collection that also revisits Biblical events through which further abuses to women and nature are exposed, the appropriation of Jesus' words points towards the denunciation of the perpetuation of the violence against women and nature through the Christian discourse[11].

Seen in this light, *Loba* provides an answer to Merchant's initial question: "if women overtly identify with nature and both are devalued in modern Western culture, don't such efforts work against women's prospects for their own liberation?" (Merchant 1983, p. vvi) Despite the use of the mystical discourse often linked with essentialism, di Prima's *Loba* stresses the necessity of turning away from a literal reading of the Goddess, into a metaphorical and psychological position which grant women the power to continually construct themselves. The Goddess, as the woman who seeks her, appears in Loba in a constant state of evolution—"The Memory of far things/is the continuous presence/in which I discover my Self." (241) The capitalization of "Memory" and "Self" highlights the connection between the presence of the female divine and individual female self-discovery, which is an ongoing process in so far as the image of the Goddess keeps revealing itself to women

[10] A similar definition is provided by Janis Birkeland, who notes that "[e]cofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 1993, p. 18).

[11] As Lynn White Jr. writes in "Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" (White 1996): "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends." (10)

in different situations—“She does not leave in her going, she arrives/continuously,/no epiphany/only Presence” (242). One way in which di Prima establishes the Goddess’s continuous change is by recurring to all-encompassing descriptions in which the Loba has different forms, inhabiting animals and natural elements, but also objects, sounds, abstract feelings, situations, etc. In the first of three consecutive poems describing Loba included in part three, she is “the wind you never leave behind/black cat you killed in empty lot, she is/smell of the summer weeds, the one who lurks/in open childhood closets, she coughs/in the next room, hoots, nests in your hair/she is incubus” (45). The negativity of these descriptions, which portray Loba as a rather threatening presence, is slightly overturned in the following poem, in which she is described through nature and growth: “she is the scrub oak, juniper/on the mesa, she is Joshua tree/in your desert, she grows/in cracks in the pavement/she tastes of sage, tastes bitter/as chaparral” (47). Here, her bitterness is not related to death or insanity as in the last poem, but to her nature-derived properties—“she is born in tangled woodlands of kelp” (46). The juxtaposition of such images ultimately allows the poet to provide both women and nature with an empowering discourse based on self-representation; a discourse that even if just fueled by the poet’s imagination, allows nature itself to set its boundaries: “I am the cliff where you may not stand/The mountain where you cannot live” (48). Rather than retreating to a utopian, matriarchal world, the exposition of the abuse of women and nature through this discourse acts as a reminder of the need to take action—even if it is just through acts of the imagination—towards the kind of society in which we want to live. Indeed, although di Prima is much less explicit in her call to arms in *Loba* than in *Revolutionary Letters*, the way the poet describes women with nature in similarly threatened or endangered positions allows us to highlight both *Loba*’s feminist and eco-concerned *raison d’être*. As Noël Sturgeon has aptly affirmed, “the effort to make connections between women and nature rather than between feminism and environmentalism as political movements produces a theoretical context in which conceptions of both women and nature are frequently essentialist.” (Sturgeon 1997, p. 264) Hence, it is not about the connection between women and nature—between Loba and her natural and animal qualities—but about the feminist and environmentalist mindset that shapes the poet’s urgent call for the revolutionary to take action to save the planet, as well as the denunciation of the abuse women and the natural world are systematically subjected to in Western societies.

3. Waldman and the Eco-Political Stance

The inherent power Diane di Prima conferred poetry with the lines “THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST/THE IMAGINATION” (Di Prima [1971] 2007, p. 104), is shared and actualized in Anne Waldman’s body of work. Just like di Prima, Waldman often uses this power to denounce crimes against nature and delineate a green politics. A long-time believer in the energy and potential of words, in the essay “‘I is another’: Dissipative structures” (*Fast Speaking Woman*), Waldman links the performative nature of poetry with Speech Acts theories of performative utterances (see Austin 1975) to endow poetry with the ability to effect changes in the world:

> Through language one is making gestures that ward off death, that honor the earth, that encourage the rain to fall or someone to fall in love with you, to stop the war, to close down Rocky Flats. Language provides access to the poet’s ultimate desire and its manifested efficacy. (Waldman 1996, p. 137)

Building from this premise, Waldman develops a poetics heavily influenced by a situated body that participates in different spheres of social and political life. As part of this body poetics, ecological issues often come under the spotlight of her aesthetic stance. As a case in point, in the same collection, the speaker’s day dreams in “Millennium sutra” portray a deteriorating world in which politics and ecological collapse go hand in hand,—“vote apocalyptic/& you will get your war” (Waldman 1996, p. 124)—and where harm to the ecosystem is the systematic practice of a greedy and materialistic society: “rain forest stripped & bare/no trove there/but all you could ever need –/a slump, a

dress, a new life,/tales to be greedy by/is accessed on a/poisoned machine" (125). The trope of society as a "poisoned machine" leads the poet to dystopian representations of the city as a monstrous entity reminiscent of weiss's "webbed" San Francisco. As a case in point, human consciousness and mental activity create a humanoid and menacing city in the poem "Noösphere" (*Kill or Cure*): "Intoxicated, I could see all the wires in my walls as veins of some maniacal beast that had its network, its tentacles everywhere. I visualized grids of nerves & muscle & electricity of my city." (Waldman 1994, p. 231) Much like di Prima did in *Revolutionary Letters*, the speaker in Waldman's poem is not oblivious to her own accountability for the eco-crisis she denounces. Guilty by participation and association with the Noösphere, the poet discards elegiac and pastoral modes of nature writing arguing, instead, that the knowledgeable poet can no longer turn a blind eye to the pressing ecological problems she has inadvertently brought forth. In this position, the informed poet wonders "[h]ow can we glorify that seemingly gorgeous Rocky Mountain trail close to Colorado's Rocky Flats when you know how the plutonium has leaked into the streams running through it, giving rise to monstrous distortions, cancers of all kinds." (Waldman 1994, p. 232) It is through this well-informed and unambiguous blame-taking that Waldman situates the performative power of poetry as a tool to stir consciousness and mobilize action.

Having acknowledge one's own accountability for the eco-crisis, one of the ways in which Waldman hopes to affect change in the world is by methodically and critically connecting specific ecological issues with war. This move is present in the poem "Science time" (*Skin Meat Bones*), where the speaker urges the reader—much as di Prima did in her letters—to "help the world, go further/Set back the clock on the USS Pittsburgh, take it apart,/dismantle those warheads, dig up the poison & deactivate/its hideousness, admit wrongdoing". (Waldman 1985, pp. 78–79) This theme is further and more deeply developed in *The Iovis Trilogy* (Waldman 2011), Waldman's epic and ambitious poetic study of the connection between masculinity, war and a multi-directed violence that includes violence against nature. In its more than one thousand pages, the poet investigates the power and reach of scope of Jove, the embodiment of the overrule father who serves as a starting point to explore negative and positive masculine influences in her life. Eco-crises are recurrently denounced through various incarnations of Jove, as the "father who is a kind of power god, master of the nuclear heaven or nightmare" (Waldman 2011, p. 197), but also the poet's son, who appears as hope for a new generation led by a greener consciousness. In addition, through the alter ego "Anne-who-grasp-the broom"—a character that is often used to incorporate archival material and personal correspondence to the epic—Waldman further stresses the performative and political stance of poetry, one that allows her to shape the eco-crisis[12].

Yellow Jumpsuit Activism: Uh Oh Plutonium

Rather than a utopian turn—as the poet writes she is "not writing the modern arcadia" (Waldman 2011, p. 1007)—Waldman's determination in *The Iovis Trilogy* to "[k]eep the world safe for poetry (and everything else)" (Waldman 2011, p. 918) includes the direct address and denunciation of ecological problems. Indeed, instead of resorting to utopian or pastoral modes, the connection between the poet's lived experience and the environment is often made through apocalyptic imagery, a discourse which, as Buell noted, "is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (Buell 1995, p. 285). This is the case in one of Waldman's first video projects, *Uh Oh Plutonium* (Waldman 1982), where she explicitly combines her poetry and political activism with the performance and visual properties of the video clip form—an emerging medium at the time. In this video, the poet expands the performative and multimodal

[12] In addition to the many appearances of Anne and her broom, the author's son also voices some of the political concerns of his mother, writing, for instance, to President Reagan to praise his effort to "cut down the number of weapons made every year and to ban the use of chemical weapons" (216); or to Skybox International Inc. to complain about their "not biodegradable or recyclable" (255) packaging, offering some alternatives that would be environmentally friendly.

qualities of her poetry with the use of shamanistic, mantra-like, forms of chanting and incantation[13].

Clothed in a yellow one-in-all jumpsuit and backed up by synchronized chorus girls, the poet turns into a lead singer as she utilizes the visibility of the commercial pop hit to denounce the radioactive contamination of the Rocky Flats Plant (Boulder, Colorado)[14]. Located just a few miles from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, which Waldman co-founded with Allen Ginsberg in 1974, the plant was built in the early fifties and started producing parts for nuclear weapons—concretely fission cores—in 1953. A series of accidents, which took place from 1957–1969, together with leakage produced by the normal activity at the plant, caused plutonium and other highly toxic chemical elements to pollute the plant and the surrounding area, extending even to populated areas of Denver. From the very first leakage of plutonium in the 1957 fire, the government issued no radioactivity warning, hiding the environmental hazard people were exposed to. After a second fire in 1969, civilian monitoring teams started to draw attention to the actual levels of radioactive contamination, resulting in an increased public awareness and the first protests and mobilizations to close the plant. Anne Waldman participated actively in the demonstrations together with poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, and has continued protesting and incorporating this eco-crisis in her work over the years.[15]

In the essay "Warring God Charnel Ground (Rocky Flats Chronicles)" (*Vow to Poetry*), Waldman describes the history of accidents and mismanagement issues at the plant, as well as the different environmental and health problems the plant has caused and will continue to cause. As the poet writes, "[i]t is exceedingly difficult for the human system to flush out plutonium. Half of the original mass will remain in the body a century after its entry. 'We'll all be glowing for a quarter of a million years,' I sang in protest on Rocky Flats premises in 1976." (Waldman 2001, p. 232) In *Uh Oh Plutonium* Waldman expands the idea of "glowing with radioactivity" to connect the lyrics of the song with the visual effects offered by video technology. Extending the sentence "We'll all be glowing for a quarter of a million years," Waldman composes the video-poem by listing the unnatural, radioactive glow parts of the human anatomy, objects and landscapes have acquired due to the exposition to plutonium[16]. An apocalyptic portrayal of the future, overcome with nuclear waste, helps the poet make visible the rather invisible threat of radioactive contamination. In the poet's dystopian world of environmental disaster, technicolor infuses and distorts everything, reflecting back an image showing "teeth glowing/microfilm glowing/pages of words glowing/underwear glowing," or "nail and knuckles glowing/sore kneecaps glowing/ankles in despair/storm clouds glowing/hair follicles glowing/golden earlobes/the better to hear you with."

As product of the 1980s, *Uh Oh Plutonium* is heavily influenced by the "toxic consciousness" Cynthia Deitering uses to describe—mostly U.S.—works that "showed an increasing concern with the pervasive problem of toxic waste" (Deitering 1996, p. 196) and which offer "insights into a culture's shifting relation to nature and to the environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imaginations." (Deitering 1996, p. 196) Using poetry to open up this public debate, and accompanying the glowing metaphor of the lyrics, the video shows different frozen images of crowds of people in urban and rural environments, as well as buildings such as the

[13] In the introduction to *Manatee/Humanity* (Waldman 2009) Waldman writes: "This poem takes its initial inspiration from a particular initiation/teaching—or wang (literally 'empowerment')—in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, with links to a pre-Vedic shamanic ritual, and from an encounter and meditation on the mysterious manatee, the endangered mammal of coastal waters, and the grey wolf, residing particularly in the western United States." (i).

[14] The format of the commercial pop hit can also be seen as an ironic parallelism between the cheap commercialization of music and art and the commercialization of nuclear weapons notwithstanding people's safety.

[15] Footage of the demonstration, with Waldman and Orlovsky sitting down on the railway tracks to stop shipments to and from the plant, can be seen in the documentary *Fried Shoes, Cooked Diamonds* (dir. Constanzo Allione, narrated Ginsberg 1979). At the demonstration Ginsberg read his poem "Plutonium Ode" (1978) and Gregory Corso read "Bomb" (1958).

[16] The lyrics of "Uh Oh Plutonium" are an extended version of her poem "Plutonium Poem" (Waldman 1978). The video version changes the opening verse "Fuck Plutonium" of the poem for the softer "Junk Plutonium."

old World Trade Center or the Taj Mahal, and landmark monuments such as The Statue of Liberty or The Great Sphinx of Giza, to name a few, being altered through the special effects of the video technology. Filtered and distorted through blue, green, red, violet and yellow fluorescent color filters, the images change in swift movements keeping up with the paradoxical upbeat pop tempo. Feeding news of nuclear apocalypse to a society through a celebrated product of mass consumption, and much like Deitering's analysis of novels informed by a toxic consciousness, Waldman provides a representation "of a postnatural world, of a culture defined by its waste, and of a nation that has fouled its own nest". (Deitering 1996, p. 202) Much as it happened in di Prima's work, the dystopian or even apocalyptic turn is not gratuitous, but hopes to bring about change in the world. This is all the more present in Waldman's work when seen in relation to the centrality of orality and performance in her poetics. Indeed, as the poet writes in the essay "Fast Speaking Woman and the Dakini Principle", *Uh Oh Plutonium* originated as a piece meant to be sung or chanted:

> since the first publication of 'Fast Speaking Woman,' I've taught classes on shamanic and ethnopoetic literatures at The Naropa Institute, using, among other texts, Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*, as well as Sabina's imaginative chants. The class one year tried out various enactments of words to create a force field of energy for protest demonstrations at Rocky Flats plutonium plant in Boulder. One evolved into an antinuclear work that was subsequently performed as a group piece. (Waldman 1996, p. 41)

This performative energy translates in *Uh Oh Plutonium* in alliterative rhythms and the repetition of incantatory verses through which the poet/performer is progressively empowered. Towards the end of the video, with the image of the New York skyline as seen from behind a graveyard, the poet stares defiantly into the camera as she approaches it to sing away the links established between economic profit and human and ecological destruction: "I dedicate this day against megadeath/this Pluto's wealth plus Archia rule/this rule of the wealthy/this Plutolotry/this worship of wealth/I spell away". Drawing etymological connections between the radioactive element and the God of wealth and the underworld—word plays being very common in her work—the poet appropriates the shaman or witch position she identifies with in *The Iovis Trilogy* and other works to cast a spell against the destruction force of those who benefit from the nuclear weapon industry. Hence, the concluding verses, in which the poet's strong, deep voice crescendos a "mega mega mega mega mega mega mega mega death bomb/ENLIGHTEN!", oppose the radioactive glow of plutonium with the metaphorical enlightenment of social and political awareness. Echoing Ginsberg's performative stance in the approach to orality as a weapon to counterattack environmental and social problems, Waldman's *Uh Oh Plutonium* parallels Ginsberg's "Plutonium Ode":

> I call your name with hollow vowels, I psalm your Fate close by, my
> breath near deathless ever at your side
> to Spell your destiny, I set this verse prophetic on your mausoleum
> walls to seal you up Eternally with Diamond Truth! O
> doomed Plutonium. (Ginsberg 2001, p. 311)

Like Ginsberg, Waldman wishes to enhance social critique through the power of poetry. This visionary, incantatory, aesthetics as well as Tibetan Buddhist rituals such as "wang"—empowerment—allow Waldman in this and other works such as *Manatee/Humanity*[17] (Waldman 2009) to develop a poetic stance intimately linked with an ecological mindset. This move, ultimately, brings to light the poet's own commitment to exposing the eco-crisis through art.

[17] Waldman writes in the introduction: "This poem takes its initial inspiration from a particular initiation/teaching—or wang (literally 'empowerment')—in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, with links to a pre-Vedic shamanic ritual, and from an encounter and meditation on the mysterious manatee, the endangered mammal of coastal waters, and the grey wolf, residing particularly in the western United States." (Waldman 2009, p. i).

4. Conclusions

The work analyzed in this article gives testimony of the centrality of environmental and ecocritical discourses within and around the Beat generation, at the same time that it stresses the need to expand the theoretical lens through which Beat-related poets such as di Prima and Waldman are often framed. An analysis of di Prima's work through amplified lens that reach beyond her position as the quintessential Beat woman opens up new points of entrance into a poetics in which the Beat generation represents, as David Calonne right notes, merely "a subset of a much larger historical movement in which she situates her own work". (3) In this regard, an approach that takes into consideration the poet's life-long study and influence of Buddhism and mystical traditions as well as situated analysis which considers her participation in counter-culture activist groups such as the Diggers, reveals a strong connection with political and ecological concerns which delineate *Revolutionary Letters* as well as subsequent works. In much the same way, Waldman's ecological concerns in poetry as well as her environmental activism are deeply ingrained in not just her study of Buddhism and shamanistic practices, but also in her continued development of a body poetics profoundly influenced by the performative qualities of language. In this sense, approaching their work through the theoretical context of eco-criticism foregrounds the profound influence discourses beyond the Beat generation had in their work.

In the works studied, Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman use their poetry to bring to light both general ecological concerns and more specific eco-crises that are denounced or condemned through their poetry. Using utopian and dystopian imagery, as well as other discourses such as the toxic or the apocalyptic discourse, they aim at effecting change in the world by placating local and global eco-crises. Such an arduous task, and frequently naive stance, is addressed critically. Diane di Prima, of the two the poet whose aesthetic most frequently tilted towards the idealization of the revolutionary mode, also makes room in *Revolutionary Letters* to ironically reminisce her mimeographed-activist-pamphlets days—"well, the best thing to do with a mimeograph is to drop it/from a five story window, on the head of a cop" (146). Similarly, Anne Waldman cannot but agree with the critic that in "'Fast Speaking Woman' & The Dakini Principle" affirmed that "[p]oets are hardly shamans" (Waldman 1996, p. 42). Still, and in keeping with Lawrence Buell's defense of ecocritical writing in *Writing for an Endangered World* (Buell 2001), the poets analyzed in this article also acknowledge poetry's potential as an act of environmental imagination capable of "register[ing] and energiz[ing] engagements with the world" (Buell 2001, p. 2). Much like Buell, Waldman's reply to the understandably skeptic critic underscores the potential of poetry to act as receptacle and disseminator of world-wide concerns, even while not necessarily bringing about immediate or effective change. Be it as it may, Diane di Prima's and Anne Waldman's poetry show how "making themselves available as 'antennae of the race'" poets can, and indeed often do "receive or tap into energy sources we are usually impervious to." (Waldman 1996, p. 42) This stirring of consciousness, amid the still pressing environmental and ecological crisis, is as relevant today as it was three decades ago.

Funding: Funded by the research project "Queer Temporalities" (PCG2018-095393-I00). Main researcher Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Austin, John Langshaw. 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Birkeland, Janis. 1993. Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice. In *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Edited by Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Buell, Lawrence. 1995. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. London: Princeton University Press.

Buell, Lawrence. 2001. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. London: Belknap Press.

Buell, Lawrence. 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Callenbach, Ernest. 1975. *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Nelson*. Berkeley: Heyday/Banyan Tree Books.

Calonne, David Stephen. 2019. *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Chen-Hsing Tsai, Robin. 2012. Gary Snyder: Translator and Cultural Mediator Between China and the World. *Comparative Literature Studies* 49: 596–609.

Deitering, Cynthia. 1996. The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 196–203.

Di Prima, Diane. 2007. *Revolutionary Letters*. San Francisco: Last Gasp. First published 1971.

Di Prima, Diane. 1998. *Loba*. New York: Penguin Books.

Di Prima, Diane. 2001. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*. New York: Penguin Books.

Di Prima, Diane. 2014. *The Poetry Deal*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers.

Encarnación-Pinedo, Estíbaliz. 2016. Utopia in Progress in di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18: 1–7. [CrossRef]

Fazzino, Jimmy. 2016. *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press.

Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge.

Ginsberg, Allen. 2001. *Selected Poems 1947–1995*. New York: Harper Collins.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Eve Quesnel, eds. 2015. *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential Writings of Peter Berg*. New York: Routledge.

Grossinger, Richard, ed. 1978. *Ecology and Consciousness*. Richmond: North Atlantic Books.

Heise, Ursula K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Legler, Gretchen T. 1997. Ecofeminist Literary Criticism. In *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Edited by Karen J. Warren. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 227–38.

McNeil, Helen. 1996. The Archeology of Gender in the Beat Movement. In *The Beat Generation Writers*. Edited by A. Robert Lee. London: Pluto Press, pp. 178–99.

Merchant, Carolyn. 1983. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Metesky, George [pseud.]. 1966. The Ideology of Failure. *Berkeley Barb*, November 25, 6.

Murphy, Patrick D. 2017. Complexity Integration, Ecocritical Analysis, and Gary Snyder Studies. *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 30: 93–100. [CrossRef]

Nayar, Pramod K. 2009. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Delhi: Longman/Pearson Education India.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1992. *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Silliman, Ron. 2007. Ed Dorn New American Poetry. *Silliman's Blog: A Weblog Focused on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. March 20. Available online: https://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2007/03/for-reader-of-my-generation-collection.html (accessed on 15 November 2020).

Sturgeon, Noël. 1997. *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action*. New York and London: Routledge.

Tovey, Paige. 2013. *The Transatlantic Eco-Romanticism of Gary Snyder*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Waldman, Anne. 1978. Plutonium Poem. In *New Directions 36: An International Anthology of Prose & Poetry*. Edited by James Laughlin. New York: New Directions Books, pp. 97–98.

Waldman, Anne. 1982. *Uh Oh Plutonium*, Hyacinth Girls Music, NYC, Video.

Waldman, Anne. 1985. *Skin Meat Bones: Poems*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.

Waldman, Anne. 1994. *Kill or Cure*. New York: Penguin.

Waldman, Anne. 1996. *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants and Essays*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Waldman, Anne. 2001. *Vow to Poetry: Essays, Interviews & Manifestos*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.

Waldman, Anne. 2009. *Manatee/Humanity*. New York: Penguin.

Waldman, Anne. 2011. *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

weiss, ruth. 1958. *STEPS*. San Francisco: Ellis Press.

White, Lynn, Jr. 1996. The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 3–14.

humanities

MDPI

Article

Material Overconsumption as Ecological Polemics in Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Gary Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra": Re-Envisioning Beat Critiques of Anthropocentric Materialism

Henrikus Joko Yulianto

English Department, State University of Semarang, Semarang 50229, Indonesia; henriungaran@gmail.com

Abstract: Beat poetry, since its origination in the American milieu in the 1950s until its further maturation in the late 1960s and 1970s, has embodied ecological visions. Allen Ginsberg's and Gary Snyder's Buddhist poetics of the emptiness of material phenomena evoke one's awareness ofthe true nature of material goods. This ecological awarenessenlightensanyoneto not overconsume the goods in fulfilling his/her daily necessities. In this recent era, Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra" memorialize this Beat green poetics against anthropocentric materialism and its potential detrimental impacts on the natural environment. These poems view human's material attachment as a recurring melancholia even in today's digital technology era. Their ecological criticisms through the Buddhist poetics pave the way for anyone to cherish rather than objectify any material thing in living the biotic community.

Keywords: Beat poetry; anthropocentric materialism; Buddhist poetics; biotic community

Citation: Yulianto, Henrikus Joko. 2021. Material Overconsumption as Ecological Polemics in Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Gary Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra": Re-Envisioning Beat Critiques of Anthropocentric Materialism. *Humanities* 10: 78. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020078

Received: 4 February 2021
Accepted: 13 May 2021
Published: 20 May 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Beat poetry has an ecological swing. It not only eulogizes jazz as its poetic form butserves as an ecological critique of mainstream material overconsumption. The notion of spontaneity that Beat writers, especially Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, learnt fromjazz rhythm and from Buddhist Mahāyāna teachings about the emptiness of phenomenahas entreated anyone to not objectify and attach oneself to material things (Allen, pp. 18–62; Yulianto 2017). The idea of 'spontaneity' in their poetics, as derived from bebop jazz and from the insight and manner Mahāyāna Buddhism evokes in anyone due to the insubstantiality of phenomena, serves as their non-materialist trajectory (Yulianto 2017). Indeed, Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra" do not make use of bop prosody, which might be short and telegraphic, just as Jack Kerouac's choruses did in his *Mexico City Blues* in the era of the 1950s (Kerouac 1959). Instead, their long and asymmetric lines exemplify jazz improvization and emphasize urgency or 'immediacy' (Mortenson 2017, p. 81) as their spiritual poetics and critique of materialism. However, both Ginsberg and Snyder still embody a frenzied rhythm and the 'harsh, hard-edged' tonality of bebop in their use of enjambement that critiqued the material-oriented culture of people in their era (DeVeaux 1997). In fact, in "Plutonian Ode", Ginsberg still used interlocking strophes as he did in his 1950s poems such as "Howl" (Ginsberg 1956). Ginsberg's poems in the 1970s, such as "Plutonian Ode" in his *Plutonian Ode and Other Poems 1977–1980* (Ginsberg 1982), in a like manner raise environmental issues that reveal the era. "Plutonian Ode" is Ginsberg's prominent example of this poem with some ecological values. Its interlocking typography does suggest interconnectedness between things in the phenomenal world. Meanwhile, some years before, in 1969, the West Coast Beat poet Gary Snyder distributed his poem "Smokey the Bear Sutra" as a free broadside at the Sierra Club in San Francisco 'to promote ecological consciousness' (Charters 1992a, p. 519). Different from Ginsberg's ode, which has a solemn tone and a musically rhythmic and regular pattern, Snyder's narrative and

dramatic poem uses a sparse, irregular, and dadaistic typography. Synder expresses this latter feature through the use of capitalized lines and phrases that exemplify anger and protest. These capitalized lines are similar to those of his contemporary, Michael McClure, in his "Peyote Poem" written in 1958 (Charters 1992c, pp. 265–73). Then, the repeated phrases "DROWN THEIR BUTTS" and "CRUSH THEIR BUTTS"exemplify the poet's censure of the despoilers of the natural environment. Anthropocentric materialism is a never-ending phenomenon. From time to time, humans always depend on material things to fulfill their physiological and social needs. Any material products human beings invent will always serve their welfare. These human-oriented cultural activities exemplify the phenomenon of 'anthropocentrism' that initiated human hegemony overall life forms and the physical environment. In modern and contemporary lives, this anthropocentric activity has caused several threats tohuman and nonhuman animals as well as the natural environment.Ginsberg's long poemsfrom the era of the 1950s, such as "*Howl*", as well as those of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, such as "Kaddish", "Wichita Vortex Sutra", and "Plutonian Ode",portray the poet's bardic and elegiac laments about socio-political turmoils of these eras that all reveal the material anthropocentrism of those who held political supremacy (Katz 2016). In "Howl", Ginsberg more straightforwardly lampoons the social and ecological disharmony because of thisanthropocentric materialism. Inhis poem "For the Death of 100 Whales" that was read at the Six Gallery reading event in October 1955 in San Francisco (Morgan 2010, p. 102; Charters 1992b, p. 273), McClure censures the anthropogenic crime against whales that caused the demise of 100 whales. This marine mammal slaughter was certainly a crime against the endangered species that threatened biotic life in general (McClure 1982, p. 33). Then, McClure, as a West Coast poet, argued in an essay that the embodiment of human beings as being born of physical matter is derived from 'a spectrum of inorganic matter' and that we essentially coexist with other life forms (p. 118). He also argued that a man should be able to admit that he/she is an animal justlike anonhuman animal since all living beings similarly need biospheric elements, including oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen, sulfur, and sunlight (pp. 115, 121). A female Beat poet of the younger generation, Anne Waldman, also recited a critique of human material overconsumption in her Buddhism-inspired poem "Makeup on Empty Spaces". For instance, some repeated lines in Waldman's poem, such as "painting the phenomenal world", "I bind the massive rock", and "I bind the uneconomical unrenewable energy of uranium" (Waldman 1989, pp. 130–31), all suggest a human craving for material things. This ecological awareness aims to make humans aware that they are not the center of life in the natural world but only parts of it just as other life forms are.

Human material overconsumption poses ecological hazards. This act will threaten the natural environment since it means to overexploit natural resources as the basic ingredients (Leonard and Conrad 2011). This material overextraction then will disorder the ecosystem. Mahayana Buddhist principles teach disciples to avoid material objectification because they posit the insubstantiality of any material thing (Simmer-Brown 2005; Capra 2005; Norberg-Hodge 2005; Gross 1997, pp. 291–311; Kaza 2010, pp. 39–61). Ginsberg in his poems "Ruhr-Gebiet" (1979) and "Homework" (1980) from the same anthology *Plutonian Ode & Other Poems 1977–1980* (Ginsberg 1982) critiques the human material overconsumption that has wreaked havoc on the natural environment and social harmony itself. For instance, in "Ruhr-Gebiet" he uses the phrases "too many" and "too much" to authenticate this material overconsumption—

Too much industry

No fish in the Rhine

Lorelei poisoned

Too much embarrassment

. . . . . .

Too much metal

Too much fat

Too many jokes

not enough meditation

(Ginsberg 1982, p. 75)

This human act reveals his objectification of goods, which arises from his ignorance of the true essence of material things.

This article discusses Allen Ginsberg's "A Plutonian Ode" and Gary Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra" as the two figuresare affiliated with the Beat Generation. The discussion is focused on human material overuseas ecological polemics. Two problems that this article discusses are: first, how Ginsberg's and Snyder's material poetics in the two poems reveal anthropocentric materialism and ecological polemics; and second, how their material poetics evoke one's ecological conscience in today's anthropocentric materialism. In discussing these questions, I refer to some books on Buddhist Ecology (Payne 2010; Tucker and Williams 1997; Badiner 2005), the nature of material objects in view of social anthropology (Bennett 2010; Miller 2005; Woodward 2007), and environmental humanities and material ecocriticism (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Iovino and Oppermann 2014). The reason for using these Buddhist ecological books is that the arguments in these books are based upon Buddhist teachings that evidently care about environmental issues and all life forms. Furthermore, Ginsberg and Snyder are two figures who, among other Beat poets, embraced Buddhism as their spiritual path and in their poetics (Yulianto 2017; Snyder 1969, pp. 90–93). Therefore, discussing their poems as ecopoems means to look into the Buddhist ecological views they embrace in their poems.

2. Anthropocentric Materialism as Human Phenomena

The term 'anthropocentric materialism' suggests human overuse of material things. These things are derived from natural resources and nonhuman organisms in the natural environment. The term 'materialism' is derived from the word 'matter', which means 'things', 'stuff', or often 'objects' (Miller 2005; Woodward 2007; Leonard and Conrad 2011; Bennett 2010). 'Matter' refers to any material phenomena in the natural world. This phenomenon certainly includes the ecology of all things or the 'mesh', the 'network', or the interconnectedness of things—humans, nonhuman animals, and material things in the natural environment. The mesh exists in all forms of life and material phenomena, including man-made products and natural resources such as plants, metals, fossil fuels, and any other material derivatives (Morton 2012, pp. 38–50). In the view of the environmental humanities and social anthropology, 'matter' exists in any biotic relationship, including the air one breathes and the food one consumes. This especially refers to material ecocriticism as a study that "examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text" and aims to identify a human's interaction with his/her material things (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, pp. 1–3; Miller 2005). The idea of 'materialism' relates to consumerism that in the Buddhist perspective corresponds with human material overconsumption. This practice also tallies with overpopulation, while the latter phenomenon correlates with poverty (Gross 1997). Therefore, this excessive population and consumption of goods may suggest an anthropogenic propensity to crave for more material things. Furthermore, the American Buddhist writer and emeritus professor in Biology and environmental humanities Stephanie Kaza illustrated that materialism, which is identical with consumerism, in America has been around since the 1950s, the *era of the Beat Generation* (my emphasis). For instance, she said that since that year "the use of energy, meat, and lumber has doubled; use of plastic has increased five-fold; use of aluminum has increased sevenfold; airplane mileage has increased thirty-three-fold per person". In this era, people use cars twice as much as those living in the 1950s, such that they leave 'a larger ecological footprint' on the Earth (Simmer-Brown 2005, p. 3). Then, by referring to Loy's writing, Simmer-Brown said that consumerism may have become 'the new world religion', which is based upon the 'two unexamined beliefs' that "growth and enhanced world trade will benefit everyone" and "growth will not be constrained by the inherent limits of a finite planet" (Simmer-Brown 2005, pp. 3–4). She further argued that the cause of consumerism (overconsumption of material goods) is 'ego gratification' or one's 'constant craving'. This human desire is derived from "the speed of

one's minds, wishing so intensely for what one does not have that one cannot experience what is there, right before him/her" (Simmer-Brown 2005, p. 6). Referring to Buddhist teachings about the Noble Truth of Suffering (Goddard 1994), she pointed out that this consumerist craving causes suffering as she says "We want, therefore we consume; we want, therefore we suffer" (Simmer-Brown 2005, p. 4). Then, she referred to the notion proposed by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, her *guru* and Ginsberg's Buddhist teacher, too, that materialism as the quality of one's reliance on materialness has three kinds—physical materialism, psychological materialism, and spiritual materialism (ibid., 2005, p. 5). Physical materialism means "the neurotic pursuit of pleasure, comfort, and security" or 'the outer expression of consumerism'. Psychological materialism refers to one's intention "to control the world through theory, ideology, and intellect". By having this ideology, one feels victorious, correct, and righteous. An example is the trend of contemporary people (laymen and public figures) to commercialize and objectify Buddhism for social popularity (Simmer-Brown 2005, p. 5). Spiritual materialism means one's attempt to use Buddhism to get rid of fear and insecurity and to maintain a 'centralized awareness' (Simmer-Brown 2005, p. 6). The history of materialism also closely corresponds with patriarchal culture, in which most people in modern times believe in the idea that 'real men' are those who possess more material wealth than others, especially women and children (Capra 2005, p. 11). In dealing with this materialism, the patriarchal culture connotes "expansion, competition, and an 'object-centered' consciousness" (Capra 2005, p. 11). Materialism in this millennium also corresponds with globalization (Norberg-Hodge 2005, p. 16). This global culture tends to produce homogeneity in cultural products, which is called a monoculture. This mass-culture not only means to expand and exploit material resources from the natural environment, but tends to privilege certain groups of industrialists to the disadvantage of villagers and working-class people. Since capital owners will replace farmers with 'capital-intensive machinery', diversified food production tends to take place with an export monoculture (Norberg-Hodge 2005, p. 17). In Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Snyder's "Smokey The Bear Sutra", the ecological polemics that the poems address reveal this patriarchal material-oriented culture. The use of uppercase letters in several phrases and images, such as 'Doctor Seaborg', 'Lord of Hades', 'the Great Year', 'Baptismal Word', 'Grand Subject', 'Solar System', 'Unapproachable Weight', and 'Diamond Arts', combined with the names of Greek and Hebrew gods and goddesses, such as 'Spring-green Persephone', 'Demeter', 'Sabaot', and 'Elohim' (Ginsberg 1982), in Ginsberg's poem suggest this patriarchal material-oriented culture (see Pederson 2009). Since most of the images written in uppercase letters are male or refer to male affairs and to what men conventionally do, these elucidate men's grasp on material things. In comparison, Snyder's use of uppercase letters in several phrases, sentences, and imperatives, such as 'SMOKEY THE BEAR', 'HE WILL PUT THEM OUT', and 'DROWN THEIR BUTTS' (Charters 1992a, pp. 570–71), depicts masculine superiority over any other gender, especially women. Since not only men but also women live in the natural world and they together constitute the agents who consume material things to survive, both men and women have to be aware of conserving biotic life. Therefore, Ginsberg's and Snyder's ecological vision in their poems evoke a male and a female reader's understanding of this urgency and responsibility.

Materialism always centers upon humans or *anthropos*. Everything that humans do is always for fulfilling their needs. Therefore, in daily material consumption, material goods and the natural environment become mere objects to cater to their necessities. The word 'anthropocentrism' then suggests 'a charge of human chauvinism' and 'an acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries (Boddice 2011, p. 1). In this millennium and global culture, anthropocentrism poses a polemic about what it means to be a human being (Sax 2011, p. 21), especially in dealing with other life forms and with human consumption of material goods. The word 'human' has an ecological overtone since it was derived from the Latin word *humanus* and this word originated from *humus*, which means 'earth' or 'soil'. Therefore, etymologically the term 'human' has already revealed the embodiment of the earth in a human entity. This shows the inherent essence of the human ecology, the interconnectedness between humans and their natural environment. By the term 'an-

thropocentric materialism' I mean that human material overconsumption deals with one's greed. This anthropogenic activity means to disregard any other life forms, especially nonhuman animals. This human material overuse violates the inherent values of all life forms and material things when their entities play an important role in the biotic community (Meine 2013). Another meaning that I argue is that this anthropocentric materialism essentially depicts humankind's sense perception about material phenomena rather than the material things themselves as self-independent entities. Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" and Snyder's "Smokey The Bear Sutra" polemicize this psychological materialism through the illustration of environmental issues during the late 1960s and 1970s.

3. Ginsberg's and Snyder's Material Poetics as a Revelation of Anthropocentric Materialism and Ecological Polemics

Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode" consists of three parts. Part I has 45 strophes; Part II has 12 strophes; and Part III has 8 strophes. So, this poem has 65 strophes in total. In a like manner, Snyder's poem more or less has 18 stanzas. The lengthiness of the poems in some ways suggests the materiality of natural phenomena and the human material overconsumption they criticize through the ironic and satirical overtones of 'Plutonian Ode' and 'Smokey The Bear Sutra'. Both poems use a lyrical, dramatic, and narrative style by the use of the first-person "I" and quoted speeches (with quotation marks). Their material poetics goes two ways. First, it ironizes and satirizes humankind's materialism through the polemics 'plutonium' and 'environmental despoliation'. Second, their material poetics is imbued with Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, namely the insubstantiality of the true essence of any material phenomenon. In Snyder's poem, he capitalizes some phrases and lines that highlight the issues. Capitalized phrases, such as SMOKEY THE BEAR, lines such as HE WILL PUT THEM OUT, "I DEDICATE MYSELF TO THE UNIVERSAL DIAMOND BE THIS RAGING FURY DESTROYED", (Charters 1992a, pp. 569–71) emphasize ecological and spiritual insights from the American west scene and eastern Buddhist teachings about the emptiness of phenomena (Snyder 1969, p. 92). Furthermore, the figure 'smokey the bear' emblematizes 'the US Forest Service campaign to control forest fires' (see Story of Smokey 2021; Wikipedia 2020c). The images 'the universal diamond' and 'highest perfect enlightenment' belong to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which point toward emptiness as the true essence of phenomena. The image 'diamond' is derived from 'the Diamond Sūtra' or the 'Sūtra of the Diamond', a part of the Buddhist scriptures that teaches the highest wisdom of the true essence of phenomena as being devoid of self-entities. All material phenomena emerge in their interdependent relation to all other elements and to human consciousness (*pratītya-samutpāda*) (see Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 57; Goddard 1994, pp. 85–107). The word 'diamond' in Sanskrit means *vajra* or *dorje* in Tibetan. In Buddhism, this suggests 'a symbol of the indestructible' ('adamantine') and stands for the emptiness (*shūnyatā*) of all material phenomena (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 241). This Buddhist principle of the interdependent arising is analogous with the idea of ecology, or the interconnection between living beings and the natural environment.

In a somewhat different manner, Ginsberg's poem uses an odic form, which might derive from a Greek ode. It is a long and meditative lyric poem with an elaborate stanza structure in various line lengths. Originally, an ode was a Greek choral song that was recited at religious festivals and described 'the adventures and sufferings of gods, goddesses, and heroes' (Hass 2017, pp. 209–10). This poem, like Ginsberg's other long poems, has indented and interlocking strophes that make a poetic ecology of the interconnection between one material thing and another. This poetic interconnectedness similarly reveals 'the interdependent arising' or *pratītya-samutpāda* of material phenomena. The title and subject of the poem, 'plutonian', clearly address ecological issues about the Earth's metallic material and its detrimental havoc when humans wrongly make use of it. Strophes 1–5 in Part I of Ginsberg's poem describe plutonium (uranium) as a material commodity that some American scientists experimented on as a nuclear weapon—

What new element before us unborn in nature? Is there

a new thing under the Sun?
At last inquisitive Whitman a modern epic, detonative,
Scientific theme
First penned unmindful by Doctor Seaborg with poison-
ous hand, named for Death's planet through the
sea beyond Uranus
whose chthonic ore fathers this magma-teared Lord of
Hades, Sire of avenging Furies, billionaire Hell-
King worshipped once
with black-sheep throats cut, priest's face averted from
underground mysteries in a single temple at Eleusis,
(Ginsberg 1982, p. 11).

The 'new element' and 'chthonic ore' exemplify a material entity that humans crave to produce certain elements. The name "Dr. Seaborg" comes from the figure in history, Glenn Seaborg, an American nuclear chemist of Swedish descent who identified plutonium in 1944 (Bernstein 2007, pp. 74–77). It emerged from a neutron bombardment—neutron splitting or fission—from uranium-238, nucleus uranium-239, and neptunium-239 to, finally, plutonium-239 (Bernstein 2007, p. 76). Metallurgically, uranium is ancient and has been stored in the Earth's belly throughout the ages. The use of Greek and 'gnostic' gods and goddesses, such as Persephone, Demeter, Sabaot, Jehova, and Sophia, to describe this metal indicates the very ancient quality of the material as as well as anthropocentric materialism itself (see Pederson 2009). Then, the use of uppercase letters for plutonium-related images suggests patriarchal, material-oriented hegemony. This reflects Ginsberg's saying that, by sustaining this plutonium, the government wanted to set up 'a monolithic Surveillance State' (Schumacher 1992, p. 629). In fact, Ginsberg's poems always have political overtones but also articulate social and ecological views. Ginsberg's father, Louis Ginsberg, was the first son of Russian immigrants, Pincus and Rebecca Schectman Ginsberg. His mother, Naomi Livergant, was the daughter of a Jewish–Russian family, the Livergants. Louis taught English at some schools in New Jersey and wrote poems, while Naomi also taught at some schools there. Both the Ginsbergs and the Levys were individuals who were interested in liberal politics and social change. While the Ginsbergs were socialists, the Levys were devoted communists (Morgan 2006a, pp. 4–6). The family's craze for politics shaped Ginsberg's enthusiasm for political issues, too. The socio-political turmoil in the United States in the 1930s, or the Great Depression, might have been one cause of Naomi's mental illness. The continuous treatment of the mother in asylums not only distressed the family mentally but also expended much of the family's budget (Morgan 2006b, pp. 11–21). This family background might have contributed to the social–political nuances Ginsberg later embraced in his poems. For instance, in a letter to Richard Eberhart dated 18 May 1956, Ginsberg openly elucidated the features of his poem "Howl", which served as a form of social criticism. The goal of this criticism was "to offer constructive human values" and "to liberate basic human virtues" (Morgan 2008b, p. 137).Thus, while criticizing the governmental authority in the plutonium industry, his material poetics aimed to raise the public's ecological awareness of the hazards of the material when humans overconsume and mismanage it.

Next, scientists' discovery of transuranics (Bernstein 2007, pp. 63–65) reveals an ecological polemic since it is not the inherent quality of the metal that matters but the human cognizance of the atomic properties and of making them into a powerfully formidable agent.

The line "her daughter stored in salty caverns under white snow" (strophe 7) implies the poet's ecological polemical view that the metal should remain dormant in the Earth rather than be 'alive' due to being extracted by humans for their experiments. Another example of this ecological polemic due to human perception rather than material perceptibility is the poet's confession about his supremacy in identifying the very properties

of the material, such as in"I manifest your Baptismal Word after four billion years" and "I enter your secret places with my mind, I speak with your presence, I roar your Lion Roar with mortal mouth" (strophe 14 and 25) (Ginsberg 1982, pp. 12–13). The images in uppercase letters, such as 'Baptismal Word' and 'Lion Roar', do not clearly objectify plutonium as a self-existent material but essentially reveal the human mind in recognizing the formidable material.

Names such as Hanford, Pantex, and Washington (strophe 20) exemplify the nuclear reactors that scientists built during that time (Bernstein 2007). The phrase "a new Thing under the sun" (strophe 22) indicates the neutron fission that resulted in plutonium-239and that this transuranics is not naturally made but is an anthropogenic experimentation. This likewise proves how this human-material-oriented mind, through the reactors, would have threatened all life forms since even a speck of uranium dust would harm living beings. Allen Ginsberg and his friends, for instance, protested against them by sitting on the rail track outside of Rockwell Corporation's Nuclear Plant in Colorado to demand the disarmament of nuclear production (Schumacher 1992, pp. 628–29). The names of several places, such as Hanger-Silas Mason and Manzano Mountain, where uranium processing and mining occur indicate this anthropocentric materialism (Wikipedia 2020a, 2020b). Strophe 24 illustrates the poet's alarm at the hazards of nuclear reactors through their toxic emissions. This is human recognition of transuranics and their potential power for armament that everyone should be scared of. In strophes 25 to 29, the poet psychically delves into the inner elements of plutonium and aims to cognize the true nature of the metal. In Buddhist practices, this way of interiorizing a material object to understand its nature is a form of mindfulness to 'wash away the toxins in one's psyche or consciousness' (Hanh 2005, p. 237)—"I enter your secret places with my mind, I speak with your presence, I roar your Lion Roar with mortal mouth" (strophe 25). This line also suggests the poet's use of a Buddhist and gnostic mantra as a means of recognizing one's attachment to the material as the reason rather than the plutonium as a self-existent materiality (see Pederson 2009, p. 34).

This strophe indicates a human way of 'othering' the plutonium without objectifying it because of its fearful qualities. The following strophes illustrate how hazardous even a speck of plutonium dust is to human and nonhuman beings and to the natural environment. At the same time, the poet's description of the frightful nature of the plutonium discloses the ecological fact that human beings and natural phenomena, including plutonium as one of the natural elements, are interconnected.

The phrase 'the Wheel of Mind' followed by 'your three hundred tons' (strophe 36) exemplifies this interconnectedness between one's consciousness and the plutonium. This means that the human consciousness has embedded the materiality of objects despite the fact that the objects have their own entities in a relative sense (Chandrakirti 2002, pp. 199–200). The next line, "I embody your ultimate powers", then emphasizes the superior agency of human consciousness in recognizing material phenomena and their materialities. The next line, "I sing your form at last", and the next, cataloguing "behind your concrete & iron walls inside your fortress of rubber & translucent silicon shields in filtered cabinets and baths of lathe oil" (strophes 37–38), further the poet's mindful mastery over the nuclear reactors.

In comparison, in Snyder's "Smokey The Bear Sutra", in stanza 1 the poet briefly analogizes the mythic account of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, with the ecological interdependence between a living being and the natural elements and ecological hazards in the natural world by describing anthropogenic threats to nonhuman animals and the natural environment in general—

Once in the Jurassic about 150 million years ago,

the Great Sun Buddha in the corner of the Infinite

Void gave a Discourse to all the assembled elements

and energies: to the standing beings, the walking beings,

the flying beings, and the sitting beings—even grasses,
to the number of thirteen billion, each one born from a
seed, assembled there: a Discourse concerning
Enlightenment on the planet Earth.
(Charters 1992a, p. 569)

Some phrases and words written in uppercase letters, such as 'the Great Sun Buddha', 'the Infinite Void', 'Discourse', and 'Enlightenment', disclose the material aspects of these things. These capital letters also give prominence to these things as components of ecological life in the biosphere. Furthermore, the capital letters in the phrases 'the Infinite Void' and 'Enlightenment on the planet Earth' and in other words, especially 'the Sun Buddha' and 'Discourse', simultaneously aim to de-materialize these things that, despite being material things that emerge as 'material' things, are devoid of their true nature (Rinpoche and Larampa 2012, pp. 39–42). Then, 'the standing beings', 'the walking beings', 'the flying beings', and 'the sitting beings' suggest human and nonhuman animals that originally came from 'seed', where 'seed' itself signifies the origin of a life form. In Buddhism, *seed* itself does not essentially possess its own true existence but constitutes an aggregate of elements (Chandrakirti 2002, pp. 210–14). The word 'enlightenment' (*bodhi* in Sanskrit, *satori* in Japanese) or 'awakening' describes a state of one's awareness of the insubstantiality/emptiness of external phenomena (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 65). The poet's mentioning of 'the standing beings', 'the walking beings', 'the flying beings', 'the sitting beings', and 'grasses' exemplifies his warning to people in general to care for all life forms. The word 'enlightenment', as the true essence of phenomena, then subjugates one's material-oriented desires and his objectification of nonhuman animals and things. This word also evokes one's awareness of the interdependence between living beings in the natural environment. This ecological consciousness will encourage everyone to cherish all of the life forms that coexist as a biotic community (Meine 2013, pp. 171–89) or what Gary Snyder called *sańgha* (Barnhill 1997, pp. 187–217). For instance, in stanza 6, the poet describes 'a handsome smokey-colored brown bear' as the character who aims to bring enlightenment to living beings—

Bearing in his right paw the Shovel that digs to the
truth beneath appearances; cuts the roots of useless attach-
ments, and flings damp sand on the fires of greed and war;
His left paw in the Mudra of Comradely Display—indicating
that all creatures have the full right to live to their limits
and that deer, rabbits, chipmunks, snakes, dandelions,
a nd lizards all grow in the realm of the Dharma;
(Charters 1992a, pp. 569–70)

While showing the poet's concern for endangered species like bears in the United States, the figure 'the smokey bear' serves as the natural emblem of the U.S. Forest Service campaign (Wikipedia 2020c). The spiritual overtone of the smokey bear likewise suggests the teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism about the emptiness of material phenomena. The phrase 'the Mudra of Comradely Display' refers to the Buddhist word *mudrā*, which means 'a bodily posture or a symbolic gesture' (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 148). These gestures correlate to natural gestures (of teaching, protecting, etc.) and to certain aspects of Buddhist teaching. There is an ecological aspect since these gestures connect the practitioner with 'the buddha visualized in a given practice' (*sādhana*). There are 10 gestures: *dhyāni* mudrā (gesture of meditation), *vitarka* mudrā (teaching gesture), *dharmachakra* mudrā (gesture of turning the wheel of the teaching), *bhūmi-sparsha* mudrā (gesture of touching the earth), *abhaya* mudrā (gesture of fearlessness and granting protection), *varada* mudrā (gesture of granting wishes), *uttara-bodhi* mudrā (gesture of supreme enlightenment), mudrā of supreme wisdom, *añjali* mudrā (gesture of greeting and veneration),and*vajrapradama* mudrā

(gesture of unshakable confidence) (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 148). All of these mudrā likewise embody ecological aspects since they connect humans with each other, with nonhuman animals, and with the physical environment. Then, the image 'smokey the bear' itself refers to the actual bear that a Native American languagecalled the Large Brown One and the Old Man in the Fur Coat (Wikipedia 2020c). The poster of the smokey bear in wikipedia shows the bear's finger pointing to the reader, signifying *vajrapradama* mudrā or the 'gesture of unshakable confidence' since the pointing commandingly solicits everyone to keep forests from fires. At the same time, Snyder compares the bear with some Buddhist figures, including the Ancient Buddha, and some Buddhist teachers whom Snyder met when he lived and studied Buddhism in Japan in the 1950s and the 1960s (Snyder 1999, pp. 243–44; Yampolsky 1991, pp. 60–69). As the guardian of wildfires, the fire the bear quells is analogous with 'the fires of greed and war' that Siddhārtha Gautama aims to extinguish in humans (Snyder 1999, p. 244). Furthermore, in stanzas 9 and 12, the poet polemicizes several environmental issues that the West Coast areas were facing, including forest fires, manufactured canned foods, and an excessive number of vehicles—

> With a halo of smoke and flame behind, the forest fires
> of the kali-yuga, fires caused by the stupidity of those
> who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all
> is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth
> of One Mind;
> . . . . . .
> Indicating the Task: his followers, becoming free of cars,
> houses, canned foods, universities, and shoes, master the
> Three Mysteries of their own Body, Speech, and Mind; and
> fearlessly chop down the rotten trees and prune out the
> sick limbs of this country America and then burn the leftover
> trash.
> (Charters 1992a, p. 570)

The long line "fires caused by the stupidity of those who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth of One Mind" exemplifies the human craving for material things. Then, the images 'vast and free', 'the Blue Sky', and 'Green Earth of One Mind' exemplify the materiality of the natural landscapes. At the same time, the capital letters in these natural images aim to de-materialize them in order that one will not regard them as having a true existence (Chandrakirti 2002, pp. 166–67). 'The Blue Sky' and 'Green Earth of One Mind', written in uppercase letters, are images used in Buddhism that mean 'a panoramic awareness' or 'a state of one's consciousness where there is no division between subject and object' and an awareness of the interdependence of material things on causes and conditions (Tonkinson 1995, p. vii). In the next stanza, the poet mentions some material things that human beings should stay away from, including excessive numbers of vehicles and canned foods. This overuse of vehicles and canned foods exemplifies anthropocentric materialism and causes environmental problems. For instance, the overuse of vehicles causes air pollution and canned food overconsumption will endanger the body's wellness. In 1969, Snyder wrote an essay entitled "Four Changes", in which one of the essays is about 'pollution'. The sources of pollution do not only come from chemical substances, such as DDT, but also from the fossil fuel combustion of the increasing number of vehicles (Snyder 1969, pp. 94–95). The image 'the Three Mysteries of Body, Speech, and Mind' is derived from a Buddhist teaching (dharma) of Vajrayāna that consists of 'specific bodily postures and gestures' (mudrā), concentration of the mind (samādhi), and the recitation of sacred syllables (mantra)'. Buddhism symbolizes this threefold aspect in 'many ritual texts' by 'the seed syllables *om ah hum*. The syllable *om* in white in 'the forehead' refers

to body'; the syllable *ah* in red to 'the throat center and speech'; and the syllable *hum* in blue to 'the mind' (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, pp. 25–26). The term 'Vajrayāna' itself comes from the Sanskrit word *vajra*, which means 'diamond' or 'adamantine', while the Sanskrit word *yāna* points to 'vehicle'. So, the word in tandem means 'Diamond Vehicle' or a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that emphasizes teachings about the emptiness of external phenomena (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, pp. 241–42, 251). In portraying subjects imbued with Buddhist nuances, both Ginsberg and Snyder were kind of othering but also anthropomorphizing 'plutonium' and 'the smokey bear' to emphasize their ecological significance. They used parody or a 'camp aesthetic', which means "to diminish the value of the religious experience" and "to transmit their knowledge of Buddhism" to readers in generalwho are not familiar with Buddhism (Belletto 2017, p. 19; Whalen-Bridge 2017, p. 232).

4. Material Poetics as an Ecological Vision in the Era of the Anthropocene

Humankind's relation to materialism is an ecological network. It is what Buddhism calls 'the Indra's Net' or 'food-web community' (Barnhill 1997, pp. 188–91). Here, I also argue that material poetics in Ginsberg's and Snyder's polemics on environmental issues exemplifies 'the Indra's Net' because these issues reveal the interdependence of things as a virtue of ecological interconnectedness in the natural world. These polemics serve as a criticism of the human objectification of material goods. This criticism then serves as an agent to raise readers' ecological awareness because of the fact that material over-consumption has depleted natural resources. Furthermore, the hazards of plutonium and other related subterranean resources endanger all life forms in the physical environment. Ginsberg expresses these material poetics through his spiritual interiorization of plutonium as the epitome of ecological interconnectedness between human beings and a material object. Yet, his spiritual immersion through the Buddhist threefold division of body, speech, and mind raises one's awareness of the true nature of the object. Strophe 43 says: "Poured on the stone black floor, these syllables are barley groats I scatter on the Reactor's core", in which the image 'these syllables' represents speech as his skillful means (or called upāya in Mahāyāna Buddhism-see Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 239) of controlling the superiority of the object. These syllables similarly serve as a mantra that aims to subdue one's material-oriented mind, especially his craving for material objects and their versatile materialities. He satirizes human efforts in inventing plutonium since scientists make use of this for armaments rather than for social welfare. Strophes 46 to 48 in Part II exemplify this human material attachment through the experiment of discovering plutonium—

> The Bard surveys Plutonian history from midnight
> Lit with Mercury Vapor streetlamps till in dawn's
> Early light
> He contemplates a tranquil politic spaced out between
> Nations' thought-forms proliferating bureaucratic
> & horrific arm'd, Satanic industries projected sudden
> With Five Hundred Billion Dollar Strength
> (Ginsberg 1982, p. 15)

At the same time, 'plutonium' also serves as a 'Beat' metaphor for a kind of 'bedrock consciousness' as the stripped off-mind the Beats experienced with the essence of things in the material world as John Clellon Holmes said in his article "This Is The Beat Generation" published in *New York Times Magazine* on 16 November 1952 (see McDarrah 1985, p. 22). The word 'bard' means 'poet' and so it refers to the Beats themselves. However, this also satirizes the scientists who discovered plutonium and made use of it for the armament industries. He expresses this critique through the image 'bureaucratic & horrific arm'd, Satanic industries projected sudden with five hundred billion dollar strength', which exemplifies human material-oriented desire. Furthermore, in strophes 60 to 65, Ginsberg once

again chants his mantra by spiritually interiorizing plutonium and its formidable qualities as one's mind perceives them. This aims to identify the insubstantiality of plutonium as a self-autonomous element (and other metals and material things—my emphasis), so that human beings will not be excessively attached to it—

> Take this wheel of syllables in hand, these vowels and
> consonants to breath's end
> take this inhalation of black poison to your heart, breathe
> out this blessing from your breast on our creation
> forests cities oceans deserts rocky flats and mountains
> in the Ten Directions pacify with this exhalation,
> enrich this Plutonian Ode to explode its empty thunder
> through earthen thought-worlds
> Magnetize this howl with heartless compassion, destroy
> this mountain of Plutonium with ordinary mind
> and body speech,
> thus empower this Mind-guard spirit gone out, gone
> out, gone beyond, gone beyond me, Wake space,
> so Ah!
> (Ginsberg 1982, pp. 16–17)

Some extreme lines that imperatively encourage his readers to spiritually interiorize this plutonium, such as those in strophes 61 and 63, exemplify his critique of human indifference to ecological robustness and of his worldly material craving ('earthen thought-worlds'). The image 'the Ten Directions' in strophe 62 refers to one of the Buddhist principles (dharma) (Goddard 1994, pp. 653–55). These strophes as well as strophes 64 and 65 tend to separate the plutonium from human consciousness as if the metal element exists as a self-autonomous entity. Yet, the poet's images 'heartless compassion', 'ordinary mind and body speech', and 'gone beyond me' signify Buddhist teachings. The phrase 'ordinary mind and body speech' suggests the 'intuitive mind' rather than the 'discriminating mind' for an individual in viewing phenomena in this material world (Goddard 1994, pp. 306–7). The phrase 'gone beyond me' and mantra 'ah' likewise imply the insubstantiality of phenomena. This mantra simultaneously serves as the poet's skillful means of preventing the American government from enlarging the nuclear industry due to its environmental hazards (see Pederson 2009, pp. 34–35). Even more so, the United States and other large countries around the world still use uranium as the material to produce electrical energy and for other purposes in nuclear plants (see Cravens 2007).

In the last stanza of his poem, Snyder suggests the notion of the insubstantiality of material phenomena through the figure 'smokey the bear', who also recites a mantra to all living beings to discern this essence—

> And if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, television,
> or the police, they should chant SMOKEY THE BEAR'S WAR SPELL:
> DROWN THEIR BUTTS
> CRUSH THEIR BUTTS
> DROWN THEIR BUTTS
> CRUSH THEIR BUTTS
> And SMOKEY THE BEAR will surely appear to put the enemy out
> with his vajra-shovel.
> (Charters 1992a, p. 571)

The first line above satirizes humankind's excessive consumerism and materialism. This satire similarly serves as an agent to raise the reader's ecological awareness since the lines above polemicize the material products that jeopardize humankind's life and counter these with the figure of smokey the bear as an endangered animal combined with a Buddhist spiritual mantra. The satirical mantra then raises the reader's awareness of the hazards that human material overconsumption will pose to the natural environment. The Smokey Bear's repeated mantra in capital letters substantiates the poet's concern about environmental problems caused by anthropogenic activities. The image 'butts' has various meanings. However, as a form of satire, it means 'a person's buttocks or asshole', a derogatory word for human indifference to the environmental issues. Then, in the last stanza, the poet points out some secure conditions for a person if he/she cares about the natural environment and recites the Sutra (Goddard 1994)—

Now those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it in
practice will accumulate merit as countless as the sands
of Arizona and Nevada.
Will help save the planet Earth from total oil slick.
Will enter the age of harmony of man and nature.
Will win the tender love and caresses of men, women, and
beasts
Will always have ripe blackberries to eat and a sunny spot
under a pine tree to sit at.
AND IN THE END WILL WIN HIGHEST PERFECT
ENLIGHTENMENT.
(Charters 1992a, p. 571).

The image 'countless sands of Arizona and Nevada' describes how a person will reap a spiritual enrichment as much as the sand in his/her insight into the true nature of phenomena. The subsequent lines using 'will' exemplify the 'conditioned arising', suggesting that a person will experience spiritual enlightenment if he/she is willing to liberate himself/herself from material obsession. The interdependent causality that the stanza reveals is called *pratītya-samutpāda* (conditioned arising) in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 2010, p. 172). This means that spiritually enlightened figures or those who practise Buddhist wisdom in their daily life will undeniably cherish the natural environment and the life forms that persist in the natural world. Both Ginsberg and Snyder embrace the Buddhist teaching of compassion (*karunā*) toward all life forms. This spiritual insight cherishes the inherent values in all life forms, including both animate and inanimate beings. In Buddhism, these values are called Buddha Nature (Abe 1989, pp. 46–47). The idea is that each material phenomenon in this natural world coexists with human consciousness in perceiving it so that each thing has mind—"grasses, trees, and lands are mind; being mind, they are *shujō*; being *shujō,* they the Buddha-nature" (Abe 1989, p. 46). The insight into the inherent values of a material thing will evoke everyone to care rather than to waste the thing in his or her daily material consumption. The last line in capital letters emphasizes the goal of this spiritual quest, which is to attain enlightenment. In Buddhism, this state means the liberation of individuals from bondage with material attachment and also the insight into the emptiness of the true existence of material things.

Both Ginsberg and Snyder as American poets internalize Buddhist teachings in their poems. Buddhist nuances in their poems were not just persona, as they observed Buddhist practices, such as meditation and chanting sutra, until the era of the 1970s when Ginsberg wrote "Plutonian Ode" and Snyder wrote "Smokey the Bear Sutra" (Morgan 2008a, pp. 387–89; Snyder 1999, pp. 243–44). Their embrace of Buddhism came from their inward willingness rather than the collective drive of orientalism or American exceptionalism.

Indeed, the term 'orientalism' in a general sense can mean someone's activity in teaching, writing about, or researching things of the Orient (Said 1979, p. 2). In this case, Buddhism came from India and then developed in Japan and Tibet, which constitute the oriental regions. In some ways, Ginsberg and Snyder's observance of Buddhism can represent orientalism in a conventional sense without any stereotypical colonial desire. In a like manner, American exceptionalism and American innocence are socio-political attitudes that correlate with colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy (Baraka 2019, p. 14). Their poetics certainly serve asa form of 'social rebellion' and they expressed this social criticism via their own voices as Beat poets who had learned Buddhism and its teachings rather than being suggestive of American exceptionalism or orientalism. With their Beat Buddhist poetics, they had more freedom to search for enlightenment for America in particular and to each individual reader in general.

5. Conclusions

Both Ginsberg and Snyder polemicize several environmental issues related to human material overconsumption. Apart from any other social and political overtones, their depiction of 'plutonium' and 'smokey the bear' in their poems conveys ecological insight. Their ardent voice and satirical tone in conversing about the subjects in a poetically chronological sequence elucidate their concern about the havoc that human overconsumption of plutonium and other material products may wreak on all life forms and the natural environment.Nowadays, the United States uses uranium as a biotic commodity and a mineral to produce electricity and energy in reactors (www.world-nuclear.org (accessed on 28 March 2021)). In comparison, Snyder's portrayal of forest fires and material products that humans overconsume daily, including vehicles, fossil fuels, and other commodity products, corresponds with modern social life in a global world in which consumerism and materialism are humankind's way of life. Even more so, the controversial issue of global warming and climate change will always haunt each country in the world that overconsumes materials such as fossil fuels that greatly contribute to a larger ecological footprint. Deforestation and land clearing for the plantation and mining industries still exist in several third-world countries (see Seymour and Busch 2016). These anthropogenic activities certainly devastate physical landscapes, emit carbon dioxide and toxic waste into the air and surrounding areas, and also deplete biodiversity in these areas. Ginsberg and Snyder's material poetics then serve as what Jack Kerouac once called 'a new vision' to raise one's moral and ecological awareness to not extravagantly pursue and consume material things. The ecological insight they convey is an adamantine poetics since it originates from Buddhist wisdom about the insubstantiality of material phenomena. In a conventional sense, this wisdom teaches everyone to cherish all life forms and to consume material goods sufficiently so that their acts will produce ecological resilience and sustainability.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Abe, Masao. 1989. Dōgenon Buddha Nature. In *Zen and Western Thought*. Edited by William R. LaFleur. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 25–68.

Allen, Donald, ed. Improvised Poetics. In *Allen Ginsberg: Composed On The Tongue: Literary Conversations, 1967–1977*. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, pp. 18–62.

Badiner, Allan Hunt, ed. 2005. *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.

Baraka, Ajamu. 2019. Foreword: Countering the Violence of Imposed Forgetting. In *American Exceptionalism and American Innocence: A People's History of Fake News—From the Revolutionary War to the War on Terror*. Edited by Roberto Sirvent and Danny Haiphong. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, pp. 11–17.

Barnhill, David Landis. 1997. Great Earth Sañgha: Gary Snyder's View of Nature as Community. In *Buddhism and Ecology—The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryüken Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 187–217.

Belletto, Steven, ed. 2017. The Beat Half-Century. In *The Cambridge Companion To The Beats*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–22.
Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Bernstein, Jeremy. 2007. *Plutonium: A History of the World's Most Dangerous Element*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
Boddice, Rob. 2011. The End of Anthropocentrism. In *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. Edited by Rob Boddice. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, pp. 1–18.
Capra, Fritjof. 2005. Patriarchal Roots of Overconsumption. In *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*. Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. 9–14.
Chandrakirti. 2002. *Introduction to the Middle Way—Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara*. The Padmakara Translation Group. Boston: Shambhala.
Charters, Ann, ed. 1992a. The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual. In *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 517–20.
Charters, Ann, ed. 1992b. For the Death of 100 Whales. In *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 285–86.
Charters, Ann, ed. 1992c. Peyote Poem. In *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 265–73.
Cravens, Gwyneth. 2007. *Power to Save The World: The Truth about Nuclear Energy*. New York: A Knopf Book.
DeVeaux, Scott. 1997. Introduction: Stylistic Evolution or Social Revolution? In *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–31.
Fischer-Schreiber, Ingrid, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Michael S. Diener. 2010. *A Concise Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*. Boston: Shambhala.
Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. *Howl and Other Poems*. The Pocket Poets Series Number Four. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
Ginsberg, Allen. 1982. *Plutonian Ode and Other Poems 1977–1980*. The Pocket Poets Series Number Forty. First Printing. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. 1996. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
Goddard, Dwight, ed. 1994. *A Buddhist Bible*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Gross, Rita M. 1997. Buddhist Resources for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment. In *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryüken Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 291–311.
Hanh, Thich Nhat. 2005. Diet for a Mindful Society. In *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*. Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. 237–44.
Hass, Robert. 2017. *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins.
Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. 2014. Introduction: Stories Come to Matter. In *Material Ecocriticism*. Edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–17.
Katz, Eliot. 2016. *The Poetry and Politics of Allen Ginsberg*. San Bernardino: Beatdom Books.
Kaza, Stephanie. 2010. How Much Is Enough?: Buddhist Perspectives on Consumerism. In *How Much Is Enough?: Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*. Edited by Richard K. Payne. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, pp. 39–61.
Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *Mexico City Blues*. New York: Grove Press.
Leonard, Annie, and Ariane Conrad. 2011. *The Story of Stuff: The Impact of Overconsumption on the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—And How We Can Make It Better*. New York: Free Press.
McClure, Michael. 1982. Mozart and the Apple. In *Scratching the Beat Surface: Essays on New Vision from Blake to Kerouac*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 115–21.
McDarrah, Fred W., ed. 1985. This Is The Beat Generation. By John Clellon Holmes. In *Kerouac & Friends: A Beat Generation Album*. New York: William Morrow and Company, pp. 21–27.
Meine, Curt, ed. 2013. The Land Ethic. In *Aldo Leopolod: A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Ecology and Conversation*. New York: The Library of America, pp. 171–89.
Miller, Daniel, ed. 2005. *Materiality*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Morgan, Bill, ed. 2006a. 1895–1926: Before the Beginning: Parents. In *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Viking, pp. 4–8.
Morgan, Bill. 2006b. 1933–37: 155 Haledon Avenue. In *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Viking, pp. 15–21.
Morgan, Bill. 2008a. To Bob Dylan. 29 June 1976. In *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Da Capo Press, pp. 387–89.
Morgan, Bill. 2008b. To Richard Eberhart. 18 May 1956. In *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Edited by Bill Morgan. New York: Da Capo Press, pp. 130–39.
Morgan, Bill. 2010. The Six Gallery. In *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of The Beat Generation*. New York: Free Press, pp. 101–10.
Mortenson, Erik. 2017. Allen Ginsberg and Beat Poetry. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*. Edited by Steven Belletto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 77–91.
Morton, Timothy. 2012. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Norberg-Hodge, Helena. 2005. Buddhism in the Global Economy. In *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*. Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. 15–28.

Payne, Richard K., ed. 2010. Just How Much Is Enough? In *How Much Is Enough?: Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, pp. 1–16.
Pederson, Joshua. 2009. Gnostic Mantra: Reading Religious Syncretism in Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode". *Religion & Literature* 41: 27–42.
Rinpoche, Khenchen Thrangu, and Geshe Larampa. 2012. *The Open Door to Emptiness: An Introduction to Madhyamaka Logic*. Edited by Michael L. Lewis and Clark Johnson. Glastonbury: Namo Buddha Publications.
Said, Edward W. 1979. Introduction. In *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 1–28.
Sax, Boria. 2011. What is the Quintessence of Dust? The Concept of the 'Human' and Its Origins. In *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, pp. 21–36.
Schumacher, Michael. 1992. Plutonian Ode. In *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 628–32.
Seymour, Frances, and Jonah Busch. 2016. *Why Forests? Why Now?: The Science, Economics, and Politics of Tropical Forests*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.
Simmer-Brown, Judith. 2005. The Crisis of Consumerism. In *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*. Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. 3–8.
Snyder, Gary. 1969. Buddhism and the Coming Revolution. In *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*. New York: A New Directions Book, pp. 90–93.
Snyder, Gary. 1999. *The Gary Snyder Reader—Prose, Poetry, and Translations*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.
Story of Smokey. 2021. *The Smokey Bear Wildfire Prevention Campaign*. Available online: https://smokeybear.com/en/smokeys-history/story-of-smokey (accessed on 14 March 2021).
Tonkinson, Carole. 1995. *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*. New York: Riverhead Books.
Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and Duncan Ryüken Williams, eds. 1997. *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Waldman, Anne. 1989. Makeup on Empty Space. In *Helping the Dreamer: New & Selected Poems 1966–1988*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, pp. 130–33.
Whalen-Bridge, John. 2017. Buddhism and The Beats. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*. Edited by Steven Belletto. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 225–39.
Wikipedia. 2020a. Hanger-Silas Mason. Available online: www.masonandhanger.com/about/history (accessed on 21 February 2021).
Wikipedia. 2020b. Manzano Mountains. Available online: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manzano_Mountains (accessed on 21 February 2021).
Wikipedia. 2020c. Smokey Bear. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smokey_Bear (accessed on 24 February 2021).
Woodward, Ian. 2007. The Material as Culture. Definitions, Perspectives, Approaches. In *Understanding Material Culture*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., pp. 3–16.
Yampolsky, Philip. 1991. Kyoto, Zen, Snyder. In *Gary Snyder—Dimensions of a Life*. Edited by Jon Halper. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, pp. 60–69.
Yulianto, Henrikus Joko. 2017. East Meets West: Spontaneity in Beat Poetry as Buddha-Dharma and Visions of Spiritual Ecology. Ph.D. dissertation, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, USA.

humanities

MDPI

Article

Creative Environments: The Geo-Poetics of Allen Ginsberg

Alexandre Ferrere

English Department, Paris Nanterre University, 92000 Nanterre, France; ferrere.alexandre@hotmail.fr

Received: 3 May 2020; Accepted: 27 August 2020; Published: 1 September 2020

Abstract: As was the case for other writers from the Beat Generation, geography is more than simply a setting for Allen Ginsberg's work, as his poetry also bears the imprint of the influence of the landscapes through which he traveled in his mind and poetic practice. In the 1950s, the same decade which saw the composition of Ginsberg's *Howl*, Guy Debord and his followers developed the concept of "psychogeography" and "dérive" to analyze the influence of landscapes on one's mind. The Debordian concept of psychogeography implies then that an objective world can have unknown and subjective consequences. Inspired by Debord's theories and through the analysis of key poems, this paper argues that a psychogeographical focus can shed new light on ecocritical studies of Ginsberg's poetry. It can indeed unveil the complex construction of the poet's own space-time poetics, from hauntological aspects to his specific composition process.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg; Beat Generation; poetry; poetics; memory; Guy Debord; psychogeography; landscape; ecocriticism

1. Introduction

In his introduction to *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Bertrand Westphal writes: "The perception of space and the representation of space do not involve the same thing" (Westphal 2011, p. 1). Passing from an objective notion of "space" to a subjective concept of "place" is to take a step towards psychogeography, as it involves both the perception and the representation of one's surroundings. In order to understand and to study the influence of geography on emotion, Guy Debord and the Situationist International developed the concept of psychogeography as well as an experimental method they named the "dérive"—to wander in a landscape so as to re-discover it. Besides reinforcing the position of the individual in the world, psychogeography is, in the Debordian system, a way for citizens to reclaim their territories. But the Debordian system also advocates for a complete revolution of urbanism and architecture in creating new zones according to psychogeographical reports—as written in *Potlatch* #5: "Poetry is written in the shape of cities. We will thus build some overwhelming ones" (Conord 1954c. My translation).

In the wider theoretical "environment" of ecocriticism, psychogeography can be a useful tool to analyze literature, especially if we consider written texts as creative psychogeographical accounts. From this perspective, Allen Ginsberg's work is particularly striking, as the number of poems involving his experience of different places can reveal (as well as his journals, sometimes written in very specific places, like his *Indian Journals* or his *South American Journals*). Indeed, his Odyssean adventures in more than sixty countries around the globe have inevitably shaped his poetry, not only in terms of redefinitions of space but also in his vision of society as well as in his very methods of composition. And while in political terms psychogeography could be seen as a defense of freedom of movement, it could be considered poetically as an emotional interpretation of the world. The self is at the center of psychogeography, as it can only be experienced by a subject, it is therefore not surprising that Ginsberg, often labeled a "confessional" poet, wrote many poems about his relationship to his close environment.

The deep involvement of the Beats in environmental (re)actions is well-known; Michael McClure even considered the "poetry of the Beats" as "the first literary wing of the environmental movement" (Meltzer 2001, p. 185). Nevertheless, a part of Ginsberg's poetry is not only about having to cope with an environmental crisis. Sometimes, it is also the poet's own crisis, lamentations, or visions that are explored in the larger frame of an environmental and urban downfall. In other words, it seems that ever-changing landscapes are not always observed for their essence nor for the impact mankind can have on them; it is also a way to express what these landscapes can symbolize in the poet's life and how they can represent the inner tensions between Ginsberg and the outside world in a social and political way.

Historically, analyzing Ginsberg's poetry through the lens of Debord's theories could appear as a counterintuitive experiment. Indeed, Debord and the Situationists were rather hostile to Beat writers—they are described as "mystical cretins" in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* (Debord 1958a). Furthermore, Greil Marcus remarks that Alexander Trocchi, who was very close to Debord, was even indirectly excluded from the Situationists because of his relationship with Allen Ginsberg (Marcus 2011, p. 359). Nonetheless, both Ginsberg and Debord's followers were advocating for a new vision of landscapes through direct and subjective experiences of them, in a larger counter-cultural and intellectual renewal. Their works were also often linked to political criticisms of capitalism and urbanism. While the Beats were writing "both a critique of urban-industrial civilization and a search to recover authentic human identity" (Stephenson 2009, p. 177), Debord wrote, "urbanism [...] is capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment" (Debord 2005, p. 95). Their ideological points of contention are in that sense not antinomic when it comes to environment, ecology, and urbanism. Rooted in Debordian theories, this study, therefore, considers psychogeography as a critical tool that can bring a new understanding to how the objectivity of the world has been subjectively and poetically transcribed by the poet. In this paper, we will explore Allen Ginsberg's subtle and heterogeneous constructions of his own development of space-time poetics. From hauntological aspects to eco-linguistical approaches and genetic criticism of the poet's methods of composition, Allen Ginsberg's creative process will be analyzed with regard to what Guy Debord called "psychogeographical variations", as applied to the "field" of poetry.

2. Psychogeography or the Art of Awareness

Almost every issue of the magazine *Potlatch* (1954–1957), the "information bulletin of the French group of the Lettrist International"[1] in which Guy Debord actively participated, is infused with the notion of psychogeography—a concept directly inherited from Ivan Chtcheglov (also known as Gilles Ivain)[2] and his essay *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau*. The word psychogeography is first introduced along with the notion of a game in the article *Psychogeographical Game of the Week*, in *Potlatch* #1:

> Depending on what you are after, choose an area, a more or less populous city, a more or less lively street. Build a house. Furnish it. Make the most of its decoration and surroundings. Choose the season and the time. Gather together the right people, the best records and drinks. Lighting and conversation must of course be appropriate, along with the weather and your memories.
>
> If your calculations are correct, you should find the outcome satisfying. (Please inform the editors of the results.) (Conord 1954a)

1 It will be later subtitled the "information bulletin of the Lettrist International" until finally the Lettrist International becomes the Situationist International.

2 Gilles Ivain will be excluded from the Internationale Lettrist in 1954, as mentioned in *Potlatch* #2.

In this unattributed article, the term “psychogeography” is not defined, but the juxtaposition of words like “area”, “city”, “memories”, and “outcome” suggests that “psychogeography” focuses on what happens at the frontier of two worlds, the physical and the emotional. In the second issue of *Potlatch*, Guy Debord (who signed Guy-Ernest Debord) published an article entitled *Exercise in Psychogeography*, which emphasizes the interactive features of the still undefined term “psychogeography”:

> The postman Cheval is psychogeographical in architecture
> Arthur Cravan is psychogeographical in hurried drifting.
> Jacques Vaché is psychogeographical in dress.
> Louis II of Bavaria is psychogeographical in royalty.
> Jack the Ripper is probably psychogeographical in love. (Conord 1954b)

Psychogeography is then, in its first two mentions in *Potlatch*, either a game to create a new “situation”—based on the “dialectic setting-behavior” (Debord 1957)—or a poetic exercise unveiling the confrontation of a subject and their environment (whether it be a natural environment or an intimate environment). But those are not satisfying in terms of intellectual definition and implication; is psychogeography a concept? A tool? A process? Subsequent issues of *Potlatch* bring no solid answer to those questions, even though the term is used several times. But psychogeography is part of a wider philosophy in which urbanism plays a key role. The aim of this avant-garde group of thinkers, who sought to meld arts and politics, is to “create situations” (Conord 1954d), to offer the unexpected, partly through what they called “influential urbanism” (Conord 1954d). It is important to underline that, even though urbanism could be thought of as in opposition to ecological questions, this is not the case for Debord’s vision of it. Indeed, besides advocating against the “temporal fixation of cities” (and “fixation of people at certain points of a city”), the museumification of cities, and purely aesthetical architecture, Debord asks for “moving cities”, “the overgrowth of tropical vegetation”, and a “marriage with nature more audacious than anything attempted by Frank Lloyd Wright” (Debord 1959).

Despite the fact that psychogeographical reports (as well as maps) were published in *Potlatch* by members of the Lettrist group, in which they described as precisely as possible the influence of the environment on their feelings (and in that sense being what could be called ecocritical reports), Debord would define “psychogeography” only in 1955. Indeed, in an article entitled *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, published in the Belgian magazine *Les Lèvres Nues*[3], Debord wrote:

> Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Debord 1955)

One interesting aspect of psychogeography as defined by Debord is, therefore, its protean nature, whether it be in its use or its object. Nevertheless, the “pleasing vagueness” of the word does not mean imprecise analysis, as at the heart of the word lays the idea that geography, landscapes, and environments actively trigger emotion and physical reactions. In a sense, Debord and the Situationists sought to analyze the mechanisms at the frontier between an open world and a secret mind—what is seen and what is felt. Thanks to this “vagueness”—and thus, to the capacity of psychogeography to be adapted to new situations and contexts—the Debordian definition of psychogeography helps to unveil certain characteristics of Allen Ginsberg’s poetry, especially when used in an ecocritical perspective.

Intrinsically linked to the notion “psychogeography” and equally important for Debord’s followers, the concept of “dérive” is also a key element when it comes to psychogeographical analysis.

[3] To which the Lettrist Internationale collaborated from issue #6 onward.

The “dérive”, which Nathalie Caritoux defines as the “experimental method” of psychogeography ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 8) My translation), is first described in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* as:

> A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. The term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of dériving. (Debord 1958a)

In other words, the “dérive”[4] is an exploratory process—cabs are in this regard the preferred vehicle (Dahou 1954a)—used by psychogeographers in order to produce reports and maps, as architecture is seen by the Situationists as “a means of knowledge and a means of action” (Debord 1958a). In *Potlatch* #14, the “dérive” is also defined as a “method of aimless displacement” founded on the “influence of scenery” (Dahou 1954b. My translation). This point will be important when we will study some poems written during Allen Ginsberg’s own wanderings.

But a few years after offering the first definition of “psychogeography”, Debord wrote in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, in 1958:

> A situation is also an integrated ensemble of behavior in time. It is composed of actions contained in a transitory decor. These actions are the product of the decor and of themselves, and they in their turn produce other decors and other actions. How can these forces be oriented? (Debord 1958a)

In this passage, besides advocating for an active reshaping of urbanism, Debord adds a new feature to psychogeography that will be important when studying Allen Ginsberg’s poetry. Psychogeographical reactions seem indeed to be circular and could be seen as active reciprocity between the landscape and observer. More than a mere mirroring effect, the landscape affects the observer who, in turn, affects the image and representation of the landscape following a phenomenological impulse. We will see later how this sensitive exchange triggered Ginsberg’s compositions, but also what forms this circularity takes on in his poetry.

3. Towards a Geography of Memories

In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Bertrand Westphal wrote that “The concrete details of geography often relate to a spiritual hermeneutic rather than to immediate observation” (Westphal 2011, p. 2). Adapted to an ecocritical stance, what is implied here is strongly psychogeographical, even phenomeno-geographical, to the extent that landscapes convey meaning for the psychogeographer, the writer, or simply the conscious individual—in most cases, an internal representation almost always associated with feelings. In that sense, psychogeography can be generally considered, as implied above, a re-evaluation of urbanism, an invitation to build anew everyday scenery according to inner perceptions. This metaphysical sense of belonging to a territory that exists more through how it is emotionally perceived than objectively observed is rooted in ecocriticism and central to Ginsberg’s poetry. His tribute poem entitled *At Apollinaire’s Grave*, recalling the poet’s visit to the grave of the famous French poet, reflects this experience of emotionally heightened response to the poet’s immediate surroundings:

> the universe is a graveyard and I walk around alone in here
> knowing that Apollinaire was on the same street 50 years ago
> his madness is only around the corner and Genet is with us stealing books (Ginsberg 2006, p. 188)

Ginsberg emphasizes here what is called the spirit of places: when a place is so loaded with a strong sense of history that it can transcend temporal structures. Time and space appear here as two sides

[4] The term is already used in Gilles Ivain’s essay mentioned earlier.

of the same coin—the poem is somewhat balancing on its edge. The place becomes a personal book of history. The place is, as Nathalie Caritoux wrote, not "an empty frame to fill with behaviors" but "the cause, the source of behaviors" ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 10) My translation). Therefore, this phenomenal impulse (in the phenomenological sense) of a past inhabiting a place could be seen as an extension of Walter Benjamin's idea of unconscious memories, to the extent that unintentional memories emerge from the junction of collective and personal memories (Benjamin 2000, p. 335). And it is also the persistence of place through memories that is at work in this poem, as symbolized in this passage where hands are part of the forces pushing the poet into the geography of the mind (Ginsberg 2006, p. 188):

> Already our hands have vanished from that place my hand writes now in a Room in Paris Git-le-Coeur

Between those lines, the reader understands that a place, when infused with poetics, can complicate the notion of time—not as in the cliché of overcoming death in writing[5], but in transcending time through space (reversing thus the equation of space transcended by time). At the heart of this poem is not so much the temporal difference between two eras (a dividing force that is physically experienced), but the common ground that allows the melding of those eras into one another (the merging force geography gives birth to). Therefore, in the second part of the poem, Ginsberg describes himself at the Bateau Lavoir, in the company of artists like Jacob, Picasso, Tzara, Breton, Cendrars, Gide, etc. The reader easily understands that the conventional notion of time is abolished by the very fact that the poet wanders ("dérive") in the same place as these French artists did once. Another important element in this poem (as in other works involving "meeting" other deceased artists, like Whitman or Lorca in *A Supermarket in California*) is that Ginsberg uses his imagination to physically describe himself amongst those artists he admired. Once again, time is overcome through the place and those souvenirs are ones of situations that never happened.

Allen Ginsberg ends his three-part poem with a line that summarizes this syncretism of perspectives: "I am buried here and sit by my grave beneath a tree" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 190). This line does not only cloud spatial and temporal structures, but it also connects the collective and Ginsberg's own memories. This work balances between a tribute and a personal reflection, and the place is the first impulse of this movement. This poem, by essence, unveils the geographical tensions at work within the poet's mind: the poet shuttles between two different eras made from the same material, and what they have in common is the scenery. To use Debordian vocabulary, the result of the confrontation between the poet and his very surrounding is a psychogeographical poem in itself—and Ginsberg's reflexive "dérive" through the graves gives birth to a new, specific and actualizing "situation", as was the aim of the Situationists.

But the landscape in Allen Ginsberg's poetry is not lived through the senses only: imagination is here an essential but paradoxical condition[6]. In fact, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger distinguishes imagination, which he describes as "too close to fiction", from the imaginal which is made of "a group of images, loaded with affective values (positive or negative) [. . .] which are the subject of a

---

[5] On this topic, and in this poem, Ginsberg was rather clear, and he wrote lines like "my temporary hands" and "my temporary American Howl" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 188).

[6] In *Over Kansas*, Ginsberg writes about the limit of imagination:

> And down there's Hollywood,
> The starry world below [...].
> Not even the human
> Imagination satisfies
> The endless emptiness of the soul
> (Ginsberg 2006, p. 124).

shared experience, of a vision of the world shared by the participants of a joint space" ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 220) My translation). In this poem, Ginsberg composes then from both imagination and imaginal. Nathalie Caritoux adds to this notion of imaginal the idea of *kaïros*, which could be defined as the right moment from which a revelation can occur (Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 21). These two elements, the imaginal of the place, which is large, and the *kaïros*, the moment of the visit, which is intimate, form the invisible frame of the poem. In Ginsberg's poem, the place has a subjective meaning rooted in an objective ground. But the place is as much a projection, through the emotional phenomenology of the poet (Caritoux and Villard 2017, pp. 220–21), as a projector actualizing the position of the poet's mind in a specific environment, which will lead to the poetic gesture. Here, the whole poem, because of its raw material, could be considered a projection, while traces of the place acting as a projector on the poet are scattered throughout the poem—a line summarizes it: "Peter Orlovsky and I walked softly thru Père Lachaise we both knew we/would die" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 188). The place is an active muse that transforms the poet and his knowledge of his own identity and temporality; and the place, in return, is transformed by the poet in an effort of imagination. This dynamic exchange, therefore, changes the nature of the relation between the poet and the place.

This psychogeographical porosity is at work in many of Ginsberg's poems; one of the most striking examples is his famous *Kaddish*, written after the death of his mother. Many passages in the poem highlight the importance of places, which are always a poetic trigger for memories. For example, right from the beginning, the poet is taken by the city that seems to be the only solid ground on which Ginsberg could stay in his mourning, his thoughts being spread in place and time (Ginsberg 2006, p. 217):

> Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on
> the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
> downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking,
> talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues
> shout blind on the phonograph

As in *At Apollinaire's Grave*, the "dérive" of the poet motivates his later recollections. The genealogy of the poem is thus blown away in the landscape—born from a "situation" that is intrinsically lost because experienced. A few lines below, Ginsberg writes:

> It leaps about me, as I go out and walk the street, look back over my shoulder,
> Seventh Avenue, the battlements of window office buildings should—
> dering each other high, under a cloud, tall as the sky an instant—and
> the sky above—an old blue place.
> or down the Avenue to the south, to—as I walk toward the Lower East Side
> —where you walked 50 years ago, little girl—from Russia, eating the
> first poisonous tomatoes of America—frightened on the dock—
> then struggling in the crowds of Orchard Street toward what?—toward
> Newark—(Ginsberg 2006, p. 217).

Again, the poet walks and remembers his mother who died earlier, and like in *At Apollinaire's Grave*, the place impacts the poet and the poet impacts the place. The main difference though is that the poet is transported by a historical force, which is here not collective as in *At Apollinaire's Grave* but personal. In the entire reflection that is *Kaddish* the notion of place is confused, disturbed by actual memories, imaginative ghosts, and projections of the mind. The landscape blurs the notion of time and acts like a mirror reflecting the past for Ginsberg. The city becomes an intimate wound and this poem a report of eco-trauma, the simple fact of moving triggering metaphysical questions, each detail of the city forming a scar, like in this passage:

> [. . .] Strange to have moved
> thru Paterson, and the West, and Europe and here again,
> with the cries of Spaniards now in the doorstoops doors and dark boys on the
> street, fire escapes old as you
> —Tho you're not old now, that's left here with me—(Ginsberg 2006, p. 218)

Time and place are blended into each other, the poet making one with the universe ("Myself, anyhow, maybe as old as the universe"). The poet is here a psychogeographer of personal trauma, exploring his own memories in space throughout the poem.

4. Natural Echoes: Eco-Linguistical Readings

The very moving final part of the poem is also interesting to analyze in terms of ecocriticism—the last lines read:

> caw caw all years my birth a dream caw caw New York the bus the broken shoe the vast
> highschool caw caw all Visions of the Lord Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord
> caw caw caw Lord (Ginsberg 2006, p. 235)

This passage is almost an animistic ritual, merging religious ("Lord") with natural power ("caw"), echoing each other. Therefore, nature harmoniously embodies the mourning of the poet in a natural, elegiac form. This could be linked to a claim formulated by Mircea Eliade: "All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secret of nature" (Manes 1996, p. 19). In that sense, natural elements accompany the poet's sentiments throughout the absurdity of death: a secret pact, known only to the landscapes and the poet is formed. The intimacy of death is made part of the poet's surroundings and goes beyond the language spoken by mortals. Confronting death becomes, then, a metaphysical secret that can only be revealed in the mourning process, when the poet is made lonesome, his "naked" soul contemplating his surroundings. Death is reevaluated, debunked, and re-mystified through space and nature. The power of nature is invoked, and the crow is more than a mere symbol here—it is a vision of nature as an understanding entity. Christopher Manes' take on animism and language (from which I draw Eliade's quotation) is also insightful:

> [. . .] the "animistic subject" [is] a shifting, autonomous, articulate identity that cuts across the human/nonhuman distinction. Here, human speech is not understood as some unique faculty, but as a subset of the speaking of the world. (Manes 1996, p. 19)

This last part of *Kaddish* is a cry for meaning before the unreal feature of death and a desperate realization that it is all part of a natural cycle. The whole poem is not only about what is located within the Anthropocene but also it is a way to zoom out, to shift focus from the individual towards the gist of the universe, and to a wider sense of belonging. In other words, Allen Ginsberg's poetics could be seen as a counterpart of the Camusian idea of the absurdity of mankind before the universe. On the contrary, Ginsberg's poetic is one of union, transcendence, and humility—as Nathalie Caritoux wrote "The distinction between the subject and the world becomes ineffective" ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 71) My translation).

But a short eco-linguistical survey of one term used in different Ginsberg's poems can also underline the extent to which Ginsberg's poetry is tentatively overcoming space through language and against time. One of the most interesting examples is his use of the word "Mannahatta" which appears mostly in his collection *The Fall of America* (which will be at the heart of the last part of this essay). The Ginsbergian use of the word "Mannahatta" reflects the influence of Walt Whitman on the Beat poet, "Mannahatta" being the name of one of Whitman's poems. This word refers to the "aboriginal" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 790) name of New York City, a term used by the Lenape. Ginsberg uses this word as an invocation (often near the mention of Whitman) like in "Bayonne Entering NYC" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 428):

> Whizz of bus-trucks shimmer in Ear
> over red brick
> under Whitmanic Yawp Harbor here
> roll into Man city, my city, Mannahatta
> Lower East Side ghosted &
> grimed with Heroin, shit-black from Edison towers
> on East Rivers rib—

Ginsberg develops here an interesting linguistical conception of the name "Manhattan", going from "Man city" to "my city", emphasizing a sense of both objective and subjective belonging to the city. But the mention of Mannahatta also invokes historical forces, in an almost Rousseauist vision of a nature that has been lost and destroyed by modernity. This point recalls the beginning of Ginsberg's poem entitled "Ecologue" (a wordplay on "eclogue"), a Rousseauist vision of an apocalyptic America:

> In a thousand years, if there's History
> America'll be remembered as a nasty little Country
> Full of Pricks, thorny hothouse rose
> Cultivated by the Yellow Gardeners.
> [. . .]
> Earth rolling round, epics on archaic tongues
> Fishermen telling island tales—
> All autos rusted away,
> Trees everywhere. (Ginsberg 2006, p. 550)

Later, in the same poem, Ginsberg also writes, "All landscapes have become Phantom" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 463). This dystopian or Rousseauist cartography of a future America—depending on the reader's point of view—echoes Deleuze and Guattari's claim that "writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 4–5). But in the passage of *Bayonne Entering NYC* mentioned above, the city is also associated with human features, like the "East River's rib"—this goes with the deep sense of belonging to a city that is growing, and here somewhat on the verge of dying. The term "Mannahatta", which also appears on the back cover of *The Fall of America* is also present in the long poem *Iron Horse*—again associated with organic terms (Ginsberg 2006, p. 464):

> Mind wanders. Sleep, cough & sweat . . .
> Mannahattas
> tunnel-door cobbled for traffic,
> trucks into that mouth

Ginsberg also writes in the same poem: "crowd iron cancer on the city's throat" (Ginsberg 2006, p. 457) recalling Mathieu Perrot's analysis of "the poetic of the poisoned city" which is here insightful: "just like cancer changes living matter into dead matter, industrial societies' inclination to inorganic matters is the very proof of their degeneration" (Perrot 2018, p. 43). In his pamphlet *A Sick Planet* Debord would argue that "it is not the symptoms but the illness itself that must be cured" (Debord 2008, p. 91). Therefore, Ginsberg's use of an aboriginal name for Mannahatta would be an act of resistance against this metaphorical degeneration. Occurrences of "Mannahatta" can be found in other poems like *Memory Gardens*, *Friday the Thirteenth* or *Contest of Bards*. Of course, this use of the word "Mannahatta" is part of a wider Ginsbergian vision inherited from Whitman, of a primary land, "an appreciation of the Amer-Indian vision of America as "Turtle Island", as he said in an interview (Geneson and Ginsberg 1975, p. 30).

This vision of an original lost land, of which traces can be perceived through the spirit of places, is also linked to—and contrasted by—a Ginsbergian and apocalyptical vision of the city, most famously represented in *Howl*. An eco-Marxist reading of Ginsberg's poems (as well as of other Beat works, such as Kerouac's *On the Road*, Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, etc.), would stress the need to reclaim (or to save) the landscape from capitalistic views. This is what the Situationists were fighting against with their own idea of urbanism. They, for example, criticized Haussmann for modeling streets according to the size of cannons, Le Corbusier for wanting to "suppress the streets", ending thus their "chances of insurrections and meetings", and modern urbanism for following Police directives (Conord 1954c). Mainstream urbanism becomes a tool of police or capitalistic oppression against the citizen, as Ginsberg observes in the opening lines of the second part of *Howl*:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up
> their brains and imagination?

In Greek mythology, the sphinx is a cruel and heartless creature killing and eating those who are not able to answer its riddles, famously represented in the myth of Oedipus. The city is seen then as an unsolvable riddle, brutally crushing its crazed youth. And Ginsberg goes on to compare the city to Moloch:

> Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrap-
> ers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose
> factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and
> antennae crown the cities!

Biblically, the figure of Moloch is connected to the practice of child sacrifice, so then again to a youth that is being sacrificed to the city and capitalism—Caitlin Cater analyzes it as Ginsberg's fear of "the increasingly pervasive mass culture and [...] its deleterious impact on mankind" (Cater 2008, p. 15). And if we keep in mind Gilles Ivain's remark from his *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau* that "Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, to modulate reality, to make dream" (Ivain 1953), Ginsberg's poetry underlines thus that capitalism took over urbanism to make it a real nightmare. The whole poem recalls a quotation Marx Debord uses about the theory of the "dérive" in the second issue of *Internationale Situationniste*: "Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image" (Debord 1958b). Hopefully, and this might be the most important point in Ginsberg's work, the creative act can be, if not lifesaving, at least an impetus towards reawakening an awareness of our surroundings. This is precisely the mechanism at work in Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra", in which the ruins of an old locomotive (which could be interpreted as an industrial vision of America) form a big sunflower. Here, the poetic sensibility of the observers (Ginsberg and Kerouac) helps them to overcome the disenchantment of nature, while the poet advocates, on the contrary, for a re-enchantment of landscapes.

5. Composing on/from the Tongue: Recording Geography

But the psychogeographical aspect of Allen Ginsberg's poetry is also important in terms of methodology—as David Wills writes, "travel" gave Allen Ginsberg "opportunity to make significant poetic breakthroughs" (Wills 2019, p. 17). The most striking examples and tangible evidence of the impact of traveling on Ginsberg's methods of composition could be dated between December 1965 and March 1966. During that interval indeed, Allen Ginsberg read in many cities and was almost always on the road, in a car, or in a bus through Wichita, Kansas City, Bloomington, and more (sometimes in the company of Gary Snyder). Earlier that year, Bob Dylan gave Allen Ginsberg six hundred dollars so he could buy a brand-new tape-recorder. During that period, Allen Ginsberg recorded himself on his tape-recorder, improvising and creating spontaneous pieces, a vast majority of which is included in his book *The Fall of America: Poems of These States*. Allen Ginsberg's moving environment made it easier for him to record his thoughts rather than writing them. He himself called these poems a "kind of

collage of the simultaneous data of the actual sensory situation" (Ginsberg 1980, p. 26). The poems published in *The Fall of America* are then born from movements, the poet being the active reader of his environment. These poems are therefore approaching and revealing the psychogeographical variations at work in Ginsberg's creative process in a very different way. This difference is a direct consequence of the time spent in a place and of the potential duration of geographical observations. In other words, the frontier between geography and the psyche is ever-changing, inducing thus, a new poetic structure, both in form and content. Allen Ginsberg's tape-recorder constitutes a precious archive tool, as the resulting tapes show that it was not only a way to record disconnected thoughts but a way to record lively lines and to include materials from his immediate environment.

Among the most relevant examples is a passage from his poem entitled "Bayonne Entering NYC":

> More Chimney fires than all Kansas in a mile,
> Sulphur chemical Humble gigantic viaducts
> networked by road side
> What smell burning rubber, oil
> "freshens your mouth"
> Railroad rust, deep marsh garbage-fume
> Nostril **horns**—
> city Announcer jabbering at City Motel (Ginsberg n.d.)

The word "horns" above is intentionally in bold character because it is in fact a fragment of the real, added in real-time into the poem. In the recording, Allen Ginsberg recorded those lines quite normally, when all of sudden, just after saying "nostril", one can hear horns in the background and Allen Ginsberg adding spontaneously the word "horns" in his recording, making those horns instantaneously and definitively part of the poem. In this example, the outside world of the city and the inside world of the poet are united, and the psychogeographical aspect of the poem is even more concrete. This incorporation of already existing elements into his poetry, a kind of collage of the real in a way, underlines at the same time the porosity of the frontier between the outside and the inside, but also the referentiality of the poem, as Ginsberg decided to keep those fragments of raw reality in his poems. To that extent, Ginsberg's poems of that period are made from and born in the landscapes through which he traveled.

Wichita Vortex Sutra, perhaps the best-known poem from that period, was also first tape-recorded—Allen Ginsberg told Michael Aldrich that this poem was "the transcription of only one day" (Ginsberg 1980, p. 26). Again, the poem is composed with elements taken from the flux of reality and those concrete elements were usually the impulse of Allen Ginsberg's recorded thoughts, both being mixed in the vortex of the poem. There is an interesting example of this creative vortex at the beginning of the poem:

> Thy sins are forgiven, Wichita!
> Thy lonesomeness annulled, O Kansas dear!
> **as the western Twang prophesied**
> **thru banjo, when lone cowboy walked the railroad track**
> past an empty station toward the sun
> sinking giant-bulbed orange down the box canyon—
> Music strung over his back
> and empty handed singing on this planet earth
> I'm a lonely Dog, O Mother! (Ginsberg n.d.)

Here again, the lines in bold characters are revealing, when compared to what could be considered Allen Ginsberg's first draft. One can hear how Ginsberg worked on this passage: he heard on the radio some country music, and he improvised over it, including the very song in his poem. The creative process, its imagery, and its structure are here inherent to the temporal and geographical structures perceived.

In another passage, from the poem rightly entitled "Hiway Poesy: L.A.-Albuquerque-Texas-Wichita", Allen Ginsberg literally quotes a real conversation:

> Hitchhiking student
> supported by National Defense Fund
> with his black horn rimmed glasses,
> thin blond hair,
> **"If your country calls you, would you go?"**
> **"If my country drafted me . . .**
> **then I would go**."
> (Ginsberg n.d.)

Once again, those lines are taken from the vivid flux of life, as one can hear in the recording. This way of composing in real time with and from the outside world hooks and involves the reader into the vortex Ginsberg creates, where one cannot distinguish what is imagination and what is reality. This kind of collage also adds new shades of meaning by exploring words in a new context and therefore, could be understood in the vein of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notions of de-territorialization and re-territorialization, in the sense that a fragment of the real is de-contextualized and re-contextualized—what was a trivial experience now becomes a poetical statement and shifted in category. Another example can be found in the line "Ham steak please waitress, in the warm café" in "Wichita Vortex Sutra", as Ginsberg tape-recorded himself ordering food in real-time in a café. For Deleuze and Guattari, the book (here the poem) is not "an image of the world" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 11) but "it assures the deterritorialization of the world" and "the world affects a reterri-torialization of the book" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 11). To borrow the words of the two philosophers, Ginsberg's poems are an "assemblage, a "multiplicity" made of "lines of articulation" as well as "movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 3). In other words, Ginsberg's lines are creative movements—a process of shifting territories—from a world that builds upon itself and with its own raw material. In fact, this also recalls some characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a rhizome: "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" and "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains [. . .]. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 7). Ginsberg's poems could be then considered as poetic rhizomes: the lines know more than one ramification and layer and connect between themselves and each reader's experience in more than one direction.

The poems from that specific period are psychogeographical experiences and the occurrences that structure these experiences for the reader are too numerous to be listed here. But one can come across

news broadcasts[7], radio signals[8], Ginsberg reading from newspapers[9], declarations of the President[10], and even a Bob Dylan's song—completing thus the circle:

> Angelic Dylan singing across the nation
> **"When all your children start to resent you**
> **Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?"**
> His youthful voice making glad
> the brown endless meadows
> His tenderness penetrating aether,
> soft prayers on the airwaves, (Ginsberg n.d.)

In the recording of this passage, even though it is of poor quality, one can distinctly hear Bob Dylan singing in his unique voice—and once again, Dylan's lyrics are re-contextualized in a country at war. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari once again, "there is no difference between what a [poem] talks about and how it is made" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 4).

In those psychogeographical poems, Allen Ginsberg also underlines the extraordinary surfeit of language overflowing our environment to the point of being overused, with usually a strong emphasis on the manipulative side of language in the Vietnam War era, like in these lines (Ginsberg 2006, p. 409):

> The war is language
>   language abused
>   for advertisement,
>   language used
> like magic for power on the planet

Mathieu Perrot describes in that sense Ginsberg's "green poetry" and "ecological poetic" as a way to "reawaken consciousness put to sleep by the verbal pollution which hypnotizes the masses." (Perrot 2018, p. 46). But besides language, the place itself bears violence (Ginsberg 2006, p. 418):

> Here fifty years ago, by her [Carry Nation] violence
> began a vortex of hatred that defoliated the Mekong Delta—

[7] (Ginsberg 2006, p. 402).

> *In advance of the Cold Wave*
>   *Snow is spreading eastward to*
>   *the Great Lakes*

[8] (Ginsberg 2006, p. 407).

>   Quietness, quietness
> over this countryside
>   except for unmistakable signals on the radio
>   followed by the honkytonk tinkle
>   of a city piano

[9] (Ginsberg 2006, p. 416).

> Continued from page one area
>   after the Marines killed 256 Vietcong captured 31
>   ten day operation Harvest Moon last December

[10] (Ginsberg 2006, p. 408).

> "We will negotiate anywhere anytime"
>   said the giant President.

Proud Wichita! vain Wichita
cast the first stone!—

The place seems here to be morally poisoned by its inhabitants and instead of rippling throughout the land, this hauntological violence ripples through time.

This vortex of information, this juxtaposition of different materials unveils what is otherwise hidden in the landscape. In that sense, the reservoir of images present in the outside world is transformed into a Whitmanic scream by the poet so it can be heard by everyone, with shared materials that are accessible not only through imagination but also through a physical experience of the world. As he writes in *Wichita Vortex Sutra* (Ginsberg 2006, p. 414):

I search for the language
that is also yours—
Almost all our language has been taxed by war.

Moreover, in the works Allen Ginsberg composed during that period, changes in typographical treatment are also a creative process, as the experience of traveling influences not only the content but also the form of his poems. Indeed, Allen Ginsberg himself admitted that "When transcribing, [he] pai[d] attention to the clicking on and off of the machine", and described this process as writing in a "notebook", arranging the lines "according to their organic time-spacing as per the mind's coming up with the phrases and the mouth pronouncing them" (Ginsberg 1980, pp. 28–29). Here are lines from *Wichita Vortex Sutra*—the "clicking on and off" of the tape-recorder are represented here with an asterisk, according to the recording (Ginsberg n.d.):

While the triangle-roofed Farmer's Grain Elevator
sat quietly by the side of the road
along the railroad track *
American Eagle beating its wings over Asia *
million dollar helicopters *
a billion dollars worth of Marines *
who loved Aunt Betty *
Drawn from the shores and farms * shaking
from the high schools to the landing barge *
blowing the air thru their cheeks with fear *
in *Life* on Television *
Put it this way on the radio *
Put it this way in television language *
Use the words
language, language:
"A bad guess" *

Most of the time, the line breaks coincide with the "clicking on and off" of the tape-recorder, making each line a unit of thought. The layout of the poem is thus, deeply influenced by Allen Ginsberg's physical actions on the tape-recorder, actions which are themselves influenced by auditive or visual experiences during his travel. His use of a tape-recorder is in that sense a tool with which he sculpted his poem on the page but also a way to archive the poetry available in the world.

As we have seen, the notions of places and landscapes have a complex and pluralistic influence on Allen Ginsberg's poetry, whether words are taken from an always evolving geographical environment or born from a collective spirit of place. What is at work in most of the passages studied is a dynamic exchange between what is retrievable through poetry and what is lost in time, what is composed in the poem and what is archived in the mind.

6. Conclusions

The psychogeographical poems of Ginsberg are the embodiment of an inner struggle, of a crisis that is deployed in a sensible field: the difficult process of transcribing the world and the poet's evanescent reactions to it into poetry, into a new vocabulary or context. Ginsberg's poetry is complex, subtle, but visionary—he welcomes the reader in his mind and in the vortex of the world itself. Introspective analysis of his position in the world is almost always a defining aspect of his poetry. Ginsberg, who described himself as "a permanent traveler" (Wills 2019, p. 129)—one could add, "a contemporary Ulysses"—is most of the time a psychogeographer without knowing it, someone who "wants to know and to create" ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 72) My translation). He is not simply providing a passive description of his experience: he invites the reader to explore with him the liminal space between what is outside and what is inside, in the form of a creative and poetic study. In a way, Ginsberg's poetry transcends the notion of "dérive" as introduced by Guy Debord, as it is not a mere observation of psychogeographical variations or a poetic report that Ginsberg offers. It is, on the contrary, a deconstruction of horizontal observations, and a lively reconstruction of sceneries into a vertical work that allows the reader to oversee the environment.

Of course, the overlapping of the psyche and geography indirectly points towards the ambiguity of psychogeography: the observed environment is as influential as the observer's mindset. Poetry might be a solution to the impasse Guy Debord describes: "The sectors of the city are, at a certain level, decipherable. But the personal meaning they have for us is incommunicable" (Debord 2005, p. 129). In that sense, the poet is the medium between two worlds, as he is able, in his practice, to cross what Wunenburger called "the invisible line of scission" ((Caritoux and Villard 2017, p. 226) My translation). The psychogeographical poems of Allen Ginsberg are composed in a pendulum movement: from geographical triggers to poetic observations, from geographical observations to poetic triggers.

The Situationist vision of psychogeography, in the sense that it is a practice that invites the gathering of first-hand experiences of surroundings, and also to the extent that it is a non-mediated knowledge based on direct observations, is linked to what Guy Debord writes in his seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle*: "While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation." (Debord 2005, p. 2). In adding "psyche", that is a subjective element, to "geography", the work of the Situationist reintroduced the importance of the self, of relationship, of freedom. Ginsberg's poetry creates a poetic space in which the schizophrenic representation of the subject as against the outside world is negotiated, confronted, and finally abjured in the creative process. Landscapes, as poetic experiences, work in a reciprocal movement in Ginsberg's work. They are the poet's own tinted images and inclinations projected on an environment that, in return, swallows the poet in a union. Therefore, this union between the poet and the landscape appears more like a visionary harmony of a specific moment rather than a spontaneous poetic epiphany. Reading Ginsberg's poetry could be thus seen as an interiorized form of psychogeography, and as an examination of one's response to the environment. As for the mechanism at work for the layout on the page, this study scratched the surface of new territory to explore: a "text-ritory" to discover through poetico-geographical observations and genetic studies.

Translations of articles extracted from the magazines Internationale Situationniste and Potlatch are from The Situationist International Online unless stated otherwise.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Benjamin, Walter. 2000. *Œuvres III*. Paris: Gallimard.

Caritoux, Nathalie, and Florent Villard, eds. 2017. *Nouvelles Psychogéographies*. San Giovanni: Mimésis.

Cater, Caitlin. 2008. In Search of America: Nature, Spirituality, and the Self in American Transcendentalism and Beat Generation Literature. *The Oswald Review* 10: 4.

Conord, André-Frank, ed. 1954a. *Potlatch*. no. 1. Paris: Éditions Allia, June 25.

Conord, André-Frank, ed. 1954b. *Potlatch*. no. 2. Paris: Éditions Allia, June 29.

Conord, André-Frank, ed. 1954c. *Potlatch*. no. 5. Paris: Éditions Allia, July 20.

Conord, André-Frank, ed. 1954d. *Potlatch*. no. 7. Paris: Éditions Allia, August 3.

Dahou, Mohamed, ed. 1954a. *Potlatch*. no. 9-10-11. Paris: Éditions Allia, August 17–31.

Dahou, Mohamed, ed. 1954b. *Potlatch*. no. 14. Paris: Éditions Allia, November 30.

Guy Debord, director. 2005, *Critique of Separation (Film Soundtrack)*. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets. First Published 1961.

Debord, Guy. 1955. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography". *Les Lèvres Nues* #6. Available online: http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2 (accessed on 28 August 2020).

Debord, Guy, ed. 1957. *Potlatch*. no. 29. Paris: Éditions Allia, November 5.

Debord, Guy-Ernest, ed. 1958a. *Internationale Situationniste*. no. 1. Paris: Editions Champ Libre, June.

Debord, Guy-Ernest, ed. 1958b. *Internationale Situationniste*. no. 2. Paris: Editions Champ Libre, December.

Debord, Guy-Ernest, ed. 1959. *Internationale Situationniste*. no. 3. Paris: Editions Champ Libre, December.

Debord, Guy. 2005. *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.

Debord, Guy. 2008. *A Sick Planet*. Oxford: Seagull Books.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Geneson, Paul, and Allen Ginsberg. 1975. A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg. *Chicago Review* 27: 27–35. [CrossRef]

Ginsberg, Allen. 1980. *Composed on the Tongue Essays, Lectures and Interviews*. Bolinas: Grey Fox Press.

Ginsberg, Allen. 2006. *Collected Poems: 1947–1997*. New York: Harper Collins.

Ginsberg, Allen. n.d.a. "A Vow & Iron Horse. Reel/DAT 23 + 24." Allen Ginsberg Papers 1937–2017. Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford Libraries. Available online: https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/kt081tb6136 (accessed on 28 August 2020).

Ginsberg, Allen. n.d.b. "Auto Poesy Recorded at Various Locations." Allen Ginsberg Papers 1937–2017. Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford Libraries. Available online: https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/qr659pt3195 (accessed on 28 August 2020).

Ivain, Gilles. 1953. Formulary for a New Urbanism. Bureau of Public Secrets. Available online: http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Chtcheglov.htm (accessed on 28 August 2020).

Manes, Christopher. 1996. "Nature and Silence". In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 15–30.

Marcus, Greil. 2011. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. London: Faber & Faber.

Meltzer, David, ed. 2001. *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Perrot, Mathieu. 2018. La sagesse des relations terrestres. *Essais* 13: 33–50. [CrossRef]

Stephenson, Gregory. 2009. *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Westphal, Bertrand. 2011. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wills, David. 2019. *World Citizen: Allen Ginsberg as a Traveller*. Temple: Beatdom Books.

© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

humanities

MDPI

Article

Baboons, Centipedes, and Lemurs: Becoming-Animal from *Queer* to *Ghost of Chance*

Alexander Greiffenstern

Independent Scholar, Lehener Straße 59, 79106 Freiburg, Germany; Alexander.Greiffenstern@uni-due.de

Abstract: The paper establishes a connection between the becoming-writer of Burroughs, who found his calling and style during the 1950s and his signature characteristic of becoming-animal. This can first be observed in *Queer*, where Burroughs develops his so-called routine; a short sketch-like text that often involves instances of metamorphosis or transformation. The theoretical background for this short form and the term becoming-animal is taken from Deleuze's and Guattari's book on Kafka, who also worked best in short texts and frequently wrote about animals. "The Composite City" may be the central text to understanding Burroughs' work. It is the text where Burroughs found his style and his identity as a writer. Becoming-animal is a logical consequence that further develops Burroughs' aesthetic ideal. Over the following decades, he experimented with it in different forms, and toward the end of his career, it became part of an environmental turn. In *Ghost of Chance*, one can find the same aesthetic ideal that starts Burroughs' writing in 1953, but the political implications have turned toward saving the lemurs of Madagascar.

Keywords: William S. Burroughs; *Queer*; *Ghost of Chance*; *Yage Letters*; *Naked Lunch*; Madagascar

Citation: Greiffenstern, Alexander. 2021. Baboons, Centipedes, and Lemurs: Becoming-Animal from *Queer* to *Ghost of Chance*. *Humanities* 10: 51. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010051

Received: 7 February 2021
Accepted: 1 March 2021
Published: 15 March 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

> "As a child I had been a great dreamer, bordering on hallucinations which often involved animals. After years of trying to discover who and what I was, I suddenly awoke one morning and realized I didn't care. I didn't want insight. I wanted to escape and forget". (William Burroughs in Bauer (1981), p. 506)

The texts of William S. Burroughs are populated by all kinds of different animals. There are, among others, baboons, cats, lemurs, and centipedes. Especially in his late texts, animals play an important role for self-reflection, and their deep connections to humans are at the center of two slim but interesting books: *The Cat Inside* (1992) and *Ghost of Chance* (1991). While *The Cat Inside* is a peculiar memorial to the cats that lived with Burroughs during his last years in Lawrence, Kansas, *Ghost of Chance* is clearly connected to Burroughs' beginning as a writer and his aesthetic development. Chad Weidner remarks in his introduction to *The Green Ghost* about *Ghost of Chance*: "The novella has received virtually no scholarly attention, but it can reveal much about the writer's late varied use of narrative strategies to convey the need for urgent ecological restoration" (Weidner 2016, p. 20). On a topical level, the book can be read as a parable on modern society based in 18th century Madagascar and a fictional story about its lemurs. However, on an aesthetic level, the text illustrates the concepts of becoming-animal, as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, that has been present in Burroughs' texts since the early 1950s. Burroughs himself frequently pointed to Kafka as one of his literary influences, and the short form seems a good indicator that connects the two authors. In 1997, Timothy Murphy analyzed Burroughs' work on the basis of Deleuze's philosophy, but he mentions Kafka only once in connection to *Nova Express* (p. 133), and becoming-animal plays no role at all because his focus is on other aspects of Deleuze's work. Nevertheless, "understanding Kafka is such a convenient key to understanding Burroughs" (Meyer 1990, p. 226) that a closer look at Burroughs' animals should start with Kafka.

1. Becoming-Animal in the Texts of Kafka

The beginning of Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis" is one of the most famous openings: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 1948, p. 67). In the course of the story, it remains unclear whether the metamorphosis of the title refers to the change in Gregor or the change of his family and their attitudes toward Gregor and their own lives. In the end, the change of the family is successful for the parents and Gregor's sister: for them, it is a new beginning. Gregor's becoming-animal somewhat fails. He is unable to flee the obligations of his job and of family life. He dies in his insect form without helping his family or himself.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari offer a reading of Kafka's texts. They defend Kafka against a critique from the political left that regarded Kafka as a bourgeois author and instead they show his radical artistic perspective. They argue that the struggle of a minority within a dominant culture becomes visible in their language and literature. Kafka as a German-speaking Jew in Czech Prague can be used as a blueprint for what they call "minor literature". The act of becoming-animal is an escape route from the ruling culture.

"To the inhumanness of the 'diabolical powers', there is the answer of a becoming-animal: to become a beetle, to become a dog, to become an ape, 'head over heels and away', rather than lowering one's head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged". (Deleuze and Guattari [1975] 1986, p. 12).[1]

Deleuze and Guattari regard this becoming-animal as a movement of deterritorialization, even as absolute deterritorialization (pp. 13, 36), which means that the becoming-animal in Kafka's stories has the aim to leave the symbolic order in which they live. The problematic struggle that follows a transformation is often presented in the story. "The Metamorphosis" has already taken place when the story starts, which is then about Gregor trying to live in his new body, but his old cultural context continues to reterritorialize him via his family and his job and eventually kills him.

Becoming-animal is always a threat to society, because it challenges established rules and produces lines of flight. There is no romantic connotation to becoming-animal as in common back-to-nature movements. The animals simply submit to other rules as in "Josephine". It is of importance that Kafka seems fascinated with small animals such as mice or bugs, because the transformation is perceived as dangerous, but the smaller life-form is usually not. The society of mice or a single bug can exist within the dominant culture and even use it as a host similar to a parasite or virus, which is the appeal that the small animals have to the author of minor literature. An important "characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political" (Deleuze and Guattari [1975] 1986, p. 17), and in their later work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborated on becoming-animal that minoritarian, as in minor literature, is not to be confused with a minority. "The majority in the universe assumes as pregiven the right and power of man. In this sense women, children, but also animals, plants, and molecules, are minoritarian" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, p. 291).

Kafka himself stated that he wanted to avoid metaphors and an interpretation of Kafka's texts based on an analysis of metaphors is bound to fail. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari see the metamorphosis as contrary to the metaphor and try to analyze the transformations and read animals "realistically". This leads to a different perspective: if it is of no interest what a bug stands for, the movement or transformation will become important. What drives this transformation? How is one territory connected to the other? Does the deterritorialization lead to destruction or to further transformation? Above all: How does the machine function? No story of Kafka embodies this question better than "The Penal Colony", which is misquoted in one of Burroughs' letters and is the source of "Dream of the Penal Colony", a short story/routine that appears in William S. Burroughs'

[1] Quotes taken from a letter to Max Brod.

Queer. Kafka's short story is about a writing machine, and in a way, *Queer* shows the becoming-writer of Burroughs.

2. Becoming-Animal in *Queer*

As Oliver Harris has pointed out, to understand the becoming-writer of Burroughs and to grasp the development that resulted in the writing of *Naked Lunch*, one has to look at *Queer*, which is even the origin of the very title *Naked Lunch*. In his 2003 study of Burroughs' early work until *Naked Lunch*, Harris states that "*Queer* is the true kernel of *Naked Lunch*" (Harris 2003, p. 38). In the introduction to the new edition in 2010, Harris writes: "The origins of *Naked Lunch* in the cracking up of *Queer* appear quite literally at the moment when Lee first attempts to court Allerton with a friendly greeting and 'there emerged instead a leer of naked lust, wrenched in the pain and hate of his deprived body and, in simultaneous double exposure, a sweet child's smile of liking and trust, shockingly out of time and place, mutilated and hopeless'" (Burroughs [1985] 2010, p. xviii).

Burroughs wrote *Queer* in 1952, but it was not published until 1985, and afterwards, it was overlooked by critics for several reasons. The book was still a fragment, and Burroughs took the last stage of the manuscript and added an epilogue and an introduction that pointed readers into the direction of the shooting of his wife Joan of which there is no textual proof in *Queer*. Many readers expected to read something akin to an earlier version of *Naked Lunch* and finally discover the missing link between *Junky* and his masterpiece. Since this was not as straightforward as was expected, the pre-publication hype for the book died away quickly. The book has two aspects that seem important when it comes to transformations: first, William Lee's coming to terms with his homosexuality and his love and/or desire for Eugene Allerton; second, the usage of routines, which is a narrative form created by Burroughs that basically constitutes all of *Naked Lunch*, which Lee deploys to seduce Allerton, the object of his "naked lust".

While Lee's struggle with his homosexuality is the theme of the book, it appears first centrally in the opening scene of chapter 8 when Lee and Allerton are in Guayaquil, Ecuador. The chapter starts with a description of the city that foreshadows "The Composite City", which Burroughs sent in a letter to Ginsberg on 10 July 1953. Whereas "The Composite City" is a visionary or even utopian text, Guayaquil is "realistically" described through the eyes of Lee. This difference is also seen a few lines further down when Lee/Burroughs reflects about his chosen image.

"What happens when there is no limit? What is the fate of The Land Where Anything Goes? Men changing into huge centipedes ... centipedes besieging the houses ... a man tied to a couch and a centipede ten feet long rearing up over him. Is this literal? Did some hideous metamorphosis occur? What is the meaning of the centipede symbol"? (Burroughs [1985] 2010, p. 92).

The answer is that there is no fixed meaning. Probably this became clearer to Burroughs in the following years, but his centipede and other animals are not symbols; becoming-animal emerged as part of his writing similar to Kafka. As Kafka's animals, Burroughs' are not metaphorical animals, the writing is not allegorical, but always literal. For both authors, becoming-animal offers a way out. In his comparison of the two authors, Adam Meyer points out: "Kafka and Burroughs use images of metamorphosis to show this sort of death-in-life existence, but these portraits can also serve a second, opposite purpose: to show the man who, however quixotically, dares to fight against the system" (Meyer 1990, p. 220). For Burroughs, these metamorphoses are associated with corporeal questions of identity.

For Lee, in *Queer*, the image of a centipede starts a transformation into an animal-creature, some kind of predator searching for an object of desire. Lee's metamorphosis is signaled in the next paragraph: "The river looked as if a nameless monster might rise from the green-brown water. Lee saw a lizard two feet long run up the opposite bank" (p. 92). After he finds a group of young boys at the waterfront, he "looked at them openly, a cold stare of naked lust. He felt the tearing ache of limitless desire" (p. 93). Similar to

any animal on the hunt, he singles out one of the boys as his target. "The boy vibrated with life like a young animal" (p. 93). Then, he has a vision of being inside the boy's body experiencing memories of sexual encounters with the other boys and also with a woman. At this point, he snaps out of the vision and asks himself again if he is homosexual. "'I'm not queer,' he thought. 'I'm disembodied'" (p. 94). The scene ends rather comically with Lee asking Allerton "'Think I'm queer or something?' 'Frankly, yes'" (p. 95).

As Deleuze and Guattari suggest for Kafka, the becoming-animal is a line of flight. By becoming a predatory lizard on the river bank, Lee is able to express his desires (as scary as they might be) in contrast to his relation to Allerton in which he is afraid of being rejected as "some old queer". The metamorphosis is introduced by the idea of the centipede and then triggered by the lizard. It does not matter into what animal Lee changes, because the animals are not symbolic; it is a literal transformation, a becoming-animal as such. Lee's identity is not fixed; he is a homosexual but not a "fag". Despite being homosexual, he is the typical ugly American who behaves similar to a colonizer on several occasions, and in consequence, he is also an anti-communist, challenging a common point of view of the 1950s that equated homosexuality and communism as similar threats undermining American society. However, this is only one possible reading, because the ugly American can also be some kind of act leading up to his numerous routines, which often go in a similar direction (such as the Slave Trader or the Texas Oil Man). Then, there is the sentence Lee says to Allerton, "Just a routine for your amusement, containing a modicum of truth" (p. 99), pointing to the meta-level of the text that a lot of the routines were probably written to amuse real-life Allerton Lewis Marker. So, the adopting of roles and making up of the routines can be seen as a movement toward a somehow fixed identity. In the other direction, becoming-animal and taking up new roles represent the way out of his struggle, which is exactly what this fixed identity is. For Burroughs, the consequence is that William Lee becomes an assemblage where identity as such plays no role anymore; how the mechanisms within the assemblage are connected matters instead. The imagery for this aesthetic, as it can later be observed in *Naked Lunch*, is already at work in *Queer*.

3. The Yage Letters

One central text to understand Burroughs' work and his becoming as a writer is surely "The Composite City" written in 1953 and intended for *The Yage Letters* (1963). The books consist of three parts: The main part "In Search of Yage" describes in epistolary form Burroughs' travel through South America where he searched for the mythical drug yagé. In *The Yage Letters*, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between Burroughs' alter ego William Lee and the author himself, because some letters are real letters that Burroughs sent to Allen Ginsberg, while others are not. All letters are addressed to Ginsberg, but they are signed differently. The second part of the book is a short exchange of letters between Burroughs and Ginsberg called "Seven Years Later (1960)", and the third called "Epilogue (1963)" consists of a note by Ginsberg and a cut-up text by Burroughs, signed "William S. Burroughs". "The Composite City" is the last letter of the main part and seemingly the result of Burroughs' quest; it is also part of a real letter to Ginsberg. The introduction of "The Composite City" signifies foremost a change of perspective. For the protagonist/author, a movement has occurred that is summarized in the first sentence of the vision: "Yage is space time travel" (Burroughs and Ginsberg (2006), p. 50). With this first sentence, Burroughs does not engage with the genres of science-fiction or fantasy—something that will happen later in his work—it is meant with metaphysical considerations. It means that every period of time and every place on earth has left some kind of mark on the body of the individual.

As for how far the vision of the Composite City was a result of Burroughs' consumption of yagé, or rather of his artistic considerations while traveling alone through South America, it does not matter in the end. With his first sentence, Burroughs signals that he experienced a change in perspective and describes how he felt in touch with every(-)body:

"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" (p. 50).

The journey to the Composite City leads through the body, and it mirrors the races and migrations of the earth. Again, apart from describing a transcendental experience, he describes movements and transformations. Burroughs is not moving; everything around him "shakes and vibrates with motion". Nevertheless, he has to change too—while the world in all four dimensions circulates around him and through him, Burroughs becomes something else.

Burroughs becomes a writer who incorporates the movement of the world into his writing. He denounces his nationality; being a U.S. citizen does not matter in the Composite City. It seems as though he does not want to be the Ugly American anymore, who the Lee of *Queer* so perfectly portrays. He wants to become a citizen of the singular cities such as New York City, Lima, London, Paris, or Tangier. In this sense, the Composite City has the function of a utopian society in which race is of no concern. For a white Caucasian from a wealthy mid-western family who graduated from Harvard, it was pretty bold to claim that "Negro" blood passes through his body, even if it just for the duration of his vision.

A refusal of American politics is the routine "Roosevelt after Inauguration" that is also part of the original "In Search of Yage" manuscript. As a result of its offensive character, the routine was excluded from the text until the third edition in 1988.[2] This routine has all the typical ingredients of a typical Burroughs routine. It starts with the simple idea that the president can theoretically appoint whoever he likes for his cabinet and that these politicians are basically crooks. Then, this idea is combined with the question of whether there is a difference between politicians and small-time thieves who rob drunks in the subway. The answer is of course that they have a very different appearance and mode of operation, but apart from that, they are basically the same. So, in the routine, Roosevelt appoints people from the lower ranks of society to the highest offices in government, thereby leveling the usual hierarchy. The routine is politically incorrect and funny when it lists the shady characters and their positions. "*Attorney General*: A character known as 'The Mink', a peddler of unlicensed condoms and short-con artist" (p. 42). After that, the Supreme Court gets involved, and the routine becomes offensive. Roosevelt and his advisor Harry Hopkins force the justices to have intercourse with baboons, and one by one, the members of the Supreme Court are replaced by the simians. Then, he kills or disempowers the members of congress and senate to install a system that has the aim to dehumanize every citizen. The routine ends with Roosevelt saying, "I'll make the cocksuckers glad to mutate" (p. 45).

The routine presents no human-to-animal transformation as such, but it raises some interesting questions and shows Burroughs' early usage of animals in his writing. Roosevelt was already dead in 1953, and his merits are without question. Why Burroughs chose Roosevelt and not Truman or Eisenhower can be an indication that at least the idea for this routine stems from the mid 1940s when Burroughs was still in New York City or trying his luck as a respectable farmer in South Texas. From Burroughs' point of view, the "New Deal" certainly interfered with his idea of free enterprise and could only be regarded as communism (cf. Johnson 2006, pp. 98–9). The whole joke is based on the notion that politicians often act self-serving and follow their instincts—good political instinct is even used as form of praise—rather than some ideal to serve the common good. In this sense,

[2] City Lights publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was not happy with the routine, but it "would stay in right until the long galley stage, when the British distributors, fearing legal action, pressured the London-based printers, Villiers, to have it pulled" (Burroughs and Ginsberg xli). The routine was first published in 1964 as a mimeo pamphlet by Ed Sanders' Fuck You Press.

there is not much difference between a primate such as a baboon and a politician. For Burroughs, judges were probably on the same level as politicians. Nevertheless, Roosevelt did stack the Supreme Court, so he could secure his New Deal legislation, but, as usual, one is inclined to say that Burroughs' routine gets totally out of hand, and he has readable fun wreaking havoc and creating chaos. The last sentence is presented as the only way out, and at the same time, the consequence intended by Burroughs: mutation. Similar to the utopian composite city, transformation, becoming something else, offers a way out.

In the political routine "Roosevelt after Inauguration", the primates are threatening. The baboons represent the worst character traits of humans, and they take the places of human judges. Interestingly, it is the centipede that Burroughs returns to again and again to explore the power of becoming-animal.

4. The Centipede in *Naked Lunch*

The centipede appears in *Naked Lunch* on several occasions. Most notable here is the routine "Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry" because it contains a transformation of a man into a centipede. In this routine, "Doctor 'Fingers' Schafer, the Lobotomy Kid" has removed the brain of a man to create his "Master work", the so-called "*Complete All American Deanxietized Man*" (Burroughs 2009, p. 87) who transforms into a giant black centipede in front of the eyes of the conference, thereby turning against his creator, when at the end of the routine, the monster seemingly starts to attack the members of the conference. The routine stands in the literary tradition of the mad scientist such as Dr. Frankenstein or his descendants from the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, Burroughs is not just interested in the modern Prometheus or the horror of modern science; he points out a whole array of fears and monsters in American society.

Dr. Schafer wants to control his experimental humans by turning them into mindless "Drones" (p. 88). However, as one member of the conference points out when he sees the centipede, "Schafer has gone a bit too far" (p. 87). By removing his brain and creating a man free of all anxieties, he has also removed the constraints that held him in check. The mindless idiots he creates have only one way out, transforming into something completely different but somehow related to their current existence: invertebrates. In this case, the transformation is into a centipede, in the case of Gregor Samsa into some kind of bug. Of course, this anxiety-free creature is perceived as an instant threat to society by the members of the conference, because it has nothing to lose. It is not afraid to lose a job or how to repay a debt to the bank. So, the reaction shows the real "monster" of American society, racism.[3] "We must stop the Un-American crittah", says a fat frog-faced Southern doctor [. . .] "Fetch gasoline!" he bellows. "We gotta burn the son of a bitch like an uppity Nigra!" (p. 88). After realizing the "mother fucker's hungry", the conference members start panicking and rushing out. The routine ends at this point and does not answer whether the monster is really dangerous and about to attack somebody, or whether the transformation itself and the possibilities it represents are the real threat.

Burroughs adds another layer to the routine by interrupting the scene between the call for gasoline and the panic with a fantasy by a "cool hip young doctor high on LSD25" about a future trial after the killing of the centipede. Burroughs calls into question the difference between the law and a moral code. In the fantasy of the young doctor, "a smart D.A. could" be able to use the law for persecuting the ethical crimes committed by Doctor Schafer, because the killing of the centipede is perceived as murder of the human being before the transformation, for which there would be no evidence after a burning of the creature. The young doctor does not want to get involved into this possibility, "I'm not sticking my neck out", because he is afraid of a clever D.A. and not because he thinks they are killing a human being or a living creature that should not be harmed. This question

[3] In his paper "The Dark Ecology of *Naked Lunch*", George Hart uses this scene to make the connection to speciesism. "In speciesism, humans must clearly be distinguished from centipedes just as, in racism, white people must be distinguished from Black people. Once the ambiguity is resolved, the violence is justified" (Hart 2020, p. 6).

comes to the foreground again when Burroughs returns to other primates in his late *Ghost of Chance*.

5. Ghost of Chance

A first look at Burroughs' fiction seems to suggest that there exist only two types of animals in his books: insects and wild mindless creatures such as the baboons in "Roosevelt After Inauguration". Nonetheless, the examples of the centipede in *Queer* and *Naked Lunch* show that becoming-animal is far more complex than that. In *Ghost of Chance*, a slim novel published in 1991, Burroughs sides with the lemurs of Madagascar to create another visionary place. The lemurs in *Ghost of Chance* can be seen in direct opposition to the baboons in the Roosevelt routine. While the baboons can only be perceived as wild creatures that rape the justices of the Supreme Court and kill them one by one, the lemurs have a personality and cultural significance. The becoming-animal in *Ghost of Chance* is connected to the idea of a utopian society.

The book consists roughly of two parts. One tells the story of Captain Mission who lives on Madagascar in the early 18th century. The second part describes the revenge of nature against mankind in the form of diseases. Captain Mission is a figure who also appears in Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), and it is not entirely clear whether he is solely a fictional character invented in the 18th century or whether the stories surrounding him are based on true accounts.[4] The story goes that Mission was a pirate captain who founded a free republic for pirates and freed slaves at the coast of Madagascar, which was called Libertatia. The governmental rules in Libertatia can be regarded as forerunners of the French Revolution, as every individual had the same rights.

In any case, Burroughs saw Libertatia as an attempt of people to free themselves from tyrannical governmental structures. So, in this respect, it is very much in line with his "critique" of the Roosevelt administration. The narrator sums up the articles of the democratic state, which Mission wrote together with the English captain Thomas Tew:

"The Articles were based on ideas remarkably like the ideas behind the French and American revolution of the late eighteenth century—and preceded them by more than sixty years. There would be no capital punishment, no slavery, no imprisonment for debt, and no interference with religion or sexuality" (Burroughs [1991] 2002, p. 57).

In *Ghost of Chance*, Captain Mission is the wise leader because he is in touch with his environment and especially with the famous lemurs of Madagascar. The story is a parable about how human civilization is seemingly moving forward by applying democratic structures and human rights, but that betrayal and violence are still present and the innocent victim of conflicts and greed is nature. In Burroughs' story, a lemur is killed by a certain Bradley Martin who wants to ignite a violent conflict between the settlers and the natives who regard the lemurs as sacred. Similar to Captain Mission, Bradley Martin is also a figure that appeared before in Burroughs' text, but with a much longer history. The figure is a product of Burroughs' cut-up project and the early manuscript of *The Soft Machine* (1961) was in fact titled "Mr Bradley Mr Martin" (cf. Burroughs 2012, p. 25). From there on, he makes appearances in many of Burroughs' texts, especially in the 1960s.

In *Ghost of Chance*, Martin is an agent of a secret society in London that wants to end the free republic but also regards Mission's behavior toward the lemurs as dangerous.

"A woman leans slightly forward. . . . She speaks in a cold, brittle voice, each word a chip of obsidian: 'There is a more significant danger. I refer to Captain Mission's unwholesome concern with *lemurs*.' The word slithers out of her mouth writhing with hatred" (8).

Captain Mission begins an intimate relationship with one lemur whom he calls Ghost. He starts living with the lemurs in an ancient stone structure, which suggests some connection of Madagascar to Atlantis or Mu. The becoming-animal that Mission willfully

[4] For a discussion of Captain Mission in *Cities of the Red Night* and its source text, *The History of the Pyrates* (1724) by Daniel Defoe, cf. Robinson 2011, pp. 135–40.

starts is accompanied by a form of time travel. Here, Burroughs uses genre and steps into Lovecraft territory. Mission finds a book, *The Ghost Lemurs of Madagascar*, that tells the ancient history of the Lemur People that existed before humanity—similar to Lovecraft's Great Old Ones.[5] From the book, Mission learns about the history of the Lemur People, but Mission can not finish his transformation into one himself. He is tricked into leaving the island, and when he returns, the stone structure is destroyed, and Ghost is dead. Then, Mission curses the rest of the earth. After his own death, he seems to become a ghost, finishing the transformation into this special kind of lemur and haunting the so-called "Board" that is responsible.

As the summary already shows, *Ghost of Chance* is interesting for a lot of reasons. Burroughs connects the text to his earlier work, in particular "The Composite City". Before Mission discovers the ancient stone structure, he takes a local drug called "indri". The analogy to yagé and therefore to *The Yage Letters* is made in the text. "Mission had smoked opium and hashish and had used a drug called *yagé* by the Indians of South America. There must, he decided, be a special drug peculiar to this huge island, where there were so many creatures and plants not found anywhere else" (p. 10). It becomes clear in the second sentence that the line between Burroughs, the narrator, and Captain Mission is willfully thin, which connects the narrator to Burroughs' alter ego William Lee, the protagonist of *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*. "The drug was called *indri*, which meant 'look there' in the native language". The translation is right, but "indri" usually refers to a special species of lemurs that are also known as "babakoto", which means "ancestor of man". The lemur Ghost seems to belong to this species, which is taller and has much more similarities with humans than other species of lemurs. So, in a similar way that Burroughs sets off his vision of the Composite City by taking yagé, Captain Mission takes indri before embarking on his trip to the jungle and finding the ancient structure where Ghost lives.

Mission asks the native about the drug: "Is this a day or a night drug?" "Best at dawn and twilight" (p. 10). This shows the problems of binary thinking very graphically. As yagé, indri signifies the change of perspective; it is a drug of the different shades of gray. As Lee in *The Yage Letters*, Mission gets in touch with the ancestors—signified by the "Ancestor of Man" Ghost and the ancient stone structure—and after he has become a ghost himself, he travels into the future to witness the apocalypse.

During the apocalypse, we encounter an image taken from the Composite City: the plant growing from the penis. In *Ghost of Chance*, the apocalypse comes in the form of strange diseases that are all based on some form of becoming.

"Ravenous diseases lurk in dust and straw, mist and swamps and fossilized rock. Some of the deadliest are parasite plants specialized to grow in human flesh, like the Roots. Roots grow down into the viscera and glands, curling around bones; vines sprout from the victim's groin and armpits; *green shoots spring from his penis tip* [my emphasis]; tendrils creep out of his nostrils to release deadly seeds that then spread on the wind; thorns tear out his eyes; his testicles swell and burst with roots; his skull becomes a flowerpot for stunning brain orchids that grow over dead eyes and idiot face while the skin slowly toughens into bark. In some cases, metamorphosis is complete. The subject grows into the ground to know the exquisite agony of quickening sap, of leaves eating light and root nourished by water, shit, and soil". (p. 47).

In the Composite City, there is a parenthesis that says "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" (*The Yage Letters* p. 50).[6] The becoming-plant is seeded in the Composite City. Whereas in the Composite City, the plants sprouting from a penis are a comical sign of stasis, in *Ghost of Chance*, the image has an environmental function that warns against the revenge of nature, which will inevitably happen because humans

[5] In the essay collection *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (Schneiderman and Walsh), one finds an essay by "Ccru" called "Lemurian Time War" that explores the connection between Burroughs and Lovecraft by starting out from "The Ghost Lemurs of Madagascar" (1987), which is a slightly different and shorter version of *Ghost of Chance* (Ccru 2004).

[6] In *Naked Lunch* "cocks" is substituted with "genitals".

are part of nature, too. The same way night and day are not opposites, human beings and animals and even plants are not opposites, either. Burroughs creates a disease that shows images of the twilight between humans and plants. The apocalypse cleanses the earth and "Green People" repopulate it. Burroughs' vision for the future is one of ecological harmony:

"The Four Horsemen ride through ruined cities and neglected, weed-grown farms. The virus is burning itself out, its victims dying by the millions. People of the world are at last returning to their source in spirit, back to the little lemur people of the trees and the leaves, the streams, the rocks, and the sky. Soon, all sign, all memory of the wars and the Plague of Mad will fade like dream traces" (p. 54).

In a short "Afterword", the narrator returns to Captain Tew and the end of the colony of pirates on Madagascar. For Burroughs—this time, it is clear that it is Burroughs and not some narrator—the loss of the Free Republic of Libertatia is clearly connected to the lemurs of Madagascar, because the texts ends with a footnote where Burroughs describes the situation of the lemurs today and asks for a donation to the Duke University Primate Center. Without a doubt, empathy is the first step toward understanding becoming-animal.

In 1953, Burroughs wrote "In Search of Yage", which is a book that shows Burroughs' fondness of movement and a book that is central for showcasing Burroughs' formation as a writer. This seems also strongly connected to a rather traditional question of identity. The answer to the question that is implicitly asked in the titles of Burroughs' first two novels, *Junky* and *Queer*, seems to be neither, or *Naked Lunch*. If *Naked Lunch* is some sort of answer to this search for an identity, this means that the concept of identity was replaced with an ever-evolving idea of becoming, with his becoming-writer the most important step that could be observed in his early texts. Burroughs incorporated becoming-animal into his works and embodied it himself as a writer who explored the edges of his art form with the development of the cut-up technique in the 1960s.

"The Composite City", a text written for "In Search of Yage", but first published in *Naked Lunch*, may be the central text to understanding Burroughs' work. It represents movement and the multitude of possibilities. It is the text where Burroughs found his style and his identity as a writer. Becoming-animal is a logical consequence that further develops Burroughs' aesthetic ideal. Over the following decades, he experimented with it in different forms, and toward the end of his career, it became part of an environmental turn. In 1991, in *Ghost of Chance*, one can find the same aesthetic ideal that starts Burroughs' writing in 1953, but the political implications have turned toward saving the lemurs of Madagascar.

Becoming-animal as defined by Deleuze and Guattari gives a terminology and aesthetic concept to describe Burroughs' writing. Furthermore, it connects him to a modernist writer such as Kafka, and his routines, which first became a central element in *Queer*, also make him comparable to Kafka's short fiction. Burroughs is clearly part of this modernist tradition, even though he and other writers give it their own spin, which made Timothy Murphy come up with the term "amodern" (cf. Murphy 1997, especially pp. 29–34) in contrast to postmodern.

It is astounding that a green book that reads is parts as a pamphlet by an animal-rights activist stands at the end of Burroughs' 40-year-long career as a writer. Then again, the similarities to his yagé vision of the Composite City are very visible, and Burroughs makes references to his other works as well. He refers to Brion Gysin and their cut-ups, and there is the connection to *Cities of Red Night* through Captain Mission. Furthermore, *Ghost of Chance* is a statement about his artistic development. In the book, one finds the text accompanied by abstract pictures that Burroughs had painted. By presenting texts from 1953 to 1963, *The Yage Letters* showed the development of becoming a montage-writer and a decade later the cut-up artist. *Ghost of Chance* refers back to his early texts and the concept of becoming-animal and the closely related becoming-plant. Throughout his texts, becoming-animal offered Burroughs possibilities to explore his identity as a writer and often expressed political points of view. In *Ghost of Chance*, becoming is the reaction to corporate greed and ignorance represented by Bradley Martin and the Board; and in many

ways, the search for personal freedom and tolerance has been Burroughs' project from the start.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Bauer, Jerry. 1981. "Trip to Hell and Back". Interview. In *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960–1997*. Edited by Sylvere Lotringer. New York and Los Aangeles: Semiotext(e), pp. 505–14.

Burroughs, William S. 2010. *Queer*. Edited and Introd. by Oliver Harris. New York: Penguin. First published 1985.

Burroughs, William S. 2002. *Ghost of Chance*. London: Serpents Tail. First published 1991.

Burroughs, William S. 2009. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. New York: Grove Press.

Burroughs, William S. 2012. *Rub Out the Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1959–1974*. Edited by Bill Morgan. New York: HarperCollins.

Burroughs, William S., and Allen Ginsberg. 2006. *The Yage Letters Redux*. Edited by Oliver Harris. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Ccru (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit). 2004. Lemurian Time War. In *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Ge of Globalization*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 274–91.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. First published 1975.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: Univerity of Minnesota Press. First published 1980.

Harris, Oliver. 2003. *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP.

Hart, George. 2020. The Dark Ecology of *Naked Lunch*. *Humanities* 9: 130. [CrossRef]

Johnson, Rob. 2006. *The Lost Years of William S. Burroughs: Beats in South Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M UP.

Kafka, Franz. 1948. The Metamorphosis. In *The Penal Colony. Stories and Short Pieces*. Translated by Willa, and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 67–132.

Meyer, Adam. 1990. 'One of the Great Early Counselors': The Influence of Franz Kafka on William S Burroughs. *Comparative Literature Studies* 27: 211–29.

Murphy, Timothy S. 1997. *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Robinson, Edward S. 2011. *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost. William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

humanities

MDPI

Article

'Muzak for Frogs'—Representations of 'Nature' in *Decoder* (1984)

Eva-Maria Hanser

Independent Researcher, 1090 Vienna, Austria; hanser.eva.marie@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines the various representations of 'nature' present in *Decoder* (1984), a German experimental cyberpunk film that was inspired by William S. Burroughs' thoughts on utilising tapes as revolutionary weapons. Though *Decoder* is not a film one would easily associate with labels, such as 'green' or 'environmental', signs and images that represent or refer to 'nature' and non-human life are not omitted. Through a close reading of the film, the paper first explores the ways in which these representations convey and evoke certain meanings and associations and then elucidates the themes at play in the context of these representations.

Keywords: experimental film; cyberpunk; nature; sound; control

Citation: Hanser, Eva-Maria. 2021. 'Muzak for Frogs'—Representations of 'Nature' in *Decoder* (1984). *Humanities* 10: 67. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020067

Received: 7 February 2021
Accepted: 7 April 2021
Published: 9 April 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

In this article,[1] I will focus on the various representations of 'nature' that are present in *Decoder* (Muscha 1984), a German experimental cyberpunk film directed by Muscha and written by Klaus Maeck. The film was inspired by William S. Burroughs' thoughts on utilising tapes as revolutionary weapons, which he elaborated in *The Electronic Revolution*, *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* and *The Job*.[2]

Though relatively unknown, *Decoder* has attained cult status, especially among fans of industrial and noise music, not least because of its infamous cast members FM Einheit (a former member of *Einstürzende Neubauten*), Christiane Felscherinow (known to the wider public for her autobiography *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.*), Genesis P-Orridge (a founding member of *Throbbing Gristle* and *Psychic TV*) and William S. Burroughs, who has a cameo. The only experienced lead actor was artist and writer Bill Rice (best known for his appearance in Jim Jarmusch's (2003) *Coffee and Cigarettes*). Rice plays agent Jaeger (German for hunter), who has developed a deep fascination for the stripper Christiana[3] and is commissioned by the Muzak Corporation to eliminate FM Einheit because FM, who happens to be Christiana's boyfriend, has initiated large-scale riots by creating and disseminating anti-Muzak tapes (cut-ups). Whereas Christiana is obsessed with frogs and fantasises about training them to be killer-frogs, FM is obsessed with tapes. When he realises that the background music (Muzak) played in the burger joint H-Burger is an instrument for controlling people, he becomes obsessed with the idea of creating a sonic remedy (anti-Muzak), which involves the killing of one of Christiana's frogs and the

[1] The title, 'Muzak for Frogs', refers to the first track of the *Decoder* soundtrack (Ball et al. 1985).

[2] In an interview with Jack Sargeant in *Naked Lens*, Klaus Maeck mentions these three texts explicitly, stating that they were 'his favourite books' at that time (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 201). *The Job*, first published in 1969 in French as *Entretiens avec William Burroughs*, contains interviews conducted by Daniel Odier, which are interrupted by essayistic sections (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989). The essay collection *The Electronic Revolution*, first published in Germany in 1970, is inserted in later editions of *The Job*. An excerpt of *The Revised Boy Scout Manual*, originally recorded in 1970 on three tapes and including sections presented in *The Electronic Revolution*, was published in *RE/Search* by V. Vale (1982); this seems to be the source Maeck refers to. The whole content of the tapes, later edited by Geoffrey D. Smith and John M. Bennett (Burroughs [1970] 2018), was not published until 2018.

[3] With the exception of the credits, the name of this character is not mentioned in the film. In the script, her name was initially 'Christiane' but was then changed to 'Christiana'. In the synopsis printed in the *Decoder Handbuch*, both versions of the name are present (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. I, pp. 53–58).

recording of its death cries. FM gets advice from an old man (Burroughs) and a high priest (Genesis P-Orridge), the latter of whom, along with a small army of 'pirates' (punks), helps FM cause chaos and spread the tapes.

Although the frogs are one of the key motifs of the film, the literature on *Decoder* focuses, with a few exceptions (Sargeant [1997] 2008; Reddell 2018), almost exclusively on Muzak, the issue of control, FM's tape experiments, references to Burroughs' cut-up theory and the subcultural background of the film (Goodman 2010; Becker 2019; Nitsche 2020; Torner 2020). One reason for this may be the film's complexity and the difficulty of managing the abundance of motifs and references within it, given that *Decoder* follows a nonlinear narrative that is disrupted by surreal and sometimes comical scenes and additionally makes excessive use of inserts and screens to display material from various sources (e.g., *Metropolis*, the marriage of Diana and Charles and the assassination of J. F. Kennedy). As a result, even after several viewings, one is left with confusion and a plethora of open questions.[4] It is possible that Christiana and her frogs have been largely disregarded in the literature because her activities, like FM's attempts to create and spread a 'sound virus', fall prey to this confusion.

The motif of the frogs and the idea of the virus are not the only references to 'nature'. In addition to a surreal scene filmed at a landfill, elements related to the environment and the non-human are occasionally interspersed in the film's imagery. Despite the presence of these references, however, *Decoder* cannot easily be associated with labels such as 'green' or 'environmental', as the film's main emphasis is not on such issues but on drawing attention to the intersection of media/music and control. Other themes, such as drug addiction and sex work, are also touched upon. As hinted above, *Decoder* is deeply embedded in the so-called 'Industrial Culture', a polarising movement that used music and art to explore 'the grim side of post-Industrial Revolution society' (Monte Cazazza, cited from Vale 1983, p. 2). By its very nature, 'Industrial Culture' largely eludes definitions and genre conventions. However, it can be characterised by a certain set of ideas that, according to Jon Savage, includes 'organizational autonomy', 'access to information', 'use of synthesizers and anti-music', 'extra-musical elements' and 'shock tactics' (Vale 1983, pp. 4–5). These ideas were also crucial for *Decoder*, which together with the *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984) can, in this context, be understood as an extra-musical element that provides information about music as an instrument of control (Muzak) and about revolutionary counter-tactics, such as the use of tape recorders, cut-ups, scrambling, infrasound and noise, culminating in 'anti-music'. The 'anti-music' promoted in *Decoder* attempts not only to disrupt expectations, listening habits and associational lines, as well as to distort and play back the post-industrial soundscape, but also seeks to explore the manifold effects of sound on the body, psyche and mind in order to 'decondition social constraints in thinking and bodily behaviour'[5] (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, pp. 3–8). Jon Savage has pointed out the significance of organisational autonomy for these efforts; thus the requirement for artists in the movement 'to record for their own, or 'independent' labels was partly enforced, but mainly voluntary' (Vale 1983, p. 4). On the one hand, major labels were hardly interested in these sound experiments; on the other hand, 'Industrial Culture', which was concerned with the issue of control and driven by the intention to disseminate information, was attached to DIY ethics. *Decoder* received a total of 400,000 DM in funding from German state and city institutions (Sargeant [1997] 2008, pp. 202–3) and was produced by a team consisting mainly of non-professionals. Although the budget was ample in comparison to the New York para-punk films on which *Decoder* was stylistically based (ibid., p. 200), it was still limited, especially when compared to other filmic models, such as *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) or *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), which each were given their own specially designed futuristic cityscape (Weik von Mossner 2017, p. 417). This

[4] This impression is also supported by a statement from Klaus Maeck: 'Well, in the end our story became so confused that nobody could really understand what was going on—unless he studied the film carefully' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202).

[5] Translated from German: '[. . .] soziale Zwänge im Denken und Körperverhalten zu dekonditionieren' (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 5).

junction of limited means and 'ingenious dilletantism' (sic)[6] resulted in surprisingly fresh cinematic approaches but also in (unintended) shortcomings, most notably with regard to the filmic language, which occasionally impedes the comprehension of the basic plot, and the mise-en-scène, as the production—the film was shot within four weeks—was largely dependent on its environment and the conditions that were present. Because of this, the city, especially in some scenes filmed in the morning or during the day, sometimes appears more charming than grim. In addition, weather could not be used deliberately to set the mood of a scene. Instead, the film works with light filters in various colours, and each character is assigned a specific colouring.

In this paper, instead of focusing entirely on Muzak, I rather attempt to shed light on the representations of 'nature' in *Decoder*, which previous studies on this film have only touched cursorily, if at all, and thereby contribute to the field of ecocinema studies. A majority of the works in this field address professional, non-experimental films that portray 'nature'. These might include wildlife documentaries or films featuring animals (such as Disney films), further films in which themes of wilderness, landscape, the pastoral, animality or anthropomorphism are present. Films in which ecological issues or disasters are centred in the narrative or in which the concept of human/humanity is challenged (as in horror, science fiction, cyberpunk, etc.) are also commonly studied (Ingram 2000; Brereton 2005; Cubitt 2005; Ivakhiv 2008; Rust et al. 2013; Weik von Mossner 2017). Of particular relevance are Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann's *Ecocinema and the City* (Murray and Heumann 2018), which transgresses the divide of city and 'nature', Scott MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine* (MacDonald 2001), which deals explicitly with independent, avantgarde and experimental films and also includes chapters on the city, and, in particular, Adrian J. Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (Ivakhiv 2013), which not only draws from a rich and wide-ranging cinematic pool but also examines how cinema has shaped our relation to and perception of the material world. Yet, when speaking of examining the various representations of 'nature' in *Decoder*, I do not simply mean to focus on how the non-human is portrayed. Rather, *Decoder* gives an opportunity to draw attention to signs and images that refer to the non-human, but elude cinematographic conventions shaping the perception of 'nature'. In a first approach, I will address the absence of pastoral imagery and show that *Decoder* instead gives room to both the non-human within the human sphere and the exposure of human bodies to invisible non-human matters, including microbes, viruses, toxins and sound waves. Then, step by step, I will elaborate on the motifs of the landfill, the frogs and the sound virus. While the landfill and the frogs are motifs that are presented as rather open to association, beyond the fact that they address the themes of pollution/toxicity and animality, the idea of the sound virus does not easily arise, but requires additional material provided, for instance, by the *Decoder Handbuch*[7], including sections of Burroughs' 'Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden'. Despite the ambiguity that surrounds the landfill and the frogs, by approaching these motifs with Burroughs it becomes apparent that, together with the sound virus, they point to guerrilla tactics as elaborated in *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* that involve the weaponizing of chemicals, animals, viruses and sound. However, though these motifs can be associated with the issue of control in varying ways, they cannot simply be reduced to that, as they also shed light on the existence within the post-industrial landscape.

[6] *Die große Untergangs-Show—Festival Genialer Dilletanten* was the name of an event that took place in Berlin in 1981 and showcased bands such as *Einstürzende Neubauten*, *Die Tödliche Doris* and *Sentimentale Jugend*. The misspelling of 'Dilettanten', which was originally an unintended typo, was affirmed rather than corrected. The notion of 'Geniale Dilletanten' then became synonymous with the subcultural No Wave scene in which *Decoder* was also embedded (Müller 1982; Nitsche 2020).

[7] The *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984), which is unfortunately only available in German, contributes greatly to the comprehension of the storyline and the film's aims. The handbook provides an extensive collection of the texts that served as the main impulses for the script—which is also included—and is divided into six sections, five of which are assigned to the key motifs of the film. These are Muzak, cut-ups, pirates, frogs and burgers.

2. ' . . . It Is Free of Preservatives and Additives and Is Grilled without Fat . . . '

In *Decoder*, each sign or image that represents or refers to non-human life is either embedded in a human environment, a product of (artificial) imitation or overshadowed by human activity.

In addition to the frogs living and hopping in Christiana's flat, there are indoor plants in her apartment and at H-Burger that give both spaces particular but slightly different qualities. While the plants at H-Burger are intended to create a family- and consumer-friendly atmosphere, Christiana's plants can be read as an attempt to replicate the natural habitat of her frogs and to create a safe space, or sanctuary, that allows her to retreat from the outside world and the urbanised landscape. Other imitations of 'nature' or non-human life include drawings of frogs in books, the coin-operated horses at H-Burger and a neon sign near the strip club where Christiana works. The sign depicts an elephant with a decorative blanket on its back and might belong to the club whose name, 'Safari', is similarly illuminated. But the frogs are not only pets for Christiana to cuddle. Looking closely, one can also find glasses filled with dead frogs preserved in alcohol in Christiana's flat and FM's fridge. Furthermore, a recording of the death cries of a frog that FM squeezed in anger after Christiana brought it to his flat is the final and crucial ingredient in the anti-Muzak tape that makes people flee and vomit. These are not the only moments in which non-human life is overshadowed by human activities; there are at least three others that render humanity's destructive impact visible. In a surreal scene that takes place in an arcade, footage of video games and war scenes has been spliced together in rapid succession.[8] These inserts, which are partly displayed on screens, contain imagery of a two-dimensional landscape with a gun pointed at the sky, triggering an explosion in space, a tank camouflaged by plant material rolling down an overgrown landscape, a bazooka camouflaged by plant material, a soldier spying in a cornfield and more tanks moving quickly through a green landscape (00:13:30–00:14:52). Additional footage of war scenes is later displayed on a TV screen at the beverage shop where Christiana and FM buy beer. Among other things, a downed aircraft is shown crashing and exploding over a cornfield (00:21:24–00:22:21). In another surreal scene, a dream scene, Christiana follows an old man across a toxic and seemingly endless landfill. Flying birds are seen behind a mesh fence hung with plastic bags and other rubbish (00:27:02–00:29:41). In addition, FM's flat has a view of the city's harbour; its shipyards and cranes can be seen reaching into the sky from his window.

In contrast to filmic models, such as *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), an 'ecocide' (Brereton 2005, p. 211) or a similar apocalyptic event has not yet occurred—animals of flesh and blood do still exist and are affordable. However, the emphasis is on 'not yet', as the imagery points to the high probability that such an event could happen in a somewhat near but still distant future. Moreover, the dream of the toxic landfill is an indicator of an unconscious haunted by eco-fears, fears that are probably being suppressed in daily life. In this sense, the world of *Decoder* is not so much a dystopia as a representation of 'the grim side of post-Industrial Revolution society' (Monte Cazazza, cited from Vale 1983, p. 2), which is also one of the main reasons why imagery related to the 'beauty' of 'nature', such as the pastoral, is avoided.[9] In the post-industrial world, fleeing the city and the noise of industry (indicated by the shipyards) and retreating to the countryside is not an option for many people for a variety of reasons.[10] Instead, there are other substitutes that allow people to

[8] The scene is a reference to the 'The Penny Arcade Peep Show' sections in *The Wild Boys* (Burroughs [1969] 2008) and to *The Electronic Revolution*, which ends with the words, 'END OF THE WAR GAME' (Burroughs [1970] 2001, p. 58).

[9] When pastoral or a similar type of imagery appears in the context of the 'Industrial Culture', it can be assumed that there is probably something grim hidden in it, even if this is not immediately apparent. For instance, the record cover of *20 Jazz Funk Greats* shows the bandmembers of *Throbbing Gristle* standing in a meadow filled with flowers. On closer inspection, it can be seen that they are next to the slope of a cliff and that a car is behind them. The photo was taken at Beachy Head (England), which, according to Peter Christopherson, is 'a traditional suicide point, because it's a very tall cliff' (cited from Daniel 2012, p. 20).

[10] *Decoder* was filmed in 1982, when Berlin was divided. Although people from West Berlin could travel through East Germany to West Germany by car, they were not allowed to leave the transit route. Thus, leaving the city spontaneously for a trip to the countryside was not that easy.

cope with a certain lack regarding the organic, such as the coin-operated horses and the Safari club—elements that revolve around fetish, fantasy and pleasure. Christiana's frogs represent another approach: keeping pets and creating a garden-like atmosphere within one's flat is a rather common approach to finding solitude and rest within the urban sphere. However, as I will later discuss in more detail, there is, according to *Decoder*, another reason that people seem to be happy despite the circumstances that accompany modern existence: Muzak and its soothing effects. Within the diegetic world, a fundamental question is whether only Muzak can fulfil this function or whether Muzak is meant to represent media more broadly. With the exception of the marriage of Diana and Charles, all of the material displayed on screens is related to death, destruction and war. Is this content aimed at us, in order to demonstrate the grim side of modernity, or is this grim message intended for the viewers within *Decoder*, in order to provoke us to ask why despite this imagery no attempts for change are made? This question arises due to the absence of pastoral or other similar imagery, which might be regarded as having a soothing effect, much like Muzak or the marriage of Diana and Charles.

It is because of this absence that, at first glance, one might have the impression that 'nature' does not exist within this diegetic world. What we do and do not perceive as 'nature' is to a certain degree shaped by media. As Ivakhiv (2013) points out, '[a]s a categorical stand-in for the non-human and non-artifactual world around us, nature, in Western history, has taken many forms', ranging from 'a divinely ordained system of norms and rules, rights, and obligations' to 'a locus for the residence of spirits' (p. 77). Over the course of industrialisation, through which the divide between the urban and rural spheres intensified, '[n]ature became what was "out there" in the country, and certain types of landscape came to represent pastoral, romantic, and classic ideals' (p. 81). Paintings and photographs of these idealised places 'out there' were brought into the city. Viewing them, the masses learned 'how to see nature' and then travelled to these places by train (p. 83).

Yet 'nature' is not only 'out there' or in-between, 'nature' is also within and invisible to the naked eye. Microbes and viruses, which inhabit the human body and sphere, are also present in *Decoder*, but they escape the eye and are only revealed in a roundabout way. A first hint is given in a scene that depicts the way that the employees of H-Burger are drilled. While they do synchronised exercise sequences in sportswear to a strangely funny chant, the manager instructs them on hygiene and appearance:

- People with bad teeth, with herpes, with skin diseases, eczemas or tattoos are naturally not employed to have direct contact with customers but where . . . ?
- In the kitchen.
- Exactly. Remember that.
- What should our appearance be at work?
- Clean-shaven, with clean fingernails and teeth and fresh breath. I use a deodorant against smell. At work, I wear black trousers, black shoes and have neat, washed hair.
- Like this one. Once again. The appearance of our waiters and waitresses is of utmost importance to our customers. And that brings me to the crucial question: What makes the H-Burger better than all rissoles, meatballs and all the rubbish of our rivals?
- The H-Burger is, of course, manufactured from 100% pure German beef . . . it is free of preservatives and additives and is grilled without fat.
- And anybody can look into our pots. We have nothing to hide. Therefore, it is essential not only to keep your clothes in order but also to always make sure that all kitchen utensils are in perfect condition. And smile! Smile! After all, we're selling happiness (00:24:30–00:27:02).

Microbes and viruses are seen as a constant threat to consumerist and capitalist society—represented in *Decoder* by H-Burger. Food poisoning, for instance, would have a business-damaging effect. Control at the microbiological and viral level thus involves control over the human body and its practices. Conversely, in *Decoder*, resistance against the system involves an embrace of the microbial and viral realm. The appearance of the pirates who assist FM inverts the bodily ideal that H-Burger seeks to enforce. With unwashed and

uncombed hair and showing their bad teeth with relish and pride, the pirates vandalise the burger place. Later, they disseminate anti-Muzak tapes in various burger joints, causing mass hospitalisation that is initially associated with food poisoning. However, it is not actually a virus that makes people sick but sound waves, which are as invisible as viruses and which affect the human body. *Decoder* thus draws attention not only to visible 'nature' but also to a wide variety of invisible matter ranging from microbes, viruses and sound waves to chemicals, which the human body is not only exposed to but, as Stacy Alaimo (2010) notes, 'is always intermeshed with' (p. 2).

In this sense, one could say that *Decoder* brings into play two different conceptions of the relation between human and 'nature'. On the one hand, there is an anthropogenic view informed by industrialism, in which humans are separate and seemingly independent from 'nature', while 'nature' is overshadowed by human activity and is more or less only conveyed via various media (which can include the dream, the window and also the glasses with the frogs, the coin-operated horses and the illuminated signs). On the other hand, the film presents a view that can be described by Alaimo's notion of 'trans-corporality', a perspective that emphasises the 'interconnections, interchanges and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures' (ibid.) and shows the inseparability of humans from the environment, which 'runs right through us in endless waves, and if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal microscopic time-lapse video, we would see water, air, food, microbes, toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out' (Harold Fromm, cited from Alaimo 2010, p. 11).

3. 'So, I Have Decided that Junk Is Not Green but Blue'

There are two scenes, both of which are FM's dreams, in which an old man (Burroughs) appears. Whereas FM encounters the old man in an electrical appliance store in the second of those scenes, the first scene only involves Christiana but not FM.

It opens with a full shot of frogs crawling on something glittery and uneven, accompanied by Christiana's moony voice reciting the words of the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

> Eye of newt/and toe of frog/Wool of bat, and tongue of dog/Adder's fork and blind worm's sting/Lizard's leg and howlet's wing/For a charm of powerful trouble/Like a hell-broth boil and bubble./Liver of blaspheming jew/Gall of goat, and slips of yew/Silver'd in the moon's eclipse/Nose of turk, and Tartar's lips/Finger of birth-strangled babe/Ditch-delivered by a drab/Make the gruel thick and slab . . . (cited from Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 54)[11]

The camera zooms out to reveal Christiana, who is bathed in green light and wrapped in a silver rescue blanket, sitting on a slope surrounded by trash bags. As the camera zooms out further, the outline of an old man in a hat and trench coat walking with a cane can be seen at the top of the hill. Christiana straightens up and watches him walk by. The next shot shows the man—only his body but not his head is captured—stopping in front of a mesh fence, behind which is the gloomy grey-violet sky. Birds are flying behind the fence, and the sound of crows can be heard. Burroughs' voice from *Nothing Here Now but the Recordings* (Burroughs 1981) is played in the background: 'Word falling—Photo falling—Breakthrough in Greyroom—He has gone away through invisible mornings, leaving a million tape recordings of his voice behind, fading into the cold spring air, pose a colourless question . . . ' (Burroughs 1981, B4 'Word Falling—Photo Falling'). As the recording continues, he moves on and walks along a brownfield covered with rubbish. The imagery is now filtered through red light. Christiana runs after him—which is depicted by her fast-moving feet in shimmering green stilettos on dark ground—and catches up. While they slowly disappear into the distance together, the last part of the track is played:

[11] These lines are actually 'cut-up' from the famous scene that opens the fourth act of *Macbeth*, more precisely from passages of the second and third witch (Shakespeare [1606] 2009, pp. 100–1). One can only speculate why exactly these (notably the antisemitic and racist phrases) and no other lines (for instance from the passage of the first witch who adds poison obtained from a toad to the brew) were included.

'Junk turns you on vegetable—It's green, see? — A green fix should last a long time—An unworthy vessel obviously—So, I have decided that junk is not green, but blue' (ibid.). With the word 'junk', the image starts to flare blue again and again, an interference sets in and the camera zooms out to reveal a screen and then FM sleeping in his studio (00:27:02–00:29:41).

Despite the scene's mysteriousness, it is apparent that it engages with the theme of toxicity. This issue is introduced in the first shot, in which the frogs are associated with poison in the recited lines from Shakespeare, which describe the preparation of a charmed brew. The next indicator is the green filter that is used when Christiana is shown amid the rubbish, thereby adding a toxic quality to the subject of pollution. Finally, the recording highlights the issues of drug intoxication and addiction (junk) as the central, albeit not sole, concern of this scene.

Sargeant calls the depicted environment a 'post-apocalyptic landscape' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 198)—an impression that may be due to the use of the green and red light filters, the grey-violet sky, the crows as messengers of doom, the deserted landscape littered with rubbish where nothing seems to grow and possibly the silver rescue blanket Christiana is wrapped in, evoking the association of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. However, the scene was actually not shot after an apocalypse but at a moment when an 'apocalyptic' event was in the process of unfolding. It was filmed in 1982 at the Georgswerder landfill in Hamburg, where highly toxic industrial waste was dumped and which was closed in 1979. One year after the filming, in 1983, it was discovered that dioxin was seeping into the groundwater. Thereupon, newspapers called the landfill 'the most dangerous hill of the world', and the evacuation of an entire district was considered (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 58; NDR 2014). Although they did not know the extent of the pollution at the time of filming, the scene was already shot from a perspective shaped by what Cynthia Deitering (1996) calls 'toxic consciousness'. According to Deitering, a shift can be detected in the fiction of the 1980s in which waste and pollution become dominant reference points in the perception of modern culture. The landfill thus reveals 'the underside of consumer capitalism' (p. 197), which is omitted from the public image that H-Burger seeks to project (as in the staff-training scene) and is in contrast to H-Burger's values of service, cleanliness and quality ('The H-Burger is, of course, manufactured from 100% pure German beef . . . it is free of preservatives and additives and is grilled without fat'). In this sense, the camera zooming out can be understood as showing the bigger picture: it draws attention to the enormous amount of waste being produced by major companies and equates H-Burger's products with junk[12] (junk food), thereby implying health-damaging effects and addictive properties.

At the time the film was shot, only a few people, including her flat-mate Klaus Maeck, knew that Christiane Felscherinow was Christiane F. (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202). It is possible that the inclusion of the theme of drug addiction was at least partially motivated by her.[13] When seeing the film today with this knowledge, what comes to mind are the parallels between Christiane Felscherinow and William S. Burroughs (the old man). Both were survivors of heroin addiction, and both achieved their first public recognition—while initially remaining anonymous—in books giving first-hand insights into the vicious circle of addiction (F[elscherinow] 1979; Burroughs [1953] 2003). From that point of view, the scene seems to silently hint that Burroughs is a precursor of Christiana/Christiane Felscherinow, that Christiana/Christiane Felscherinow, who by the recitation of Shakespeare's lines is identified with witchcraft and magic, possesses supernatural/superhuman power(s) not least in regard to her survival and the constant fight against addiction and that both are leaving toxic grounds behind when disappearing together into the distance.

[12] Klaus Maeck stated that the H in H-Burger 'stood for heroin' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202).

[13] '[. . .] also Christiane lived in our 'Wohngemeinschaft' (commune), and so we created this split character after her real life. She was already famous for her book, but tried to hide herself from hungry media. And she tried to change her life, to find new things to do' (Maldonado and Maeck 2020).

Burroughs did not actually play the old man in this scene.[14] His absence is indicated by the title of the LP from which the recording was taken—*Nothing Here Now but the Recordings*—and by the first part of the track, notably the words 'leaving a million tape recordings of his voice behind'. The track was a cut-up from the chapter 'Shift Coordinate Points' in *Nova Express* (Burroughs [1964] 2014, pp. 29–33), a novel in which addiction is exposed from the beginning as a means to control people ('Prisoners, Come Out', pp. 3–6). Taking this, the reference to H-Burger's junk food and the landfill into account, the scene establishes a connection between the issue of addiction and modern capitalist society, implying that it is society that creates addiction, leading to individual suffering and far-reaching, long-term consequences, such as damage to health and psyche, legal persecution and exposure to violence and (sexual) exploitation.

What is particularly interesting in this scene is how 'nature' and toxicity are brought into relation with each other, first in the juxtaposition of the Shakespearian lines and the frogs and then in the enigmatic lines about junk, both of which echo each other. In the above-mentioned chapter 'Shift Coordinate Points', 'Doc picks up a piece of grass [. . .] and starts cooking up this green junk' (ibid., p. 32). Grass could indeed only mean grass but could also include plants that are known and used specifically for intoxicating effects, such as cannabis, coca or papaver somniferum, to name a few. However, the juxtaposition of the words 'vegetable', 'green' and 'junk', shifts the connotation of 'green', which is commonly associated with 'nature', to toxicity, which is also commonly indicated by the colour green. Frogs are also green, and some species, such as the giant monkey frog or the Colorado River toad, produce a secretion that is used for its intoxicating effect. Although both the grass and the frogs highlight the natural occurrence of toxins, in both instances it is humans who process these toxins for specific uses and subsequently expose themselves, others and the environment to toxic substances, with both intended and unintended effects. The conclusion 'that junk is not green, but blue' could in this context denote that green matter has become something else through human processing in the age of (post-)industrialism—it has become 'junk' in its manifold manifestations.

4. 'Did I Tell You about My New Death Frogs?'

Chad Weidner has pointed out the challenges of undertaking ecocritical readings of experimental texts, namely the 'lack of coherent narratives and recognizably relevant content' (Weidner 2016, p. 22). It is similarly difficult to make one's way through experimental films, where one is at constant risk of either over-interpreting or overlooking content.

For instance, one could spend days reflecting on the enigmatic lines about junk from the recording in the scene above and find various possible interpretations because it is a cut-up and thereby ambiguous and open to association. However, I think the crux is that something was needed to scenically establish a connection between the landfill and heroin, and this is performed by the recording (notably by the juxtaposition of the words 'junk' and 'fix'), which in turn informs the mise–en–scène (as in the words, 'He has gone away through invisible mornings' and the green and blue light filters, the latter highlighting the word 'junk'). Thus, at some point, the search for hidden meanings becomes rather questionable and probably leads to becoming bogged down in an excess of possible meanings while yielding little insight. The idea that each element and motif in the film does not have a secret meaning to be decoded by the viewer is supported by a statement Klaus Maeck made when asked in an interview about the concept of the death frogs:

> Well, I realized years later, when I watched Alejandro Jodorowsky's Montana Sacra [=*La Montaña sagrada/The Holy Mountain*] (1973) again, that the bloody battle of the frogs must have impressed me a lot. I remember seeing this film many times in the 70′s. And then, working on the script I studied various frog rituals

[14] Burroughs had agreed to participate in the film on the condition that it would not take too much time. The scene with him in the electrical appliance store was shot in London within one hour and was rather difficult as Burroughs had trouble memorising his lines (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 203). Against this background, it is unlikely that Burroughs would have come to Hamburg to shoot the scene at the landfill.

> in different religions and traditions. I didn't take it too serious though, just liked the slightly surrealistic flip for the movie. I liked the idea of being obsessed by frogs. Which resulted in a private frog collection, since all my friends thought I am obsessed with frogs and gave me frogs in all formats and sizes as presents. Still have some (Maldonado and Maeck 2020).

The possible symbolic meaning of the frogs is thus less relevant than the contexts in which they are put. They are first introduced in a scene in which Christiana and FM, both wearing blindfolds, are talking to each other on the phone. When the camera moves back, it is revealed that they are actually both in the same room. In the dialogue that unfolds, it becomes apparent that both of them are preoccupied with their particular obsessions and are annoyed by the obsession of the other:

- Whenever I played my new tape, someone stopped.
- You're crazy. I'm not interested in hearing your tape fantasies.
- Well, you're not listening properly.
- That's right. Did I tell you about my new death frogs? I could train them to be assassin frogs.
- So they can bite off men's cocks?
- Why not? But castration doesn't solve the problem. Did you know that Lady Di gave birth to a frog? (FM yawns) I read that they're a symbol of fertility or amniotic fluid. For the Mayans they symbolized the vagina: mucho.
- Mums against muchos. I think the big M of McDonalds looks like a mother's tits. Big, fat and round [. . .] (0:22:22–0:23:18)

As the dialogue progresses, they also talk about Christiana's work as a stripper, and it is hinted that FM is troubled by it. He then tries to get close to her in an intimate way, but she rejects him and brings up the subject of her work herself, specifically the gazes she is exposed to, which 'burn'. She has the impression that one man in particular (agent Jaeger), who 'had eyes like a laser', 'wanted to slit [her] open' with his gaze, but somehow she 'made it' and thereby compares herself to an 'energy force' (0:22:22–00:24:29). Although, in this case, FM seems not to take her entirely seriously, she indeed had defeated Jaeger by gazing back, which dazzled him until he could not leave his eyes open any longer (00:18:16–00:19:21).

I suspect it was the intention of *Decoder* to render both Christiana and FM as characters fighting against control, each with different weapons in different fields (visual/peepshow and sonic/H-Burger) that come with different implications. However, in the case of Christiana, the film does not fully succeed in this aspiration. One of its merits is the ambiguity inherent in the main characters, whose relation to each other, as Sargeant point outs, is marked by polarities that 'do not remain static but are repeatedly re-negotiated' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 199). Though FM is the protagonist of the film and is 'initially identified with sound' and 'further [. . .] with science and technology' (ibid.), in the encounter with Christiana, his heroism is cracked and challenged. She does not question the fact that music is used to control people, but she is annoyed by his approach and the weight he attaches to this matter:

- Oh, once again, the great hero feels misunderstood.
- Look, with this [=tape with Muzak] they have everything under control.
- Ah yes . . . they have all in hand.
- You know what that means?
- Of course.
- Don't you care?
- Don't you notice that this is an old story? This kind of music has been used for a long time already. Even the Gestapo used music to make people shit to death. Do you want to be on the front page? 'Scandal at H-Burger. Street boy reveals mystery of power of music.' It makes me sick . . . 'They have everything under control'.
- But it's true!

- It's true, it's true! You know what? You have no idea! [. . .] You have no idea about music!
- No idea about music?
- Sure, you do have some idea. But you don't go about it properly. I'll buzz off. (00:56:23–00:57:23)

Just as FM is not a shining hero, Jaeger, who is identified with both sound and vision, is not a classic villain. He does not like his job or Muzak, but instead hints at his sympathy for FM. His obsession with Christiana seems to oscillate somewhere between voyeurism and affection, but it is not reciprocated by Christiana, for whom he is nothing but another representative of an obscene society she feels the urge to withdraw from. Christiana, on the other hand, is initially 'identified with sight' and further 'with the magical and organic' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 199). Moreover, she is perfectly aware of technologies and techniques for imposing control but is not convinced that Muzak controls everything. However, in contrast with FM and Jaeger, it is more difficult to define her activities, which is my major point of criticism for the film. Although she is laid out as a fairly independent character, in the end, she does not seem to complete her goals but instead worries about FM, whom she can't reach and who is chased by Jaeger. In this context, her identification with the organic is somewhat problematic, as *Decoder* thereby risks reiterating gender-related dichotomies. The frogs, as the centre of Christiana's obsession, serve among other things to highlight her discomfort with male (sexual) desire, which is in no small part a reaction to her labour as a sex worker. Sex work itself is not rendered pejoratively in the film; rather, the film critiques the society and circumstances it is embedded in. The character of Christiana is in this regard partly informed by the life of Christiane Felscherinow, who, due to addiction, was forced into child prostitution as a minor, and by the musician and performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti (a founding member of *Throbbing Gristle*), who caused a massive scandal by exhibiting material from her appearances in pornographic magazines at the ICA in London in 1976 (Ford 1999, chp. 6). Just as Cosey Fanni Tutti undermined the male gaze by becoming in the context of the exhibition 'both subject and object, artist and model, viewer and viewed' (pp. 6.25–6.26), Christiana defeats the male gaze by gazing back. However, her urge to withdraw also indicates the draining effect the work has on her. She thus seeks to recharge at home surrounded by her frogs, which, according to her research, are associated with aspects of femininity.

The intersection of frogs and femininity is not limited to fertility alone but also encompasses confusion, 'powerful trouble' and death, as Christiana's idea of death frogs and notably her recitation of the (bearded) Weird Sisters' lines in FM's dream suggest. There is a strange parallel between the preparation of the charmed brew—which contains 'Eye of newt/and toe of frog' and, though not cited, a venom obtained from a toad (Shakespeare [1606] 2009, p. 100)—performed by the Weird Sisters (or, respectively, by Christiana) and FM's tape experiments, in which he is imprinting his tape with 'trouble-causing' information, including, as the final ingredient, the death cries of the frog. However, it remains unclear whether the dream gave him the idea of squeezing the frog to death or whether his act was due to rage arising from not making progress, arguing with Christiana and feeling jealous of the frogs (which is indicated in a remark in the script in Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 55). Furthermore, it is impossible to say to what extent Christiana consciously contributed to the creation of this tape. Did she send him the dream with her magical abilities, and was it her actual intention to bring him the frog, which then freed itself from the bag? Or did everything just happen by coincidence, which, according to Burroughs does not exist?

Although Christiana does not provide further detail about the death frogs besides mentioning that she might train them to be assassin frogs, there are some possible reverberations from this image. Maeck refers to the battle of the frogs in *La Montaña sagrada* (Jodorowsky 1973), a deeply polarising scene that has (for good reason) been repeatedly criticised for harming animals (e.g., Klein 1974) and that depicts the conquest of Mexico as a street performance using chameleons dressed as Aztecs and toads as Conquistadores

(00:08:26–00:12:23). What is interesting about this scene is that it indirectly draws attention to the introduction of non-native animals in the course of colonialism, which affected local ecological systems.[15] At the same time, importing non-native animals is one of the guerrilla tactics suggested by Burroughs in *The Revised Boy Scout Manual*. Whereas, in the 2018 edition, his suggestions about importing animals, spreading viruses and using infrasound (in addition to 'Deadly Orgone Radiation') are all subordinated under the heading 'Chemical and biological weapons' (Burroughs [1970] 2018, pp. 8–11), in the excerpt published in 1982 in *RE/Search*, each of these points is assigned a separate heading—'Chemical and biological weapons', 'Biologic Warfare Proper' and 'Infrasound' (Vale 1982, pp. 6–7). When looking at these two pages of the excerpt, in which the text is arranged in three columns and the headings stand out in their juxtaposition, one realises the extent of the influence this text had on *Decoder*, as the headings echo the film's (underlying) programme in almost exact order. Burroughs does not mention frogs but does refer to a variety of other animals (and plants), including invasive species such as the walleyed pike and the black bass, endangered animals such as lemurs and flying foxes and animals that are considered potentially dangerous for humans such as bushmasters, leopards and tigers, as well as freshwater sharks, piranhas, desert cobras, rattlers, Gila monsters, tiger snakes and wolverines. The idea of using animals in the context of guerrilla tactics/warfare is not as absurd as it seems and not just something Burroughs spontaneously came up with, as the article *Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee* by Jake Kosek (2010) shows. There is a long tradition of using bees for military purposes, dating back to 'antiquity, when hives were dropped on invading armies or launched into fortified tunnels, caves, forts, and bases' (p. 654). Bees were further deployed in the torture of Viet Cong soldiers or, more recently, of 'U. S. detainee Abu Zubaydah' (p. 655), and current military research focuses on their use as ''bio-monitors' for all kinds of toxic materials' (p. 656) and landmines (p. 657). Bees and other insects have also informed military strategy and tactics, notably through models of swarming that have been applied to the use of drones (pp. 663–69). The concepts of death frogs, sound viruses and infrasound are not merely references to the inserts of war scenes displayed on screens mentioned earlier—at their core, these are tactics and techniques of control inspired by military research and innovations for which Burroughs showed a great interest.

5. 'I'm Not the Virus, but Sound Can Be One'

Although one might have the impression that the Burroughsian virus is primarily about revolutionary resistance, it is instead more deeply related to the issue of control. Viruses invade the human body, take control on a cellular level and program/condition their host in order to replicate and spread. Burroughs' analogy of a 'word virus' thus draws attention to language as an instrument of control. Words invade our bodies right from the beginning of our lives; they are in our heads, they constitute our world and our perception of reality and they are replicated and spread by us (Lydenberg 1992; Kahn 1999, chp. 11). We cannot remain silent because we are locked in, but we can attempt to change the codes by which language is structured (Burroughs [1970] 2001, pp. 53–56). This is where the cut-up comes in, which is, first of all, a tool of deconditioning (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989, pp. 160–70) that allows us to 'nullify associational lines' (Burroughs [1970] 2001, p. 21) but also a tool that has the capacity to impose associations. When Burroughs in *The Electronic Revolution* ponders creating viruses with tapes, he aims to explore the possibility of the revolutionary appropriation of control techniques enabled and utilised by mass media. In *Decoder*, it is sound that is being examined as an instrument of control and revolutionary appropriation.

[15] The classification of species as 'invasive', 'native', 'non-native' and 'alien' is not unproblematic, as, among other things, it threatens the 'right to existence' of animals. For instance, cane toads in Australia, having been introduced from South America, are on 'the government's Feral Animals control list' and are hunted by groups of 'Toad Busters', who 'catch toads in car headlights and crush them with heavy vehicles', an activity that is often 'accompanied by drinking sprees' (Robin 2017, p. 51).

At H-Burger, FM comes to realise that the background music affects his perception of the surroundings—people look grotesquely happy and contented, but when he closes his ears, suddenly they make quite the opposite impression (00:31:15–00:33:59).[16] Influenced by a dream in which the old man advises him to 'start by zero preconceptions' and hands him a dismantled tape recorder (00:37:34–00:39:31), he begins to distort and scramble a recording he had made of the music played at H-Burger. Little by little, a voice can be discerned saying something like 'Feel good!' (00:39:32–00:43:22).[17] Subsequently, FM goes for a walk searching for sound material that has the potential to evoke the opposite effect. Attracted by strange noises, he enters a vacant building where the pirates are squatting. He witnesses a ritual in which they hammer rhythmically with different items against the floor, the wall and metal plates—which scenically contrasts the H-Burger staff training. When he starts recording, a pirate attacks him and drags him away. After being exposed to a dream machine, he is brought to the high priest, who instructs his followers to value and obtain information ('to rob the bank'). The pirate who has brought FM in announces that FM was recording. The high priest then declares (in an ambiguous manner), 'We don't like infections, parasites or viruses. We don't want that kind of person in here', whereupon FM replies, 'I'm not the virus, but sound can be one. [. . .] Sound is coded and you got the keys.' FM is allowed to keep the recording (00:45:23–00:52:03). In the following scene, FM and the pirates riot at H-Burger and are pushed away by a noise tape the manager plays (which FM also seems to record). After the argument with Christiana, he squeezes the frog, records its death cries and mixes them with the distorted material recorded at H-Burger and the recorded sound performance of the pirates. The result is a noise/infrasound tape that makes him feel sick and vomit.

My suggestion is that FM's sound operation is not only informed by Burroughs' idea of using infrasound or creating a tape that could cause illness but also by the concept of 'the virus mechanism' laid out in the introductory essay 'Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden' in *The Electronic Revolution* (pp. 5–17). Simply put, a virus can be compared to a program that contains information regarding first the 'perspective host', second 'the means by which a virus gains access to the host' and third 'the effect produced in the host' (p. 10). In a subsequent section, which is also reprinted in the *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, pp. 15–16), Burroughs offers examples of the way a virus could be produced by three tape recorders, each obtaining a different strain of information. In one example, the target is a politician, in another, The Moka Bar. In the case of the politician, tape recorder 1 obtains recordings of his speeches (host), tape recorder 2 obtains recordings of his sex life (access) and tape recorder 3 captures voices expressing indignation (the effect). In the case of The Moka Bar, tape recorder 1 records the sounds at the bar (host), tape recorder 2 obtains recordings of the surrounding neighbourhood (access) and tape recorder 3 records the act of playing these sounds back (the effect). According to Burroughs, the acts of recording the target and of playing back the recordings are actually enough, and everything else is just refinement because the recording itself is access—it is a piece of the target obtained by recording that 'becomes autonomous and out of their control' (p. 16). The act of playing back, abstractly speaking, affects the target: 'By playing back my recordings to the Moka Bar when I want and with any changes I wish to make on the recordings I become God for this local. I effect them. They cannot effect me' (ibid.). In his essay 'On Coincidence', Burroughs defines magic as 'the assertion of will, the assumption that nothing happens in this universe [. . .] unless some entity wills it to happen' (Burroughs [1985] 1993, p. 101). The power attributed to the act of playing back is thus located somewhere between technology and magic. In *Decoder*, H-Burger takes the place of The Moka Bar, although FM's tape operation exceeds the simple act of recording and playing back. His recording of the music played at H-Burger could be considered tape recorder 1 and thus contains information about the host. Tape recorder 2 might hold the

[16] The scene is a direct reference to the essay 'The Invisible Generation', which is introduced with the assertion that 'what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear' (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989, pp. 160–70).

[17] The scene refers to Burroughs' thoughts on the transmission of subliminal messages by scrambling (Burroughs [1970] 2001, pp. 23–41).

recording of the sound ritual performed by the pirates and thus could be interpreted as gaining access by hammering into the host. Tape recorder 3 contains the death cries of the frog, which portray the effect he wishes to create, the effect of making people feel the opposite of 'feeling good'. The tape, which is then spread in various burger joints, inspires large-scale riots. The reasons for these demonstrations are not explained in more detail in the film, but possibly the attack on and paralysation of Muzak, which blurs the perception of reality, has led people to recognise that the social conditions under which they exist and the world they inhabit are forbidding and toxic.

The *Decoder Handbuch* offers more information, especially an essay contributed by Genesis P-Orridge about Muzak, in which the various potential uses and effects of sound waves, and notably frequency, are addressed. According to this essay (which refers to an internal paper of the *Muzak Corporation*), Muzak attempts to conceal stress and inspire maximum productivity with minimum dissatisfaction. Muzak is also used to cover up noise pollution (in heavy industry, light industry, open plan offices, banks, etc.), to disguise the isolation of some working environments (such as radar stations) and to meet the general demand for cheerful and productive workers and employees. Based on hypothesises about human biorhythms, it was broadcasted in 15 min blocks, during which the 'tempo, rhythm, instrumentation and volume' were gradually increased, followed by 15 min of silence, and was thought to stimulate metabolism, respiration, blood pressure and the nervous system. The idea of anti-Muzak, then, in a way, follows an opposite program: the noise of the industrial soundscape, instead of being concealed, is used deliberately to achieve a liberating effect. By causing an ecstatic effect without the use of drugs, anti-Muzak could decondition social constraints on thought and bodily behaviour (pp. 3–8). Though further explanations remain rather vague, sometimes contradictory and overly optimistic, the essay and also *Decoder* shed light on sound waves as a further invisible agent, in addition to toxins, microbes and viruses, that human bodies are exposed to and affected by in various ways ranging from harming to beneficial.

6. Conclusions

Decoder, which leaves much room for interpretation, is by no means a film one would easily associate with 'nature' or labels such as 'green' or 'environmental'. It deals primarily with the subject of control—humans (companies and perhaps the state) use information technology (Muzak) to control other humans in order to maintain the status quo of a capitalist society (which is based on the exploitation of human labour and natural resources). Moreover, FM's aspirations to fight 'Muzak' are not driven by noticeable environmental concerns. In addition, with some exceptions (the landfill scene and the war footage scenes), *Decoder* does not draw on imagery or rhetoric related to 'the pastoral', 'wilderness' or 'apocalypse', which are the most commonly employed tropes in environmental discourse (Garrard 2004). On the other hand, *Decoder* does not entirely omit signs and images that represent or refer to 'nature' and non-human life. The landfill highlights the fact of environmental pollution and points to the underbelly of consumer capitalism, which is rendered invisible in everyday life, as suggested in the film by Muzak's power to blur the perception of reality. FM's efforts to fight Muzak might also, therefore, include regard for the environment as well as other topics. Christiana's obsession with frogs and her attempt to replicate the natural habitat of her frogs in her flat does hint at a longing for an idyllic natural sanctuary. In addition, the coin-operated horses and the illuminated signs (the elephant and 'Safari'), although placed in a context that revolves somewhat around fantasy, pleasure and fetish, refer to a sense of lack regarding the organic. However, the representations of 'nature' employed in *Decoder* are introduced to point to the human, rather than the non-human sphere. The landfill establishes the connection between waste (junk), junk food and heroin (junk) in order to communicate the causal link between addiction and society, by whose conditions addiction is created, and to highlight the damaging effects that accompany addiction. The frogs, on the other hand, refer to a range of subjects depending on the context: remedy, magic, poison, femininity, animals as weapons, anger

and death. Thus, they occupy a blank position that is filled with different meanings and associations throughout the course of the film—similar to the concept of 'nature', which has been charged with many different and also contradictory meanings and associations throughout history. The frogs are, first of all, the object of obsession of Christiana, who herself struggles with being the object of obsession of others. Through her obsession with the frogs, she expresses her rejection of male (sexual) desire. The frogs then become the object of FM's annoyance, jealousy and anger. Later, they become a magic ingredient, which is first introduced in Christiana's recitation of the Weird Sisters' lines and then applied by FM, who squeezes the frog to death and records its death cries (Thus, 'Muzak for Frogs'—the title of the first track of the *Decoder* soundtrack—is deeply cynical). At the level of the virus or the microbes, representation works differently: one has to deduce their invisible presence through 'symptoms'. The high priest provides a crucial hint that enables FM's sound operation to be read as the creation of a sound virus and, moreover, evokes a sensitivity towards the presence of viruses and microbes, which is first brought into play by the H-Burger manager during the staff training. Although viruses in *Decoder* are associated with the idea of resistance, in the end, it is not 'nature' that resists human activity but a group of humans who resist capitalist society through the production of an (artificial) imitation of a virus for which an animal was sacrificed. On the other hand, *Decoder* contests perceptions of 'nature' that evolved in the context of industrialism, in which 'nature' has become something that is 'out there' while humans have become separate and independent. Instead, the film directs attention to non-human matters within, ranging from microbes and toxins to soundwaves, which affect the human body in various ways. Moreover, the film draws attention to the fact that many people cannot simply leave the city for recreational reasons but have to make do with what it offers; therefore, in regard of how people within the urban sphere might possibly relate to 'nature', *Decoder* is more realist than actually dystopic. The absence of pastoral imagery in this film may also be due to a certain degree of suspicion with regard to imagery that has a soothing effect, which would indicate an equation of pastoral imagery with Muzak, and thus the assumption that the comfort this imagery creates is more likely to prevent profound change. However, this possibility requires more in-depth examination, including the study of various other material related to the 'Industrial Culture'. Furthermore, it could be insightful to undertake green readings of films that were shot in West Berlin after the wall was erected (*Decoder* was shot in Hamburg, West Berlin and London), similar to *Wings of Desire* (Wenders 1987), *Taxi zum Klo* (Ripploh 1981) or *Christiane F.* (Edel 1981), and also of other experimental films that were inspired by the writings of William S. Burroughs. I am thinking, in particular, of the film *The Wild Boys* (Mandico 2017), in which the wild and exotic island on which they are stranded has a profound and altering effect on the protagonists and their bodies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ball, Dave, P.-Orrdige Genesis, Johnson Matt, Eis Ela, F. Strauss, J. Caffery, Hacke Alexander, Horn Peter, Bargeld Blixa, N. U. Unruh, and et al. 1985. *Decoder. The Soundtrack*. What's So Funny About . . . —SF 18, Vinyl.

Becker, Christophe. 2019. The Electronic Revolution Will not Be Televised. Available online: https://laspirale.org/video-616-christophe-becker-%C2%A0the-electronic-revolution-will-not-be-televised.html (accessed on 8 January 2021).

Brereton, Pat. 2005. *Hollywood Utopia. Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Burroughs, William S. 1981. *Nothing Here Now but the Recordings*. Industrial Records—IR0016, Vinyl. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSyYeSj87Bs (accessed on 20 January 2021).

Burroughs, William S. 1993. *The Adding Machine: Selected Writings*. New York: Arcade Publishing. First published 1985.

Burroughs, William S. 2001. *Electronic Revolution*. Bonn: Expanded Media Editions. First published 1970.

Burroughs, William S. 2003. *Junky: The Definitive text of 'Junk'*. Edited and with an Introduction by Oliver Harris. London: Penguin Books. First published 1953.

Burroughs, William S. 2008. *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*. London: Penguin Books. First published 1969.

Burroughs, William S. 2014. *Nova Express: The Restored Text*. Edited and with an Introduction by Oliver Harris. London: Penguin Books. First published 1964.

Burroughs, William S. 2018. *William S. Burroughs' 'The Revised Boy Scout Manual': An Electronic Revolution*. Edited and with Prefaces by Geoffrey D. Smith and John M. Bennett, with a Foreword by Antonio Bonome and an Afterword by V. Vale. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Burroughs, William S., and Daniel Odier. 1989. *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. New York: Penguin Books. First published 1969.

Cubitt, Sean. 2005. *EcoMedia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Daniel, Drew. 2012. *20 Jazz Funk Greats*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Deitering, Cynthia. 1996. The Postnatural Novel. In *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 196–203.

Edel, Uli, dir. 1981. *Christiane F.—Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo*. West Germany: Solaris Film, Maran Film, Popular Filmproduktion and CLV Filmproductions.

F[elscherinow], Christiane. 1979. *Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo*. Written Copies of Tape Transcripts by Kai Hermann und Horst Rieck, with a Foreword by Horst E. Richter. Hamburg: Stern-Verlag.

Ford, Simon. 1999. *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle*. London: Black Dog Publications.

Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.

Goodman, Steve. 2010. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Ingram, David. 2000. *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Ivakhiv, Adrian J. 2008. Green Film Criticism and Its Futures. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15: 1–28. Available online: www.jstor.org/stable/44086718 (accessed on 12 March 2021). [CrossRef]

Ivakhiv, Adrian J. 2013. *Ecologies of the Moving Image. Cinema, Affect, Nature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Jarmusch, Jim, dir. 2003. *Coffee and Cigarettes*. Chicago: United Artists.

Jodorowsky, Alejandro. 1973. *La Montaña Sagrada*. New York City: ABCO Films and Producciones Zohar.

Kahn, Douglas. 1999. *Noise, Water, Meat. A History of Sound in the Arts*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Klein, Theodore "Eibon" Donald. 1974. They Kill Animals and They Call It Art. *The New York Times*. January 13. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/1974/01/13/archives/they-kill-animals-and-they-call-it-art-more-and-more-directors-are.html (accessed on 27 March 2021).

Kosek, Jake. 2010. Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee. *Cultural Anthropology* 25: 650–78. Available online: www.jstor.org/stable/40930493 (accessed on 27 March 2021). [CrossRef]

Lang, Fritz, dir. 1927. *Metropolis*. Berlin: UFA.

Lydenberg, Robin. 1992. Sound Identity Fading Out: William Burroughs' Tape Experiments. In *Wireless Imagination. Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*. Edited by Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 409–37.

MacDonald, Scott. 2001. *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Maeck, Klaus, and Walter Hartmann. 1984. *Decoder Handbuch*. Duisburg: Trikont.

Maldonado, Anthony, and Klaus Maeck. 2020. Decoder Cyber-Krieger: Klaus Maeck. Available online: https://www.lethalamounts.com/magazine-index/2020/5/8/interview-with-decoder-creator-klaus-maeck (accessed on 20 January 2021).

Mandico, Betrand, dir. 2017. *The Wild Boys [= les garçons sauvages]*. Paris: Ecce Films.

Müller, Wolfgang. 1982. *Geniale Dilletanten*. Berlin: Merve Verlag.

Murray, Robin L., and Joseph K. Heumann. 2018. *Ecocinema and the City*. New York: Routledge.

Muscha, dir. 1984. *Decoder*. Written by Klaus Maeck. West Germany: Fett Film.

NDR. 2014. Energieberg: Der Gebändigte Drache. Available online: https://www.ndr.de/ratgeber/reise/hamburg/Energieberg-Der-gebaendigte-Drache,energieberg105.html (accessed on 20 January 2021).

Nitsche, Jessica. 2020. "Geniale Dilletanten". Zum (sub)kulturgeschichtlichen Hintergrund von 235 Media. In *Video Visionen. Die Medienkunstagentur 235 Media Als Alternative Im Kunstmarkt*. Edited by Renate Buschmann and Jessica Nitsche. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 33–46.

Reddell, Trace. 2018. *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science Fiction Film*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ripploh, Frank, dir. 1981. *Taxi zum Klo*. Munich: Exportfilm Bischoff & Co.

Robin, Libby. 2017. Domestication in a Post-Industrial World. In *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*. Edited by Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača, E. Ann Kaplan and Patrice Petro. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 46–55.

Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt. 2013. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Sargeant, Jack. 2008. *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*. Berkeley: Soft Skull Press. First published 1997.

Scott, Ridley, dir. 1982. *Blade Runner*. Hollywood: The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers and Blade Runner Partnership.

Shakespeare, William. 2009. *Macbeth*. Edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. New York: Modern Library, Originally Written c. 1606.

Torner, Evan. 2020. Germany. In *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*. Edited by Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy and Lars Schmeink. New York: Routledge, pp. 415–22.

Vale, V. 1982. *RE/Search # 4/5: William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin and Throbbing Gristle*. Edited by V. Vale. San Francisco: RE/Search Publications.

Vale, V. 1983. *RE/Search #6/7: Industrial Culture Handbook*. Edited by V. Vale. San Francisco: RE/Search Publications.

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost. William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Wenders, Wim, dir. 1987. *Wings of Desire [= Der Himmel über Berlin]*. Berlin: Road Movies Filmproduktion, Argos Films and Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. 2017. Ecocinema and Gender. In *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*. Edited by Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača, E. Ann Kaplan and Patrice Petro. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 417–26.

humanities

MDPI

Article

McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians

Antonio J. Bonome

Department of Spanish Language and Literature, University of A Coruña, 15008 A Coruña, Spain; antonio.bonome@udc.es

Abstract: Looking at different disciplines in the humanities as water-tight compartments is doing a great disservice to knowledge; a comparative angle can do much to solve the situation. History shows how literature and the visual arts have been prone to mutual contagion. This essay will briefly examine a few examples of how performance art was approached by the literary realm during the second half of the 20th century compared to how it was done within the visual arts, and more specifically, regarding non-human creatures. To achieve this purpose, a performance carried out by writer Michael McClure during the 1960s will be collated with two further actions by visual artists who were prominent during the 1970s and 1990s, respectively. The three actions involved animals or pondered on how humans relate to animals and their environment. They differently addressed issues that are still being discussed today and questioned the status quo through their approaches towards animality. A comparative methodology will be used to assess these works under the light of recent publications. Discrepancies in these artworks from the ecocritical ethics and aesthetics viewpoint show a whole different perspective to the topics discussed and provide a worthy contribution to a comparative assessment of performance art.

Keywords: animals; beat generation; ecocriticism; comparative literature; white shamanism

Citation: Bonome, Antonio J. 2021. McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians. *Humanities* 10: 74. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020074

Received: 3 March 2021
Accepted: 30 April 2021
Published: 5 May 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Cursed Hippies and Cannibal Spaniards

As he mourned a pod of orca whales slaughtered by American G.I.s stationed in Iceland, Michael McClure cried "Goya!" (McClure 1955). The invocation to the Spanish genius who painted *The Executions* in 1814 was contained in his poem *For the Death of 100 Whales*, which was read at the Six Gallery in 1955. There, McClure equated Goya's gruesome prints from *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820) or perhaps his series of paintings called "cuadros de capricho e invención"—describing atrocities he witnessed in his time, such as anthropophagy—to a contemporary massacre of non-terrestrial beings (Valtierra 2016). There was a war in Vietnam, and a war was being waged against whales in Iceland too; thus, McClure's invocation of Goya equaled the killing of wild animals with fratricide and cannibalism. The event at the Six Gallery was McClure's first poetry reading, and it is safe to say that not only did ecology and the visual arts represent two extremely early concerns in McClure's artistic output, but they also permeated the foundational event of the Beat Generation. Both interests were, again, strongly present in an action McClure carried out ten years later at the San Francisco zoo, where he read the poem *Tantra No. 49* to four caged lions (McClure 2021). In *Tantra No. 49*, the author uses the archaic forms 'thou' and 'thy' to address animals; such usage is still common today in the religious context. Choosing those pronouns to address wild animals reveals a stance of intense respect toward them, which is also apparent in the rest of the poems contained in the book. McClure's reading to lions in 1965 has rarely been considered an action of interest neither to fine arts nor to English departments, with the latter quite out of their depth when trying to analyze such artifacts. Contemporary art critics are also often unaware of analytical tools outside of their area of expertise. Even if McClure's action has been described as a "poetry stunt" by the media (Cerino 2013) and his visual artworks were overlooked by art connoisseurs of his time, he

did initiate a discussion that performance artists from subsequent decades furthered and is of interest to ecocriticism.

In *The Green Ghost: William S. Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* (2016), Chad Weidner extended to narrative Randy Malamud's criteria for studying the relationships between humans and animals in poetry as presented in the first part of Malamud's *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (2003). Such criteria, which shape an ecocritical stance toward literature, may prove useful in the realm of the visual arts and will be considered in this analysis of McClure's action in relation to two other performance artworks from subsequent decades. Randy Malamud himself is not foreign to the visual arts and critically examines, for instance, Damian Hirst's sculptures featuring dead animals in part I of his book (Malamud 2009, pp. 46–48); using his criteria to examine performance art is likewise justified and moreover, it does make sense. This essay will briefly examine a few examples of how performance art was approached by the literary realm during the second half of the 20th century in comparison to how it was done within the fine arts milieu, and more expressly, regarding non-human creatures. A hybrid methodology will be used, combining criteria hauled from linguistics (for instance, with descriptors as 'motivated' vs. 'arbitrary', or 'marked' vs. 'unmarked'), institutional critique, and aesthetics. It will also test ecocriticism as a focal theory to examine artworks displaying ecological concerns. The methodology proposed here is justified given the complexity of the other two artworks examined in this paper by Joseph Beuys and Oleg Kulik. In 1974, an action by the German artist Joseph Beuys took place in New York. Beuys' second visit to the United States was brief but well-planned: as soon as he landed at Kennedy airport, he was wrapped in a felt blanket, entered an ambulance to avoid touching American soil (presumably to protest Vietnam war), and was driven to René Block Gallery. There, he shared time with a coyote in a caged room for approximately a week. Beuys was absorbed during his performance in striking up a relationship with the animal. After allegedly being able to hug the coyote, Beuys triumphantly got back on the ambulance, still wrapped in his blanket, headed for the airport, and left the States. Joseph Beuys shares with Michael McClure an interest in spirituality and transformation, and both their performances bring attention to how humans relate to animals, which makes them worthy of study also by ecocriticism. Further reading suggested by fellow Beat scholar Ian MacFadyen turned the spotlight over Oleg Kulik's work with performance art, with several actions where becoming animal was the underlying idea. Kulik's prominence during the 1990s was owed partially to scandal; a good example of it was his performance piece *Doghouse*, which for instance disrupted the *Interpol* exhibition celebrated in Stockholm during the *Manifesta I* biennale (1996). Even if the exhibition displayed visual signs warning that should patrons trespass the artist's boundaries, they would be liable to a dangerous response on his part, the *Interpol* organizers opted for calling the police after Kulik bit a visitor during the exhibition vernissage. The real scandal was not Kulik's performance but an evident lack of communication within the *Interpol* collaborative project, mainly between curatorial teams and artists representing East and West. Should readers need further information on *Interpol*, the Russian curator Viktor Missiano wrote an excellent chronicle on the subject (Misiano 2005). A specific version of the *Doghouse* action will be examined in this paper, as it was intended to be a response to Beuys' performance from 1974. After this very concise introduction, a comparative methodology will be applied to the three artworks involved using the following formal markers: title, venue, duration and iteration, props, and discourse/intention. The last two markers proposed (i.e., discourse/intention) are recurrent descriptors in contemporary art but less common in literary studies. Whilst intention is widely used and abused in contemporary art as a descriptor, intention remains a debatable factor in literature analysis; it will be pondered precisely in connection with discourse, since both are structural elements in contemporary art that are often overlooked by literary criticism. Since non-representational writing and writing heavily tinged by conceptualism certainly call for a supplementary discourse and further explanation on the writer's part, these markers are shared both by literature and the visual arts, even if they are rarely examined comparatively. After

analyzing the three actions proposed using the markers determined hereby, an ecocritical standpoint will be tested, and a few conclusions will be offered for further study.

2. On Titles: Where Are Skin-Walkers When You Need Them?

The first issue that called my attention as someone trained in the Fine Arts is that McClure's action does not have a title. As simple an explanation as it may sound, that is probably one of the reasons it has been rarely considered a performance artwork. Titles became essential after the onset of non-representational art during the 20th century, with later developments as conceptual art and minimalism. Titles and artists' statements helped clarify the meaning of artworks or pointed toward the intention behind them. McClure's action, even if possibly unintentionally affiliated to the visual arts, does display a few elements of consequence within that province. How he chose to carry out his action at that specific site displays a sculptural awareness of sound, space, time, and his approach may certainly qualify as visionary in picking wild caged animals as an audience. Even if McClure's action lacked a title, his poem did have one: *Tantra No. 49*. The word 'Tantra' refers to a spiritual system. 'Tantra' also means 'to weave' in Sanskrit and allegedly addresses the idea that everything is connected. As for the origin of the word, Tantric Master Shri Aghorinath Ji writes: "The word tantra is derived from two words, tattva and mantra. Tattva means the science of cosmic principles, while mantra refers to the science of mystic sound and vibrations. Tantra, therefore, is the application of cosmic sciences with a view of attaining spiritual ascendancy" (Shri 2018). A brave 'beast language' is displayed in the self-published *Ghost Tantras* (1964), which is the title of the book containing *Tantra No. 49*, wherein the poet's tongue acknowledges divinity within animality. If read aloud, the poem's guttural sounds do impact the reader on a physical level; McClure's 'beast language' owes so much to Chaucer as it does to avant-garde sound poetry:

> Grahhr! Grahhhr! Ghrahhhrrr! Ghrahhr. Grahhrrr.
> Grahhrr-grahhhhrr! Grahhr. Gahrahhrr Ghrahhhrrrr.
> Ghrarrrr. Ghrahhr! Ghrarrrrr. Gharrrr. Ghrahhhrr.
> Ghrahhrr. Ghrahr. Grahhr. Grahharrr. Grahhrr.
> Grahhhhr. Grahhhr. Gahar. Ghrahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr.
> Ghrahhr. Grahhhr. Grahhr. Gratharrr! Grahhr.
> Ghrahrr. Ghraaaaaaahrr. Grhar. Ghhrarrr! Grahhrr.
> Ghrahrr. Gharr! Ghrahhhhr. Grahhrr. Ghraherrr. (McClure 1964)

I asked Louise Landes Levi, a poet who belongs to the Beat lineage and is a devoted student and translator of Mirabei and Renè Daumal, what might McClure mean by the title *Ghost Tantras*. This is what she had to say about the word 'tantra' and McClure's book title:

> Tantra refers in the Hindu system to heretical text outside the domain of the four Veda, in which the Shakti or female principle is the gate to liberation. In the Buddhist [. . .] tantra refers to teachings transmitted by Shakyamuni Buddha on planes other than the material (human) one, i.e., dreams, visions, spontaneous appearances in the sky, in water, in the elements, but not based on their material principle. The Maha Siddhas in the Tibetan tradition all received their teachings in this way, teachings that led to liberation [. . .] so to get back to our hero, our human hero, he might be referring to ghosts, to non-human spirits which he believed were informing his poetry, he may or may not have been informed regarding the Tibetan tradition. In India, of course, the tantras also refer to the tantriks, those who practiced the left-hand path (the five Ms) absolutely forbidden in the Brahmanic (vedic) tradition. (Louise Landes Levi, Facebook message to author, 9 December 2020. Landes Levi suggested the author studying a glossary included in her translation of the love poems of Mirabai, with clear definitions of 'mantra' and 'tantra.')

Thus, an element of transgression is added to previous nuances (i.e., a connection with nature and spirituality) associated with McClure's book and poem. Going further into his

action, from all the things a visitor is supposed to do at a zoo, roaring a poem at caged lions is not one of them; thus, an actual transgressive element was featured in McClure's action. While on further inspection, the title *Tantra No. 49* reveals the poet's concern with sound and spiritual progress, reading it to caged lions portrays not only a tantric willingness to find divinity within oneself but also within the animal kingdom. Even so, such willingness is not apparent in the title, which remains somewhat cryptic. Unlike McClure's, Beuys' performance did have a title, which was *I Like America and America Likes Me*. At first glance, the title does not convey much information about the work in question or Beuys' position toward ecology, which he explained in several lectures during his first visit to the USA in 1973. While Beuys' action was part of a wider project and very likely intended to be understood within that context (namely, according to his artistic discourse), this paper must consider performance artworks not only in extenso or broadly, but also narrowly. It is true that Beuys' commitment to ecology was substantiated through activism and his key role as one of the initiators of a 1978 discussion to create of the German Green Party, but the title he chose for his coyote performance amounts to a bold statement about the author's alleged powers of seduction, not only regarding a hypothetical receiver but an entire nation. The title does not really provide any information about the work per se but merely announces some nebulose intention and pitches the author's public persona to the intended receivers of his artwork. Oleg Kulik's title *I Bite America and America Bites Me* is substantially more informative than Beuys' (and McClure's) about what the viewer is to expect. Kulik's title opts for using appropriation and applies the metalinguistic function of language to art. The title is self-explanatory, ironic, reflexive, and addresses Beuys' performance agonistically. It shows aggression and humor—or a dark strain of it—which sets the piece in a better position than those previously mentioned as titles are concerned.

3. On Venues: "Nature Is to Zoos as God Is to Churches"

Margaret Atwood wrote the analogy above in *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003). It very much summarizes why McClure's action took place in a zoo and still referred to spirituality. A zoo is not a neutral, unmarked, place, but it is quite a distinct location; moreover, it is related or pertinent if the content of the artwork is considered. McClure performed his poem and performed the zoo as a space where animals were caged. The animals and their imposed space were set in conversation with McClure's voice and poetry. Given the content of the poem, his action made sense and clearly had an aesthetic organizing principle behind it. Not only did his action supplement the poem, providing a new layer of meaning and thus a new viable reading of the text; it was also a performance artwork in its own right, which is a logic that has been previously pointed out regarding how recordings and graphical materials produced by other Beat writers, such as William S. Burroughs, supplement his texts besides being artworks (Bonome 2018). Three locations are used in Beuys's action, which contains a classical narrative structure (introduction, core, denouement). Those locations are an airport, an ambulance, and an art gallery. The introduction and denouement occur at the airport, which is the first location to consider. Beuys is not like the rest of travelers in transit; he is covering his eyes (only wants to see the coyote), carries a shepherd's crook, and is accompanied by an entourage to an ambulance (does not want to tread on American soil). Before laying him on the ambulance stretcher, he is wrapped by his team in a felt blanket. International airports (as airport JFK, in Beuys' action) provide travelers with several reasons to get nervous. Travelers may arrive late for departure and miss their flights, or worse, they can get stopped by customs or even get in trouble with immigration authorities on arrival. An ambulance is the second location. Both airports and ambulances are associated with anxiety and produce estrangement from reality in the work, but—apart from being two well-known sources of pollution—their role as signifiers remains unclear. Ambulances are usually associated with illness and fatality, and they become stressful when their emergency light and sound alarm devices are on. Both airports and ambulances are transitional spaces, they are far from neutral, and they are often associated with stressful situations and transformative experiences.

They also stand as two clear symbols of post-Fordist economy as contemporary means of transportation, and they can be dangerous at times. An art gallery is the third location; the core of the action occurs there. The gallery is the main scenario for a crisis between Beuys and a coyote, which if some accounts are to be believed, climaxes with Beuys hugging the animal. A gallery affords a neutral scenario ready for resignification and profit. God is to churches as art is to galleries, one might say. Seeing an artwork in a gallery is one of the most obvious ways to recognize any contemporary artifact as an artwork, and using a gallery is something McClure did not do. It is interesting how Beuys juxtaposes three elements that initially appear arbitrarily chosen to convey what appears to be a complex message; even so, the most obvious problem with Beuys' site election is that a gallery is not the appropriate place to confine a wild animal. Oleg Kulik's notoriety owes much to several performances where he acted as a dog. Kulik performed a similar dog action in 1997 under the title *I Bite America and America Bites Me* (Я кусаюАмерику, Америка кусает меня), in cooperation with Mila Bredikhina. Kulik's performance takes a critical stance toward Joseph Beuys' coyote action, among other subjects that will be examined below. The venue where Kulik's action took place was the Deitch Projects gallery in New York. Location in Kulik's performances is something to be aware of; while galleries usually try to provide an unmarked, neutral space to be charged by displaying cultural artifacts, Kulik's project is heavily influenced by institutional critique, which reflects on the housing of art, its social function, and all the elements that conform the art system. Kulik initially came into notoriety by carrying out his dog action outside art exhibitions, disrupting them. He began by parasitizing exhibition displays as if they were readymade objects to be resignified by his performance art. In this way, he gained entry in the contemporary art circuit, being formally invited to participate in group exhibitions. Then, he managed to show his artworks in biennales and finally was granted access to the upper echelons of the art market. Repetition with slight variation was key in Kulik's strategy, with one of his reiterative actions being included in the *Interpol* section of the *Manifesta I* biennale. *Interpol* was a creative exchange of Eastern and Western artists curated by Eda Cufer and Viktor Misiano. It was embedded in a pan-regional itinerant European contemporary art biennale, which was in turn coordinated by a curatorial team that supervised the local curators of each country invited. A super-structure that very well showed how the art system worked at the time, but Oleg Kulik knew how to play the system. Kulik's actionist project demonstrates a clear understanding of artwork location and exhibition conditions during those years. According to him, the *Manifesta I* Swedish curators were not willing to hear his ideas on what he might contribute to the biennale. They were familiar with his artistic output, wanted his infamous 'dog performance', and were not willing to accept the artist's input. Kulik argued in an open letter he was compelled to write by the organizers after the event: "I was invited to Stockholm and was open for any variant and form of collaboration. To my surprise Ernst Billgrin's ready work was waiting for me: he was not prepared for any kind of collaboration" (Kulik 1996). The artworld has a tremendous capacity for assimilation and especially during the nineties was very propitious to 'bad boys.' To have a taste of the artistic system Kulik faced, readers may want to watch the film *The Square* (2017) by Ruben Östlund, which parodies the art milieu at the time and refers obliquely to the *Interpol* controversy (Östlund 2017). Kulik chose the Deitch Projects gallery in New York for his dog performance; because of his institutional critique and location awareness, the gallery was pertinent as a location, but at that point in his career, it was also unmarked and highly conventional: Kulik was finally unable to disrupt his own exhibition as a readymade.

4. On Duration and Iteration: "Prolong'd Endurance Tames the Bold"

A fierce ride naked and tied to an untamed horse across East Europe is what makes the main character in Lord Byron's narrative poem *Mazeppa* say: "Prolong'd endurance tames the bold" (Byron 1830). It might apply as a description of how duration (and endurance) are relevant markers in the analysis of the three performances considered. Duration and

endurance may convey meaning in performance art at times, while in other occasions, they merely attest to the performer's penchant for masochism. McClure's action was a one-time event and had a short duration, less than five minutes, which was the time he needed to read his poem to the lions and give them some time to roar between his verses. Use of duration is pertinent or justified in McClure's performance: the time used was the time required to read a poem. Duration might also marked, since he did not have much time to carry out his action without being interrupted or generate unwanted attention: duration is apparently used to generate tension on receivers. Beuys' performance was also a one-time event and lasted three days according to some sources (Götz et al. 1979), five days according to the Deitch Projects webpage (Deitch 1997), while other scholars claimed it lasted a week (Adams 1992). A seven-day-duration is also consigned by the exhibition catalogue by Caroline Tisdall: "Coyote: I like America and America likes me/One week's performance on the occasion of the opening of the René Block Gallery, New York, May 1974" (Tisdall 1976, p.6). The coyote performance was one of Beuys' famous resistance pieces. The catalogue shows some very beautiful images of Beuys and the coyote, which are aesthetically fascinating. Were the alleged coyote-hugging the climax, the remaining time required to complete the action would mark its duration until Beuys' departure. Still, considering the coyote-hugging remains in question (there is no photographic record of the event), duration in Beuys' performance is less pertinent than it is significant or marked; the author apparently consigned an arbitrary number of days for his action to build a rapport between the coyote and himself and keep the viewers on their toes. Overpowering Beuys's performance in duration (if such a thing makes sense) was not difficult for Kulik, who was used to extreme working conditions. Still, neither long duration nor endurance do make performance more valuable or interesting, and Kulik's work might also be interpreted as an ironic statement in this sense. Ultimately, they show the artist's agony and a relentless struggle to carve a niche for herself in the artworld. Duration is neither pertinent nor marked in Kulik's action per se; it only seems to make sense in relation to Beuys' performance. A crucial factor in Kulik's action regarding iteration is that it was not a one-time event; while he had been repeating it with slight variation over the years, he managed to signify different things each time through his command of all the variables involved in producing and displaying his artworks. Iteration is a pertinent element regarding duration in performance art, which in Kulik's case shows his dog action as a work in progress. It is probably in his parody of Beuys that his dog action came to achieve the most success and the least novelty.

5. On Props: Kinky Is Using a Feather, Perverted Is Using the Whole Chicken

Counterculture detractors of the 1960s might remark that McClure rode a Harley Davidson motorcycle and wore leather pants, which hardly qualifies today as a consistent attitude toward ecology. Leaving presentism and ad hominem argumentations aside and considering McClure's position toward wild animals, his stance toward them is as delicate in his poetry as it was in his performance piece. McClure read his poetry to four lions; the number is relevant if comparisons are to be made, because even if they were caged, they were in their context (albeit an enforced one) and overpowered him in number, which produced very definite audiovisual results in his artwork.

Looking at Joseph Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* in the same vein, the artist got himself locked with one coyote for approximately a week and nobody knows how the coyote could have possibly endured Beuys in his taming of America pantomime. The coyote was allegedly extracted from her natural habitat and set in a confined, intimidating space, with a stranger.

Finally, while Kulik's attitude toward animals was certainly close to bestiality in the beginning of his career, he soon was wise enough to turn his attention to the very Deleuzian idea of 'becoming animal' himself. Kulik is the only artist from the three considered that does not instrumentalize animals in his action. Looking at *I Bite America and America Bites*

Me as a discrete unit, viewers may conclude that if anything, the action contains a display of some playful sadomasochism and no cruelty to animals at all.

It is astonishing how the three artworks considered show an incremental need for props and artistic discourse, with McClure being close to minimalism, rising to crescendo with Beuys, and peaking to slowly wear down with Kulik.

As production is concerned, McClure just went to a zoo (where animals were already caged), did his piece, and got it recorded and filmed, while Joseph Beuys' performance required a plane flight, an ambulance, a gallery transformed into a cage, a shepherd's crook, a pair of gloves, a felt blanket, a metal triangle, a lantern, a daily stack of fifty copies of the Wall Street Journal, a photographer/film crew, and to top it up, a living animal. Finally, Kulik had a specially built cage at the Deitch Projects and his performance piece required a dog collar and chain, a blanket, a ball to play with, food and water bowls, protective gear for those amongst the attendees willing to venture into his cage, and a recording crew. A flight to JFK airport and a van were also necessary, but perhaps to avoid mimicking Beuys to excess, those apparently were not part of his action, which allegedly began with Kulik inside his cage, or at least that is what can be found on video footage registering the artwork and the rest of documentation examined (AP Archive 2015).

6. On Discourse/Intention: 'Mystic Vibrations' Is a Wedding Band from Gaston

Regarding discourse, barring an error in my part, while McClure's performance does not have one save for the poetry book he used as a score for his performance, Beuys had embarked on his first visit to the States on a lecture tour to New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis during the winter of 1973, where he explained his 'Energy Plan for Western Man,' and his ideas about 'Social Sculpture' which supported actions as *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Finally, it seems that the theoretical part of Kulik's project was mainly designed by his then wife, artist Mila Bredikhina, who had a capital role in weaving the philosophical underpinnings supporting Kulik's actions. In short: Kulik had one person in his team devoted to producing discourse about his artworks.

Previously, Kulik had also involved himself with writer Vladimir Sorokin in a sort of Jack *Kerouac's On the Road* trip to the Tver region in 1993 that inspired an artist book with images by Kulik and texts by Sorokin: *В* глубь*России* (*Deep into Russia*) (Sorokin and Kulik 1994). The trip proved useful to exchange ideas between both artists and gather materials they later shaped into an art installation. Ellen Rutten comments about their collaboration:

> The book that resulted from the Tver journey is an album in which photographs of idyllic country vistas alternate with unequivocally zoophilic pictures in which Kulik is depicted having—vaginal and anal as well as oral—sexual intercourse with a variety of (mostly domestic) animals. If Ekaterina Dëgot' describes these as "scenes of imitated zoophilism" (Dëgot' in Burkhardt 1999, p. 225; my italics—ER), then Kulik himself uses much detail to convince the reader that they feature actual sexual actions which satisfied carnal feelings of both artist and animal (Bavil'skij 2002). The photographs are accompanied by short text fragments in which Sorokin re-enacts Russian literary and linguistic styles from Turgenevian writing to *mat* and from Village Prose to porn. (Rutten 2008)

Kulik's dog action in New York was a relatively tame version of his shock tactics days, which required a plausible discourse to justify the actions he apparently carried out 'using the whole chicken', so to speak. His actions are questionable but also may be read as a question: who is the most perverted, me or the system I am playing? As an answer to that question, Kulik bit the visitor at Interpol firstly because of the aggressive behavior of certain visitors to his dog persona, and secondly because according to Renata Salecl, the Interpol curatorial team provided him with a very long chain that allowed him to move past the 'Dangerous dog!' sign (Salecl 1998).

Oleg Kulik belongs to the type of artist who sought to educate the public, often through bad example and the plausible guilt instilled in viewers when they realized they were not spectators anymore but accomplices. It might be very well the case that Kulik

faked his most disturbing images or that his discourse was pure gobbledygook. That does not matter so much as how his chosen media, content, and shock tactics were part of a design he conceived with his then wife as an artistic career.

Addressing the perversity of the art market as a metaphor for the New Economy through confrontational behavior and the instrumentalization (or even violence) toward other beings was not uncommon during the 1990s and later within the fine arts, literature, or cinema. Other cases in point within the performance/installation art sphere from those days might be Santiago Sierra or Teresa Margolles, who equally took no prisoners when it came to making viewers feel uncomfortable, in different degrees.

The datum that McClure's action did not have a title might obey to several reasons; perhaps he did not conceive his action as an artwork, or maybe he did conceive it as an artwork but did not care for titles. In support of such hypotheses, it may be stressed that Beat authors have been widely known for their performative and declamatory approach to poetry. For instance David M. Harris mentions apropos the poetry of Diane di Prima:

> There is obviously a connection between the Beat poets and modern declamatory poets, slam poets; the Beats did traditionally read their work out loud, Allen Ginsberg almost chanted his work, and a number of the other poets did the same, and there is the sense, the feeling, among a lot of the Beats that the work is just extemporized [. . .] only very rarely is what we see a first draft put directly on the page, but there's the sense that this is just human speech, just the outpouring of emotions. (Harris 2015)

McClure's location of choice was unusual, possibly illegal, and more importantly, it was unrelated to the visual arts economic structure. It was in accord with the spirit of happenings, and many actions carried out during the 1960s by guerrilla theater groups that were spontaneous, provocative, and geared toward mixing art and life. According to McClure, both his performance and preferential location were guided by such spontaneity:

> Bruce Conner and I went there to record roosters. We ran into the lion keeper, who was also a poet, and he invited us to see the lions. I read and they roared. We roared together. You can Google it. I also read Chaucer to kangaroos that waved their heads back and forth and to seals that were barking. (Raskin 2013)

Despite testing several locations and interacting with several species, the accessible footage of McClure's action corresponds to just one site, the lion house. That comes as no surprise, as McClure's guttural beast language resembles very much that of fiery felines, and the furry image of the l book cover reminds the viewer of Felidae. Considering lions are wild animals, the zoo in McClure's performance is a highly motivated space, in the sense that is far from arbitrary, and the ideal location for the poet and the lions to 'roar together'. Incidentally, lions in zoos are caged, which adds a critical nuance to McClure's action.

Footage from McClure's performance may be found on the Internet YouTube platform. One of the longest film fragments available lasts (02′54′′), while his reading is restricted to (02′32′′) (McClure 2011). The film's credits mention it was extracted from 'an episode of USA: Poetry, a series of ten films on American poets (1966) by Richard O. Moore'. A tape reel and nine identical copies of almost four minutes of duration (03′52′′) are kept at the Wallace Berman Collection in the Smithsonian Institution Archives (Berman 1962). There is a good quality sound recording of McClure's action, which excluding the brief intro lasts (03′73″) and can be accessed on the webpage of the University of Pennsylvania Writing Center (McClure 2021). Listening to the sound file differs from watching the film in that the interaction of McClure's poetry with the roaring lions is spine-chilling, as the wild sounds trigger primordial fears to the sound of big hungry predators. It is, in my opinion, as a work of sound poetry—and not a film or a performance—that McClure's action shines the most. McClure did not produce a discourse associated with his action, but that is far better than producing the wrong discourse or imposing a non-pertinent reading on a certain artwork. Such strategies are not uncommon in the contemporary art realm with examples as recent as the MACBA (2021) solo exhibition of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, where curator

Tanya Barson enforced an eccentric reading on González-Torres's conceptual sculptures. It is to be remembered that conceptual artists developed their own discourses not only to make their works understandable to the public but also to avoid their instrumentalization by art curators. Artistic discourse is currently being scrutinized, and the ongoing debate also affects literary studies.

There is a thread that to some extent joins Bay Area poets (even if not exactly McClure), Beuys, and Kulik that remains to be addressed, and that is cultural appropriation. Chad Weidner mentions said phenomenon in his book: "Some who can be referred to as plastic shamans claim to share Native American insights or even ancestry" (Weidner 2016, p. 102). The topic of "white shaman poets" was raised by Geary Hobson and Leslie Marmon Silko during the late 1970s. While their arguments did not involve Michael McClure directly, they make his case even more interesting, since he was fundamentally inserted in the culture that produced such situation. Hobson and Marmon Silko expressed their timely concern about something that was happening in the Bay Area:

> We wanted to do something that would address the proliferation of White poets who were suddenly calling themselves shamans, and by and large embarrassing/amusing/angering Indian people by their pretensions to Indian sacred knowledge and ceremonialism as they paraded such hucksterism in their various publications and public performances. (Hobson 2002)

Even if initially restricted to a small circle of American poets, such an allegation might also be used against Beuys. Joseph Beuys has been recently accused of fictionalizing his war time episodes which comprised, among other things, having had an encounter with Tartar shamans when the Stuka he allegedly piloted crashed in Crimea during World War II (Knöfel 2013). These episodes were capital in shaping out his artistic project, whereby he often assumed a shamanistic position. Whereas his works should be assessed for what they are, the danger of inserting personal narratives in any given artwork lies in certain receivers seemingly needing to believe everything an artist says, which unfortunately often includes reviewers. More analytical thinkers signaled the right track to follow when criticizing Beuys' oeuvre, in particular the discourse he associated with it, and his contradictory public persona. Jan Verwoert's essay "The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image," argues: "On the one hand, he gambled on everything that traditionally secured the value, claim to validity, and hence authority of art and artists, while on the other hand he assumed the traditional patriarchal position of the messianic proclaimer of ultimate truths" (Verwoert 2008).

The issue of how Beuys' shamanism was enthusiastically received by art critics as Donald Kuspit is also dealt with by Verwoert, who dedicates a section to Beuys' coyote performance under the following heading: "The Problematic Reversal of the Roles of Perpetrator and Victim." (Ibid.) There, Verwoert tackles with Beuys' Messianic role and twisted logic, "both sufferer and healer" (Ibid.). He finally pops the question:

> By what right does this German claim to be not only healer, but also patient and sufferer (if not even victim)? Victim of whom? Why would a German—in the historical wake of Germany's responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust and its instigation of two world wars—ever be entitled to play that role on an international stage? (Verwoert 2008)

The main problem with Beuys, as his coyote performance is concerned, would not be so much his white shaman discourse or entitled public persona, as his alleged enforcement of an intellectually dishonest interpretation on that specific artwork. According to Verwoert, Beuys simply talked too much about his piece and imposed his metaphors on receivers: It was when he enforced his role as a victim with the ambulance symbol, or worse, when he assimilated the killing of Native Americans with capitalist alienation by connecting an allegedly wild coyote with *The Wall Street Journal*, that he slipped. The very in point element of a daily stack of *The Wall Street Journal* where the coyote happily urinated on

time and again during his action is far from relatable to the Native American genocide, and it is about this topic that Verwoert remarks:

> Beuys essentially declares perpetrators to be victims. In this picture, the supposedly painful alienation of the United States from its roots is given the same status as the suffering of the victims of the genocide, which fall out of the picture entirely. Though surely unintentional (and nevertheless effective), murder is equated with a regrettable destruction of nature. The historical victims have no voice here. The coyote cannot complain. (Verwoert 2008)

Terry Atkinson, author of *Beuyspeak*, has been one of the critics who hardly endured Beuys' white shamanism; about *I Like America and America Likes Me*, he declared:

> He alleges he made good contact with the coyote—whatever this might mean. Whatever it might mean, we can be sure it will be of a more profound character than when I consider I have made good contact with our cats, Heidi and Snowy. (Thistlewood 1995)

Kulik's criticism of Beuys's piece concentrates on a justified reading of his work in terms of domestication, pointing at a blind spot in previous analyses:

> If Joseph Beuys' performance "I Like America and America Likes Me" (1974) was a symbolic domestication of America, this domestication of Kulik was a diagnosis of the state of contemporary American society. (Kulik 2020)

Art critic Mikhail Ryklin, in his article "Pedigree Pal: The Road to English Dog" agrees with Kulik's statement when he declares: "The cultural context was easily readable: while Beuys, the European, domesticated the wild American element, the Russian entered America as a dog to be domesticated by the New York public" (Bredikhina and Obukhova 2007).

There is the obvious temptation of taking Kulik's title as a prank or his action as an art stunt, when in fact authors as Mikhail Ryklin or Renata Salecl have very cleverly highlighted how it tackles with, firstly the very hackneyed idea of "dialogue" in contemporary art, secondly, the divide yet to be deconstructed between humans and animals, and thirdly, the problematic relationship between East and West (Salecl 1998).

If Kulik's open letter is to be believed, action, space, and props were allegedly imposed to the performer by *Interpol* when scandal erupted (Kulik 1996). Such structure belonged to one of the ubiquitous biennales that sprang during the 1990s, brimming with art curators and supported by lengthy theoretical discourse and a good measure of cynicism. It could be argued that Kulik could have chosen to walk out from the *Manifesta* I proposition and make a public statement against the Stockholm curators, but he chose instead to wreak havoc in *Interpol* by biting a visitor and destroying works by other artists in situ only to make his statement later in the form of an open letter informed by critical theory. Walking out of his artistic consecration in the West does pale in comparison with desecrating the artistic ceremony that was slighting his team and being the star of the show at the same time.

Having said that, from a strictly comparative viewpoint, and informed by what I know about contemporary art, in view of the markers used to assess the three actions and the arguments exposed above, Kulik's action *I Bite America and America Bites Me* (1997) does outrank Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), because the latter is confusing, and to some extent misleading, in its formal and conceptual articulation. McClure's action is certainly close to Kulik's higher qualification concerning the analytical tools used, but these tools still need to be collated with those offered by ecocriticism.

7. White Shamans, Pink Indians, and Conclusions

Randy Malamud proposes a new aesthetical frame of reference regarding ecology that may prove useful in assessing the quality of the performance artworks under discussion: "In condensed form, the basic elements of my ecocritical aesthetic are: seeing animals without hurting them; seeing them in their contexts; teaching about animals; advocating respect for them; and finally knowing them, richly but also incompletely" (Malamud 2009, p. 45).

If Malamud's criteria are followed, both McClure's performance and Kulik's end in a tie; despite having found divinity within animality, McClure saw animals "without hurting them", but in his artwork, they were constrained; he tried to understand them in their context and taught about animals (in a spiritual way), commanded respect for them, and finally, got to "*knowing* them richly but also incompletely" (Ibid.).

Kulik used no animals in his artwork, which is almost enough to outshine Beuys, and even McClure; he saw animals without hurting them in his performance, he critically saw animals in their context (not a happy one) and taught about animals and how people relate to them. He was not reverent nor condescending toward the animal he represented and advocated respect for. Finally, something that certainly happened along the two weeks he spent doing his performance in New York is that he managed to "knowing them, richly, but also incompletely" (Malamud 2009).

Regarding Beuys' action, he did not hurt the coyote physically, but he willingly confined a wild animal in an unnatural space with a stranger; thus, he did not exactly see animals in their contexts and hardly taught the viewers anything about coyotes. Furthermore, he did not precisely advocate respect for the coyote by the way he "used" the animal, while he certainly gained some knowledge about the creature.

To conclude this essay, it is worth mentioning that ecocriticism opens new venues for interpretation that neither traditional philology nor visual arts critical theory often visit, and this paper shows how it may be useful in analyzing artworks informed by current ecological concerns.

Lastly, looking through the ecocritical lens is an invigorating experience when examining artworks featuring animals or showing ecological anxieties. It is true that the art system works in a complex and often perverse way and Malamud's criteria used in this paper are allegedly aesthetical and not ethical, which is hard to totally agree with. Reading intention in an artwork is as dangerous a game as accepting artistic discourse uncritically. It is hard to ascertain what did McClure, Beuys, or Kulik have in mind when they produced the artworks analyzed here. If examined restrictively, only McClure's action seems to have addressed animalism directly. A broader approach shows how Beuys' involvement with ecology was a very serious and steady concern of his during all his career, which partially should exonerate him after all the negative criticism he received in this paper. Probably, Randy Malamud would be horrified if he discovered that McClure's and Kulik's respective artworks might end in a tie if his ecocritical aesthetics were applied in their assessment, which possibly calls for a critical examination of his aesthetics in terms of content and scope: Is it really aesthetics or ethics that Malamud is trafficking in?

There are many more implications in the artworks analyzed that deserve being studied at length and particularly through the ecocritical standpoint, as for instance how Kulik's artistic discourse relates to deep ecology. Only through empirical research and a wider knowledge of contemporary artifacts may ecocriticism evolve and generate a solid theoretical and practical corpus.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Adams, David. 1992. Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology. *Art Journal* 51: 26–34. [CrossRef]

AP Archive. 2015. USA Dog Performance. July 21. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LGZgxGlOsU&has_verified=1 (accessed on 29 January 2021).

Atwood, Margaret. 2003. *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Anchor Books, p. 206.

Berman, Wallace. 1962. Sound Recordings, 1962–1965. Box 6, Folder 3–6, 1907–1979, Bulk 1955–1979, Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Washington, DC, USA, Unpublished archival material.

Bonome, Antonio J. 2018. *The Revised Boy Scout Manual: An Electronic Revolution*. Edited by William S. Burroughs. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, pp. ix–xv.

Bredikhina, Mila, and Alexandra Obukhova, eds. 2007. *Oleg Kulik: Nihil Inhumanum a Me Alienum Puto/Nothing Inhuman Is Alien to Me*. Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, p. 346.

Byron, George Gordon Byron. 1830. *The Giaour and Mazzeppa*. Nurnberg and New York: Campe, p. 50.
Cerino, Cara. 2013. Abstract Alchemist of Flesh' Is an Offbeat Look at a Beat Writer. *The Daily Californian*. Available online: https://www.dailycal.org/2013/10/27/abstract-alchemist-flesh-offbeat-look-beat-writer/ (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Deitch, Jeffrey. 1997. Oleg Kulik: I Bite America and America Bites Me. *Deitch Projects*. Available online: https://www.deitch.com/archive/exhibitions/i-bite-america-and-america-bites-me (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Götz, Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas. 1979. *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*. Translated by Patricia Lech. New York: Woodbury, pp. 274–75.
Harris, David M. 2015. Dianne di Prima, *Difficult Listening*, Radio Free Nashville, WRFN. Available online: https://archive.org/details/DianeDiPrima (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Hobson, Geary. 2002. The Rise of the White Shaman: Twenty-Five Years Later. The Twilight Zone Library. Available online: https://alamogordo.wordpress.com/2008/11/15/the-rise-of-the-white-shaman/ (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Knöfel, Ulrike. 2013. New Letter Debunks More Wartime Myths. *Spiegel International*. Available online: https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/new-letter-debunks-myths-about-german-artist-joseph-beuys-a-910642.html (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Kulik, Oleg. 1996. Art Riot. Available online: https://www.artriot.art/artist.html?id=OlegKulik&ch=perfomance&tid=70 (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Kulik, Oleg. 2020. Featured Long Durational Work. MAI. Available online: https://mai.art/content/2014/6/23/i-bite-america-and-america-bites-me-1997 (accessed on 29 January 2021).
MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona). 2021. Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation. Available online: https://www.macba.cat/en/exhibitions-activities/exhibitions/felix-gonzalez-torres-politics-relation (accessed on 14 April 2021).
Malamud, Randy. 2009. *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 44–45.
McClure, Michael. 1955. For the Death of 100 Whales. *Nevada Public Radio*. Available online: https://www.thing.net/~{}grist/l&d/mcclure/mcclurea.htm (accessed on 29 January 2021).
McClure, Michael. 1964. *Ghost Tantras*. San Francisco: City Lights, p. 56.
McClure, Michael. 2011. Reading Poetry to Lions. 2011. University of California Press YouTube Channel. February 8. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djtmpdlXKEA&t=5s (accessed on 29 January 2021).
McClure, Michael. 2021. PennSound, Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, Accessed February 28. Available online: https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/McClure/McClure-Michael_reading-Beat-Language-to-Lions.mp3 (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Misiano, Viktor. 2005. Interpol. The Apology of Defeat. *Moscow Art Magazine*. Available online: http://moscowartmagazine.com/en/issue/41/article/799 (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Ruben Östlund, director. 2017, *The Square*. Sweden: Plattform Produktion/arte France Cinéma/Coproduction Office.
Raskin, Jonah. 2013. Interview with Poet Michael McClure. *SF Gate*. Available online: https://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Interview-with-poet-Michael-McClure-4986544.php (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Rutten, Ellen. 2008. Where Postmodern Provocation Meets Social Strategy. Deep into Russia. *Researchgate*. Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242274153_WHERE_POSTMODERN_PROVOCATION_MEETS_SOCIAL_STRATEGY_DEEP_INTO_RUSSIA (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Salecl, Renata. 1998. *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate*. London: Verso, p. 104.
Shri, Aghorinath Ji. 2018. A Tantric Master's View of Tantra. *Learn Religions*. Available online: https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-tantra-1770612 (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Sorokin, Vladimir, and Oleg Kulik. 1994. *В глубьРоссии*. Moscow: Service TM.
Thistlewood, David, ed. 1995. *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, p. 174.
Tisdall, Caroline. 1976. *Joseph Beuys, Coyote*. München: Shirmer/Mosel.
Valtierra, Ana. 2016. Goya y El Canibalismo. *Adiós Cultural*. Available online: http://www.revistaadios.es/articulo/16/goya-y-el-canibalismo.html (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Verwoert, Jan. 2008. The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image. *EFlux*. Available online: https://www.eflux.com/journal/01/68485/the-boss-on-the-unresolved-question-of-authority-in-joseph-beuys-oeuvre-and-public-image/ (accessed on 29 January 2021).
Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, p. 116.

humanities

MDPI

Article

The Future of Extinction: William S. Burroughs' *The Western Lands*

Steen Ledet Christiansen

Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, 9220 Aalborg, Denmark; steen@hum.aau.dk

Received: 28 September 2020; Accepted: 25 November 2020; Published: 8 December 2020

Abstract: In this article, I draw on William S. Burroughs' *The Western Lands* to think about what François Laruelle has termed a "generic humanity." This generic humanity broadens and expands our ethical obligations towards those who have not yet been included in humanity. Burroughs' emphasis in the novel on flattened time, magic, and death as transformation is used to show how we can make Mankind extinct from our way of thinking. Burroughs' novel is thus an example of a "philo-fiction," a work of literature that allows us to see the world differently.

Keywords: Beat Generation; William S. Burroughs; climate change; environmental humanities; posthuman; non-philosophy

---

1. Introduction

How can we think about the extinction of mankind? Living through the sixth mass extinction event, sometimes called the Holocene or Anthropocene extinction, this question seems not only pertinent but one of the few questions that truly matter. Nick Bostrom calls the looming collapse an "existential risk"—a risk that threatens the future of humanity.[1] Yet the vastness of the Anthropocene extinction involves more than just *Homo sapiens* and Bostrom's anthropocentric survival guides perceive us as the pinnacle species, ripe for technological uplift into a more perfect posthuman species.[2] However, humanity exerting dominance over the planet is the reason the Anthropocene is unfolding, revealing that mankind does not have authority over nature. A different way of thinking about humanity is needed; a way that not only decenters humanity but also expands the idea of humanity to be more inclusive. François Laruelle proposes the term "generic humanity" to suggest a universal but limited conception of humanity that is not "the tip or expression of the absolute."[3] That is to say, generic humanity is not dominant, not the pinnacle of evolution, but embroiled in a wider meshwork of nature. One writer who has done much to flatten and transmute the idea of the human species is William S. Burroughs.

Throughout his career, Burroughs was interested in what the human species is and rarely regarded the human species in a particularly favorable light. Burroughs insisted early on, in an infamous quote in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, that "human, Allan, is an adjective, and its use as a noun is in itself regrettable".[4] Even at this early point in his writings, before any of his major works, Burroughs viewed humanity with suspicion and regret. We should note, however, that Burroughs does not dismiss the human species but rather diminishes the significance it has. To say that the human is an adjective and not a noun signals that Burroughs does not regard Homo sapiens as a stable entity in the world but rather a relation in a larger ecological system. Humanity is a modifier, which is inherently different

---

1 (Bostrom 2013).
2 (Bostrom 2009, pp. 186–215).
3 (Smith 2013).
4 (Burroughs 1993, p. 68).

from conventional conceptions of humanity as an object in the world. Burroughs' writings may then serve as a shock to thought to force us to think about current times differently. This is needed, simply because what we are doing now is not working. Humanity certainly does modify the relations in which we exist. What matters is to understand more fully the consequences.

Let us take Burroughs at his word when he says that the "human problem cannot be solved in human terms".[5] Burroughs clearly has no use for the idea of the human as pinnacle, either: "For Man is indeed the final product. Not because homo sap is the apogee of perfection, before which God himself gasps in awe—"I can do nothing more!"—but because Man is an unsuccessful experiment, caught in a biologic dead end and inexorably headed for extinction."[6] Burroughs' writing has consistently been an attempt at thinking outside of the human, to understand that which is not human or, put differently, that which is nonhuman. In this way, I am less interested in what Burroughs' writings mean (always a notorious problem, anyway). What I am interested in is the ways in which Burroughs' writing can make us think differently about humanity. This is a topic that radiates throughout all of Burroughs' writings: from *Naked Lunch* and onward. *Naked Lunch*: "The broken image of Man moves in minute by minute and cell by cell ... Poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity, all symptoms of The Human Virus. *The Human Virus can now be isolated and treated*."[7] *The Ticket That Exploded*: "The human sickness is a complex of several virus strains".[8] "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars": "the Word is literally a virus, and that it has not been recognized as such because it has achieved a state of relatively stable symbiosis with its human host".[9] And so on, up to *The Western Lands*: "The human mold is broken and this you gotta hear ... out crawls a monster centipede".[10] The reason for these pull-quotes is to show the line running through all of Burroughs' writings, whether fiction or nonfiction. A full discussion of Burroughs' interest in the human species both as a virus and one half of a virus, a malleable material that constantly transforms, is too large for this current article. Yet it is evident that the human species is a running concern for Burroughs. This is one reason why Burroughs has been considered a posthumanist writer by several scholars.[11]

Humanity is at the forefront of Burroughs' writings, especially in ways that change and challenge the limits of humanity, such as mutants, language, social control, disease, parasites, alien species, and for *The Western Lands*, a mutated version of Egyptian mythology. As noted by Roberta Fornari, Burroughs uses Egyptian mythology "in order to create a "heterocosmica" in which the beliefs of ancient Egypt in afterlife offer a point of reflection on human history and illusions and a particular view of his existential situation as a human being."[12] The question then becomes how we can use Burroughs' writing to think about a "generic humanity" that is inclusive; not to follow Burroughs in all his nihilistic thinking, but to take seriously the tools that come from his writings.

What I propose here would mean to take literature as something that thinks; to take the materiality of literature as a mode of thinking and a thinking that goes beyond the intention of the author. Laruelle has proposed the idea of a so-called philo-fiction that takes art "as its model", so that the artworks "are no longer simply modalities of philosophy but precisely models that have, within philo-fictions, their autonomy via a new relation to philosophical modeling."[13] In this way, the philo-fictions of literature can reach new insights that go beyond philosophy—and critical theory more broadly. Any literary scholar will intuitively agree with Laruelle's claim, even to the point where the concept of philo-fiction

---

5 (Burroughs 2010, p. 27).
6 (Burroughs 2010, p. 41).
7 (Burroughs 2014a, p. 140). Emphasis in original.
8 (Burroughs 2014b, loc. 3131). This is one of the explicit changes to the restored text.
9 (Burroughs 2013, loc. 1294).
10 (Burroughs 2010, p. 173).
11 Michael Sean Bolton especially, in his "William S. Burroughs, Michel Serres, and the Word Parasite" and his *The Mosaic of Juxtaposition* but also S.E. Gontarski's "William S. Burroughs and the Posthuman," Shaviro, Steven Shaviro, "Two Lessons from Burroughs." (Shaviro 1995).
12 (Fornari 2003, p. 301).
13 (Laruelle 2015, loc. 153, loc. 298).

may not seem innovative at all—does not all literature make us think? The response here is two-fold. First of all, Laruelle's larger project aims to show that philosophy has guarded its border too well. Only philosophy is what thinks, and inadvertently whatever thinks is philosophy. Laruelle rejects this philosophical imperialism and philo-fictions are a way for him to expand philosophy as something that may also take place outside of philosophy proper (understood as the practice of philosophers).

The second response is that introducing literature as a model goes beyond making literature a modality of philosophy but instead literature retains the autonomy of fiction and allows it to produce precisely that—fictions. A philo-fiction allows for the mutation of thought without care for philosophical propriety or limits. Burroughs' provocation is to make us think of humanity as merely as one-among-many-others. In this respect, we can consider Burroughs as a philosopher who expresses his philosophy through fictional writings rather than academic monographs. This is not an unusual approach and has been pursued by Jones Irwin, who has shown that Burroughs's work "is significantly concerned with philosophical issues".[14] Irwin pursues social critique and moral issues, but I find Burroughs' writings regarding the human species more potent in relation to ecocritical questions.

Viewing Burroughs as a kind of writer-philosopher also helps with the complicated question of narrator and implied author in most of Burroughs' writings. Extending from *The Naked Lunch* through to *The Western Lands*, we often find passages where the line between character, narrator, and implied author blurs. In *Naked Lunch*, Dr. Benway tells the story of the man who taught his asshole to talk. In a tirade about how the rectum takes over the man and hijacks his eyes, Benway goes off on a tangent about cancer, and how democracy is cancerous with bureaus and bureaucracy. Then follows what can be best described as an extended parenthetical rant: "(It is thought that the virus is a degeneration from more complex life-form. It may at one time have been capable of independent life. Now has fallen to the borderline between living and dead matter. It can exhibit living qualities only in a host, by using the life of another—the renunciation of life itself, a falling towards inorganic, inflexible machine, towards dead matter.)"[15] This rant has little connection to the routine that Benway tells, and the use of the parenthesis makes this seem more like an intrusive statement made by the (implied) author.

The Soft Machine has an oft-quoted passage in the chapter "The Mayan Caper": "I cut radio static into the control music and festival recordings together with sound and image track of rebellion. "Cut word lines—Cut music lines—Smash the control images—Smash the control machine—Burn the books—Kill the priests—Kill! Kill! Kill!—" Inexorably as the machine had controlled thought feeling and sensory impressions of the workers, the machine now gave the order to dismantle itself and kill the priests"[16] While often read, correctly, in relation to Burroughs' cut-up aesthetics, we again find an intrusive narrator in the lines within the quotation marks. This practice of the intrusive narrator is well-established by the time we reach *The Western Lands*. One example among many is a narrative of Egyptians discussing what they will encounter in the afterlife. Their rumination is interrupted by a narrator commenting on this bit of narrative: "It is of course assumed by Western savants that the Egyptian animal Gods are the fantasies of a primitive and backward people, who did not have the advantage of the glorious gains of the Industrial Revolution, a revolution in which a standardized human product overthrows himself and replaces his own kind with machines (they are so much more efficient)."[17] Although clearly an example of non-diegetic narration, by this point in Burroughs' writings this had become a conventional technique for Burroughs to bring in his own commentary—very often philosophical-political in nature. This is why critics have come to consider these commentaries and intrusions from the "fictional narrator as well as Burroughs-Author" as Anne McDonald phrases it.[18] This association of narrator incursions with Burroughs as author is further emphasized by the fact

[14] (Irwin 2012, p. 267).
[15] (Burroughs 2014a, p. 112).
[16] (Burroughs 2014c, loc. 1494).
[17] (Burroughs 2010, p. 111).
[18] (McDonald 1983).

that Burroughs tends to make comments and arguments in his interviews that are largely congruent with these intrusive remarks. In this way, most of Burroughs' writings can very easily be regarded as theory-fictions or philo-fictions. His philosophy is rendered through stylistic and aesthetic techniques, while being especially dependent on intrusive narration. *The Western Lands* is one of his novels that uses this intrusive narrator device the most. Rather than placing philosophical-political ideas and statements in the words of characters, the Burroughs-author of *The Western Lands* intrudes incessantly. Rather than the disruptive nature of his cut-up and similar experiments that he used little for the Cities trilogy, the disruption comes from this intrusive narrator-author.

Why do we need art to push beyond philosophy and critical theory in order to think of Homo sapiens otherwise? Because literature is far better at producing alternatives than philosophy; Burroughs' writings constantly challenge the limits of humanity's centrality in the world. That is to say, Burroughs helps us remove the implicit yardstick of "we," especially since this "we" has never been particularly inclusive. Burroughs' acerbic writings refute the cohesion of humanity and instead emphasize its fluidity and changeability, providing an imaginative vocabulary for how to make humanity extinct. Rather than imagining an ecology without nature, as Morton has argued for, Burroughs argues for an ecology without humanity.[19] We must make humanity extinct in our conception of the world; not that humanity needs to be eradicated but humanity cannot be the central purpose of the world. Burroughs' explicit antihumanism, that admittedly often bleeds into misanthropy, serves as helpful material in this case. Exactly because Burroughs' antihumanism is both an attack on the inhuman behavior of the human species (understood as violence, hatred, and more) as well as an insistence that the human species is a relation, not a thing in itself.

Conceptions of the current climate collapse are always cast in a form where humanity is the central concern: climate collapse disrupts *our* way of life and *we* must change it or stop it. As long as we are the measure of the world, things cannot change. Claire Colebrook has shown how the basic assumption for dealing with climate collapse is always cast in terms of "more or less" and that we must "adapt."[20] She phrases this in a Deleuzian manner, saying that we must remove the extensive multiplicities that are determined in advance as equivalences.[21] This specialized vocabulary simply speaks to the fact that humanity comes pre-defined as the equivalent of the world. The world is for us; it is "our lived world."[22] Climate collapse will then, according to Colebrook, "alter the very unit of 'the human'."[23] It well might but it seems more urgent to me to change the unit of the human *in order to avoid climate collapse*. We cannot wait for external forces to transform us but must do the work of transformation now. Burroughs has a template for how death becomes a positive process, not something to be avoided but something to be sought for. This is not to suggest that Burroughs developed a philosophy for thinking the other-than-human, but it is to suggest that we may use his writings in this manner.

2. Burroughs and The Extinction of Mankind

Why use Burroughs' writings as a way to produce a new vision for humanity? Burroughs' writings have often been regarded as antihumanist and misanthropic, and certainly there is truth to such arguments. Chad Weidner notes such misanthropy in Burroughs' novel *The Western Lands* and in his early cut-ups.[24] Even as early as 1963, this characteristic feature of Burroughs' works was noted by Ihab Hassan.[25] What can a misanthrope have to tell us about an inclusive, radical humanity? If Burroughs' project is one of destruction and "not to order but to shape confusion and to thereby totally discredit

[19] (Morton 2007).
[20] (Colebrook 2014, p. 55).
[21] (Colebrook 2014, p. 55).
[22] (Colebrook 2014, p. 55).
[23] (Colebrook 2014, p. 56).
[24] (Weidner 2013).
[25] (Hassan 1963).

the rational world of reality", as Michael Skau has argued, what then can we take from Burroughs in a positive sense?[26] We can recognize part of Burroughs' anti-humanism as a satiric injunction against humanity's inhuman behaviors. But despite Burroughs' writings often being associated with the satiric tradition from Jonathan Swift and onwards, we may also wish to take Burroughs at face value.

There are at least four ways that Burroughs' writings can be helpful: late-career Burroughs' interest in rewriting the past and the pastoral; writing against epistemologies of certainty; writing as material and method; and the human being as a fluid, non-stable entity. The first way in which Burroughs' writings assist us is outlined by Weidner, who points to the *Red Night* trilogy (*Cities of the Red Night*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, and *The Western Lands*) as addressing "the unfulfilled potential of nature's nation."[27] That is to say, only "by reinventing ourselves yet again, we can avoid destruction of the planet."[28] Such a position may seem uncharacteristically optimistic from the writer who gave us *Naked Lunch*. Nonetheless, as much as *The Western Lands* in particular delves into death, even on a planetary scale, there are also moments of hope and desire for a future that includes a (different form of) humanity.

Hope, in *The Western Lands* is a nebulous thing. The novel declares that few will survive, about "one in a million. And, biologically speaking, that's very good odds."[29] These odds crop up a number of times throughout the novel. They tell us two things. First, this is not about individuals but rather a species level. If the human species continues, that is what matters. Secondly, optimism should be measured precisely in the survival of the species. Optimism, then, is not about carrying on as usual but rather that massive changes will occur and that these changes are essentially biological, not social. Of course, we should be cautious about using the word "optimistic" at all in relation to Burroughs, since "The captain says, 'The ship is sinking'. People say he's a pessimist. He says, 'The ship will float indefinitely'. He's an optimist. But this has actually nothing to do with whatever is happening with the leak and the condition of the ship. Both pessimist and optimist are meaningless words."[30] Whatever happens with the human species will not be connected to whether we think it is a good thing or not; it will happen as it happens, whatever the condition of the human species. In other words, pessimist and optimist are anthropocentric words that have no alignment with the case at hand (i.e., human survival).

More than anything, Burroughs' writings attack linguistic certainties and the idea that language can bring us closer together. And yet, his later novels take a different approach to the monolith of language. Skau again: "The reduction of the mass and frequency of the stylistic experimentation in Burroughs' later novels seems to reflect the need to infiltrate rather than to surrender to literary anarchy if verbal tyranny is to be overthrown and a liberated human consciousness is to be achieved."[31] Despite Burroughs' later writings being less experimental, the aim remains the same: to attack language. But in that attack the aim remains to liberate, not control. A larger take-away from such liberation through infiltration is that we must reject certainty *tout court*—Burroughs' prose destroys surety and certainty, because such epistemological certainties are indeed control measures.[32] What Burroughs' writings—even his later ones—teach is that writing and fiction is a crucial tool to understand and conceive of the future.

The third way that Burroughs' writings can help us flows from his attack on epistemological certainties. Writing, whether fiction, history, philosophy, or any other material, is never anything more than raw materials for one's own thinking and should never be sacrosanct. While cut-ups, fold-ins, and similar experimental techniques may not lend themselves well to critical thinking, the premise

26 (Skau 1981).
27 (Weidner 2016, p. 20).
28 (Weidner 2016, p. 108).
29 (Burroughs 2010, p. 113).
30 (Burroughs 1996, p. 10).
31 (Skau 1981, p. 410).
32 For more on this idea, see, (Christiansen 2014).

that writing is a method with which to think has resonance with François Laruelle's non-standard philosophy. For Laruelle, we can only understand art if we model our thinking after the art we engage with and that any thinking about art is "about transforming the aesthetic utterances about art and its dimensions".[33] Our thinking must become a form of art, which, in relation to Burroughs' writings, means precisely rejecting epistemic certainties.[34] The epistemic certainty that looms the largest is that we know what the human is.

That brings us to the fourth way in which Burroughs' writings can help us rethink mankind and make him extinct: the human being in Burroughs' writings is consistently changeable, malleable, and fluid. In *The Western Lands,* Joe the Dead is the typical protagonist for Burroughs, who "wasn't there to save human lives. He was there to alter the human equation."[35] Later, we learn that "We have the advantage. The virus enemy cannot comprehend elasticity. They cannot believe we can survive their seemingly foolproof broadcasts."[36] Whatever the human is, it seems that change is part of it. And for Burroughs writing *The Western Lands*, there is no greater change than the journey to the Western Lands for "it is a journey beyond Death," and "to reach the Western Lands is to achieve freedom from fear."[37] The Western Lands are a place of afterlife, the place we go when we die.

To die, or at least to think with Burroughs about extinction, is a fruitful way of thinking the human being anew, because, as Kathryn Hume argues, "instructions of the dead are metaphorically apt as cultural criticism."[38] But also because Burroughs' writings and writing techniques can achieve that "decisive alienation-effect that can whip us around the repressions death fosters, letting us see anew the magical powers human societies have lodged therein."[39] Extinction, death, and the writings about death allow for new thoughts to emerge, through art, and through the art of dying allow us to see humanity differently. That is what Burroughs' writings give us.

3. To Be Dead

Burroughs is no stranger to writing about death. His novel *The Wild Boys* (1971) bears the subtitle *A Book of the Dead*. Here the reference to death is mostly connect to the rebellious overthrow of society by homosexuals. *The Wild Boys* is post-apocalyptic, as is several of Burroughs' novels. However, this is not the only interest in death that Burroughs has shown. The peculiar novel-screenplay *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* (1970) takes the dying rambles of the infamous American gangster Dutch Shultz (born Arthur Simon Flegenheimer) and spins them into a surreal narrative, most of which is Burroughs' own creation. It would appear that the interest is less in the meaning of Dutch Schultz's words and far more in the surrealism provoked by their strangeness, alongside the notoriety of Schultz himself.

The Western Lands draws on many different sources of inspiration, but a key influence is the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Tibetan Book of the Dead *Bardo Thötröl*. The Western Lands is a reference to a destination beyond death, as noted, and it is clear from the novel that death is only the beginning. Death becomes a transformative moment rather than an end; it is a form of precarious freedom from social strictures. This is particularly evident in the vicious attack on Christianity that we find coming from the narrator:

> At this point the monolithic One God concept set out to crush a biologic revolution that could have broken down the lines established between the species, thus precipitating unimaginable

---

33 (Laruelle 2015, loc. 85).
34 (Laruelle 2015, loc. p. 40).
35 (Burroughs 2010, p. 61).
36 (Burroughs 2010, p. 175).
37 (Burroughs 2010, pp. 124, 162).
38 (Hume 2000).
39 (Taussig 2001).

> chaos, horror, joy and terror, unknown fears and ecstasies, wild vertigos of extreme experience, immeasurable gain and loss, hideous dead ends.[40]

As is often the case for Burroughs, his narrators often directly intrude with opinions and arguments that we find in Burroughs' expanded oeuvre, such as letters, essays, and other writings. This attack on Western civilization is rather conventional of Burroughs, especially his early writings from *Naked Lunch* to the *Nova* trilogy. *The Western Lands* is mostly a continuation of similar concerns, a rejection of capitalist civilization and authority, as well as organized religion.

Whereas language was the primary enemy in his earlier writings, and attacked with cut-ups and similar techniques, *The Western Lands* and the *Dead Night* trilogy of which it is a part are somewhat more conventional. Less cut-up, less extreme in its fragmentation, *The Western Lands* remains non-linear with large amounts of intrusive narration. This is particularly evident in the extreme switching between deep history (ancient Egyptian), pop culture (Mick Jagger) and future worlds. Such switching is not only head-spinning for the reader but also suggestive of a flattening of time, a kind of plane of temporal equivalence.

This lack of teleology seems countered by the fact that the novel's title is a reference to a place that humanity should attempt to reach; a form of Edenic location and existence. As Frederick Dolan points out, "seeking the Western Lands, then, is an unprecedented project each time it is undertaken and demands above all else a break with common, mainstream ideas of authority, certainty, and utility."[41] Although the journey to the Western Lands is unprecedented each time, breaking away from authority and certainty remains a core component. This view produces a mythic view of this journey to the Western Lands; a quest, something that is larger than the individual human.

Such a view is quite different from the more apocalyptic visions of the *Naked Lunch* and *Nova* trilogy; there is, in the novel *The Western Lands*, a degree of hope and hopeful transformation that is not found in the earlier works. Egyptian mythology becomes a means for this hope, this alternate way of thinking that is used more as raw material than actual anthropological insight. While the hopeful end might be surprising to those familiar with Burroughs, writing oneself out of Western society is a standard practice for Burroughs: "Burroughs often treats the practice of writing oneself out of Western civilization as a preparatory act for a genuine transfiguration of culture and society".[42] So, Egyptian mythology, and Tibetan, are means of writing oneself out of Western civilization, of attacking Western civilization by introducing or infecting Western civilization with thoughts different from its own. Magic is important for Burroughs in this respect. Not because he necessarily believed in literal magic but because he saw "magic as a means for large-scale transformation of the human Will; indeed, [...] Burroughs considers it necessary for the transformation of the *human species*."[43] We can reverse that argument and consider magic anything that transforms the human species. Magic should here be understood in the sense Isabelle Stengers gives it: taking it seriously in order to remove its metaphoric protection, because "the discomfort it creates helps us notice the smoke in our nostrils."[44] In other words, magic becomes an estrangement technique—a provocation to make us think and to give up accepted criteria for the human species or any other aspect that we apply magic to. The purpose of magic is to push back at our conventionalized thinking. Weidner has made much the same argument as Ron Roberts, arguing that

> *Western Lands* suggests that a complex shift in human consciousness may be the only way to allow humans to escape from a ruined planet. The narrative proposes that it is possible to resolve the interminable distance between the ancient Egyptian other and the Amerindian by

[40] (Burroughs 2010, p. 112).
[41] (Dolan 1991).
[42] (Dolan 1991, p. 548).
[43] (Roberts 2004, p. 227). Emphasis in original.
[44] (Stengers 2012).

> drawing on and consolidating elements from both cultures' mythologies to create a cosmic mysticism for the future.[45]

Mythology, mysticism, and magic become ways to remove and rethink Western conceptions of mankind; to think otherwise than man. Burroughs would certainly consider language magic in this respect, but drugs and other reality-bending practices would also be included in this view of magic. The pastoral elements that Weidner identifies in *The Western Lands* are similarly part of this rethinking of mankind's relation to the world and the environment.[46] This is a future mysticism, or magic for the future, a way out of Western civilization. We have to accept reorientation in order to move out of Western civilization, because civilizations essentially work through orienting our perception and our conceptions of the world. Magic is a word which makes us uncomfortable because we are taught that it does not work. But what if it does? What if the power of magic is to open the doors of perception, rather than the closing of these same doors that Burroughs identifies as the actions of an absent-minded writer.[47] An absent-minded writer is a writer that does not challenge and change the technology that they work with: words. Challenging the technology of writing may be a way to challenge and open up perception, and Burroughs' many experiments with language should be considered in this conception of magic.

This brings us to death. Death in *The Western Lands* is not an end but a transformative event—in other words, it is a kind of magic. Hume shows that non-Western ideas of death are crucial, because "the borrowed eschatologies do not separate postmortem existence from life in the manner ingrained in Western thought. This continuity creates new ways of reading meaning into life."[48] These new ways of reading meaning into life can precisely show us life differently. Not solely in the sense of the ambiguous boundary between biological life and death, nor non-Western ideas of the presence of dead ancestors in the present, although surely also these insights. The larger take-away from *The Western Lands* is a rethinking of the human species that does not proceed from the human species but proceeds instead from the world and the environment.

This bird's eye view of *The Western Lands* is not an interpretation nor a deep analysis. I have simply located some materials for insight that allow us to see what literature might bring in terms of rethinking mankind. First of all, *The Western Lands* provide us with a non-linear view of time: ancient history and future are mixed, suggesting a flattening of time or a plane of temporal equivalence. This smashes a teleological view of time and history, which for Burroughs represents a move beyond authority and certainty. We cannot be sure that the future will be better than the past, but what we can try is to think this temporal flattening as a way of avoiding taking Western civilization as the default, simply because it comes after Egyptian (and other) civilizations. "After" is not a meaningful distinction for *The Western Lands*.

Magic as transformation and transformation as magic is the second insight that *The Western Lands* provides. This may well be the most challenging aspect of the novel, simply because it is the furthest removed from Western thought. If the old adage "it is easier to think the end of the world than the end of capitalism" is true, then Burroughs challenges us to think, not just of the end of capitalism, but of the end of Western thought and to accept that magic is a real, transformative force in the world.[49] As lengthy quote from Dolan expresses the stakes quite well:

> the writer's task is immense indeed, encompassing a transfiguration of Western perceptions of agency and identity and overturning "responsible" cause-and-effect explanatory narrative through the ecstasy of the synchronous and its logic of displacement. Such a transfiguration,

[45] (Weidner 2016, p. 101).
[46] (Weidner 2016, p. 85).
[47] (Burroughs 2013, loc. 965).
[48] (Hume 2000, p. 418).
[49] The quote is often attributed to Fredric Jameson in (Jameson 2005, p. 199).

> as we have seen, is not only a moral or individual concern but a political one, since it calls into question the character of our shared world and demands the articulation of new criteria for judging the order bequeathed to us by the "Aristotelian" civilization Burroughs rejects, as well as articulating a form of opposition or subversion.[50]

That is what must die. No cause-and-effect narrative, disrupted through the synchronous and displacement; a transfiguration of the entire Western social order and way of thinking; as well as the presentation of new criteria. A tall order, indeed, but then again, it is the planet that is at stake. Death becomes a way of freeing us from a particular way of thinking, of transforming (and transfiguring, this is magic after all) the human species into something other than what we have thought. We must break Morton's loop cycle of a particular kind of humanity inventing itself as the correct model.

4. No Loops, No Lines

The Western Lands presents a non-linear conception of time, what I previously called a flattened view of time as a temporal plane of equivalence. Rather than considering time as a teleological movement that proceeds from some deep time to the culmination of the emergence of humanity, time must be seen a continuous shifting that does not have an aim or goal. Burroughs' lack of distinction between ancient past, contemporary present, and imagined future provides an aesthetic experience of what such a temporal conception would be like. Confusing and disorienting, but also exhilarating. It reverses the conventional order of the world, where we have control over the world and instead shows a world that rejects such authority.

Here Burroughs' rejection of authority in toto provides the clue to what needs to happen. The disruptive nature of time in *The Western Lands* comes mostly through the yoking together of disparate elements. Consider the following, the opening of chapter three: "Neferti is eating breakfast at a long, wooden table with five members of an expedition: English, French, Russian, Austrian, Swedish. They are housed in a large utility shed, with filing cabinets, cots, footlockers, tool shelves and gun racks. The Englishman addresses Neferti: 'Look at you, a burnout astronaut."[51] Presumably Neferti means Nefertiti, a queen of Egypt and possible pharaoh. Certainly, Nefertiti lived long before there were European nations such as England and France and before astronauts, too. Yet yoking these elements together makes for a strange reading experience that disrespects historical authority.

The Western Lands generally disrespects historical and teleological authority throughout the novel. The narrative structure constantly vacillates between past, present, future, and their intermixing. Sentences like the one quoted above are evident throughout the novel. The same goes for the intrusive narrator, as already mentioned. This intrusion also disrupts the flow of the narrative, as the intrusive narrator comments on events from a different temporal position. Having said that, *The Western Lands* is far from the most jumbled of Burroughs' works. There is a clear sense of story progression, even if there are many asides and intrusions, and even if temporal linearity is not followed. Compared to the traveling camera narration of *The Wild Boys* or the run-on sentences of "Johnny 23" in *Exterminator!* or the more extreme cut-ups of *The Nova Express*, *The Western Lands* does come off as more straightforward. Of course, Burroughs was one of the most non-linear, non-teleological, temporally disjunct writers, pushing writing into non-sensical territories at times. That *The Western Lands* decreases some of that non-linearity and assault on time does not mean that the novel is an easy read, nor does it mean that there is no challenge to temporal unfolding.

In "Johnny 23," for instance, the breaks in time are signaled by ellipses, presumably indicating where the cut was performed. While this makes the text challenging to read, in *The Western Lands* such disruptions are smoothed over or less jagged. Nefertiti shows up several times, always out of time: "Wilson, the Guide, who lost his license as a White Hunter for shooting rhino with a bazooka, now turns

---

[50] (Dolan 1991, p. 541).
[51] (Burroughs 2010, p. 43).

on Neferti those cold blue eyes that always seem to be looking down a gun barrel."[52] This constant jumbling together of temporally separated events, locations, and people has the effect of dislocating the reader. Yet the device serves a different purpose in *The Western Lands* than challenging the linearity of writing. Rather, it is the usefulness of time itself that is challenged. In many passages across *The Western Lands* the intrusive narrator suggests that time is an entirely human concept: "Does time pass if there is no one there to register its passing? Of course not, since Time is a figment of human perception."[53] Time, when capitalized, is associated with the One God and is presented as an oppressive force that forces linearity unto the world.

By jumbling events and people together across conventionalized conceptions of linear time, *The Western Lands* challenges comprehension differently than the jagged cut-ups of earlier works. Having Nefertiti show up in many different times and locations, including the Kansas City Yards, becomes one of the devices for challenging time.[54] By challenging our conventional (and Western) conception of time, the novel also implicitly challenges that we have any control over the world. Linearity is a human concept, not a concept that belongs to the world, but, according to *The Western Lands*, one that we impose on the world around us. The disjunctive devices of *The Western Lands* become suggestive in terms of rethinking the human species' place in the world—we should not place too much emphasis on a sense of control over the world.

A view of the human species as emerging from the world rather than something over which we have dominion can be connected to Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology. Morton reluctantly admits that there "is such a thing as the human" but hastens to add that it "need not be something that is ontically given: we can't see it or touch it or designate it as present in some way".[55] Dark ecology emerges from the fact that the human is a loop formed by our own need to see ourselves as a species.[56] Morton uses this loop form to show how a particular logistics emerged. He terms this agrilogistics, "an agricultural program so successful that it now dominates agricultural techniques planetwide."[57] Agrilogistics establishes itself, only to loop back and argue that this logic was always already present but also inevitable: "Humans looked back and designated the time of early agrilogistics as a unit, justifying the present".[58] This is a feedback loop that produces humanity as a very clearly demarcated thing, with a specific linear history that leads to a given moment—now. For Morton, agrilogistics is what leads to climate collapse; creating the human as that which can control and exploit nature for life.

The problem that we face here is the confluence of natural and human sciences and the way that they are culturally conceived as having a hierarchy. The natural sciences establish certain facts about Homo sapiens that the human sciences must then infuse with meaning and significance. As Colebrook identifies, it is precisely this infusion of meaning and significance that creates a self-perpetuating essence of humanity, "it is man who will read the conditions of this system, discern its proper order, break free from merely instrumental attitudes and arrive at a proper mode of self-regulation."[59] We constantly reinvent ourselves in order to remain the central unit in the world. This is the human species' authority over the human species, and it is that authority which produces a linear history leading to whatever current moment we find ourselves in.

The real magic that Burroughs wants to perform is to break this loop, to not see ourselves as a species that (self-)perpetuates but rather as something that needs to die to become something else. That is to say, we must become extinct in order to survive. Only through a different conception, a different thinking of what the human is, can we hope to continue. Such a logic is a strange loop, but it

---

[52] (Burroughs 2010, p. 91).
[53] (Burroughs 2010, p. 223).
[54] (Burroughs 2010, p. 116).
[55] (Morton 2016, p. 15).
[56] (Morton 2016, p. 160).
[57] (Morton 2016, p. 42).
[58] (Morton 2016, p. 45).
[59] (Colebrook 2014, p. 57).

is the strange loop that Morton identifies and that Burroughs wishes to demolish. *The Western Lands* is a journey "to create an imaginative pastoral by revealing the potential of a complex mysticism for a future human age."[60] This complex mysticism centers on the idea of magic as something that can challenge, change, and transform our idea of humanity.

5. Magic and Animism: Altering the Human Equation

The interest in *The Western Lands* is to "alter the human equation."[61] Disease, drugs, violence, myth, death; whatever is at hand may be used to accomplish this goal. Altering the human equation is a way out of the human species authority over the human species, a rejection of Man's authority (the image of humanity as understood quite similarly by Burroughs and Foucault). Disrupting the loop of humanity's self-creation and self-perpetuation is the first step. The second step must be to expand the category of humanity to include a wide variety of Others and Strangers that are generally not considered humans.

Here, I will focus on nonhuman animals, due to Burroughs' interest in dogs and especially cats. However, the point is also to follow Bogna Konior in arguing that anthropomorphism is not human enough.[62] That is to say, by expanding the idea of personhood beyond narrow conceptions of Homo sapiens, we come closer to what Laruelle and Konior following him conceive as a "generic humanity." As Konior argues, the concept of generic humanity "does away with the desire to capture, represent and project a defined human quality onto nonhumans."[63] Two components are important for Konior: a defined human quality and projecting that quality onto nonhumans. We must refuse that there is such a thing as a clearly defined human. This follows Morton's hesitation about the human species and his refusal to claim that such a species has any particular ontic claim. As I argued above, this is because a host of normativities and power relations are built into the expansive claim of homo sapiens as understood by the natural sciences. The confusion of homo sapiens as a biological fact and the understanding that Homo sapiens is necessarily agricultural or sedentary or nomadic or capitalist or red in tooth and claw. These notions are essentially all superstructures built into a biological fact and must be refused. Instead, the human species must be regarded as a relation within a larger part of the world.

Burroughs is right there alongside Konior and Laruelle. As we hear about Joe, one of the protagonists of *The Western Lands*: "He can't love a human being, because he has no human place to love from. But he can love certain animals, because he has animal places."[64] Joe is interested in experimenting and expanding the human species and he does so only using untrained medical personnel, precisely because educated doctors have "absorbed a battery of crippling prejudices."[65] In other words, there is too much of the loop form present in trained doctors. This is not to suggest that doctors should not be trained but rather that Burroughs recognizes that facts and normativities get mixed together and reinforce each other. Normativities must be changed and transformed and the magic of animism can expand social norms in helpful ways—precisely by changing these very norms.

This is Isabella Stengers' argument in her "Reclaiming Animism;" that we must establish a metamorphic and not representational relationship with the world.[66] This has always been Burroughs' goal and is evident in his many anti-representationist literary practices, whether cut-ups and fold-ins, or simply the flat temporality evidenced in *The Western Lands*. No doubt magic sits uneasily for most academics, but Stengers makes the use of the word clear: "Protected by the metaphor [of magic],

---

60 (Weidner 2016, p. 85).
61 (Burroughs 2010, p. 61).
62 (Konior 2017).
63 (Konior 2017, p. 111).
64 (Burroughs 2010, p. 39).
65 (Burroughs 2010, p. 40).
66 (Stengers 2012, n.p.).

we may then express the experience of an agency that does not belong to us even if it includes us, but an 'us' as it is lured into feeling."[67] This is the idea of generic humanity, a humanity that opens up and includes, rather than closes down and retreats.

Burroughs' use of animals is a good example here. The cat Margaras is described as a powerful being: "the dreaded White Cat, the Tracker, the Hunter, the Killer [. . .] Having no color he can take all colors. He has a thousand names and a thousand faces. [. . .] There are those who say we have violated the Articles by invoking Margaras."[68] The point here is not the specifics of Margaras but rather that he is described in terms that may as well be a human. Margaras is essentially a person. Magic and metamorphosis is not a question of the supernatural but the acceptance that fiction has power and that no one can "step outside the 'flux of participation'."[69] We are all part of a milieu (Stengers) or an ecology (Morton) or the real (Laruelle) and that whole must be realized as a capacious assemblage. That assemblage is essentially an animist thinking that accepts that "we are not alone in the world" as some form of ultimate apex predator but rather one among many—singular and universal at the same time.

Anthony Paul Smith explicates this notion of simultaneous singular and universal as a duality without synthesis, that the generic is "the individual who has accepted her being universal but limited, who has accepted not being the tip or expression of the absolute".[70] The lack of synthesis is crucial because that is the transformative moment—that we as individuals are both singular *and* universal *at the same time* and that this cannot be reduced to a particular expression. In the same manner, the human species is both singular (a biological fact) *and* universal (part of the fabric of the world) and we cannot reduce this to a particular relation to the world. The human species does not exist in a relation to the world but is part of the world, inseparable and indistinguishable from the world. Burroughs' refusal to distinguish between human and animal persons help us recognize that.

6. Death and Extinction

As we have seen, Burroughs' view of humanity in *The Western Lands* is not an apogee, but a failed experiment. It should be noted that this does not represent the end of humanity, but the end of humanity as we know it. In other words, Burroughs thinks of extinction as a beginning; if we do not make the human species extinct from our ways of thinking, we will be trapped in within a host of normativities and things will only get worse. Claire Colebrook does something similar in her *Death of the Posthuman*. Colebrook argues that the problem about humanity is that we have become the yardstick for life, that we have positioned ourselves as "the very figure of life that has rendered the human exemplary of life as such."[71] If we push Colebrook's argument to its limit, that means that extinction, as we think it presently, is something that happens *to others*—all our animal, plant, and other organism others—but never to human life itself. Bostrom's existential risk only includes humans, as if we are the only ones worth worrying about. At its most extreme, if human life is exemplary of life and we are not at risk for going extinct, extinction does not really happen; only less significant forms of life cease to exist. For some transhumanist extremists, such as Elon Musk and Ray Kurzweil, even the collapse of Earth is but a minor impediment to a humanity that will live on Mars or in computers.

What we end up with is a very human version of extinction thought, one that contains and circumscribes extinction as something nonhuman. Colebrook critiques such a view and instead proffers human as parasite as an alternative to human as predator, where the human "lives only in its robbing and destruction of a life that is not its own."[72]. Yet in Colebrook's deconstruction and inversion of

67 (Stengers 2012, n.p.).
68 (Burroughs 2010, p. 56).
69 (Stengers 2012, n.p.).
70 Laruelle, quoted and translated by (Smith 2013, p. 92).
71 (Colebrook 2014, p. 204).
72 Colebrook, 178.

humanity, as useful it is as a theoretical intervention and call for interdisciplinarity, her move retains humanity as a bounded entity, still an exemplar of life, if not a dominant version of life. Certainly, Burroughs has also regarded the human species as a parasite. As Robin Lydenberg showed many years ago, "The internal parasite of received ideas which governs modern myth is anthropomorphized in *Naked Lunch* as the 'Man Within,' the alien inhuman force which occupies the body and colonizes the will of the addict."[73] Michael Sean Bolton has also explicated how language is the parasite for Burroughs.[74] Parasite and the human species are tightly integrated for Burroughs, but it is also important to note that the parasite represents the social normativities that oppress the human species. As Bolton points out, various conceptions of the parasite regard it as a crucial image of power relations, including, for Burroughs at times, a productive relation.[75] Productive, because it leads to alteration and change through noise.

The parasite is external to the human species, even as it interjects and makes itself internal and so disturbs the easy boundaries of life and social power. It is this insidiousness that makes the parasite such a threat for Burroughs, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, where especially Deleuze derived much of his insight into control societies from Burroughs. Deleuze explicitly references Burroughs for the term control societies: "Control societies are taking over from disciplinary societies. 'Control' is the name proposed by Burroughs to characterize the new monster, and Foucault sees it fast approaching."[76] In this way, we see how Burroughs' writings have already been used as raw material for philosophy. It is also why the parasite is such a useful deconstructive term for Colebrook; arguing that the human species is a parasite rather than a predator reveals the invasive nature of Homo sapiens. At first sight, it also seems to indicate a lesser power relation to the surrounding environment, but as we can see from Lydenberg and Bolton, the parasite is a dominant figure. It is unclear if this is part of Colebrook's use of the term, but since she attempts the minimize the space given to the human in her essays, this is probably unintentional.

Nonetheless, Colebrook's larger argument about extinction is significant because she posits extinction as a thought experiment that suggest that there is only variation, not variation *of* anything.[77] That is to say, pushing the logic of extinction to its limit, we cannot (or should not) say that a being, any being, varies in order "to fit a world."[78] When there is only variation, variation also applies to the world. For that reason, environment becomes suspect on the base assumption that there is a stable environment to which species beings adapt. The environment is not a stable background against which species (and in this light, as Colebrook has shown, the human species as yardstick) adapt, vanquish, and destroy. The environment itself (as multitudinous assemblages) also adapts—constantly, incessantly—without any care for the human species. In fact, there is no such thing as "the environment" according to Colebrook, but only variation. What we call the environment is only ever an artificially bounded abstraction, but the human species as the yardstick for life has obscured this for us. Because the environment does not resemble us, it does not change or adapt—it stays the same.

Burroughs' focus on fluidity and transformation and, yes, even magic, allows that the world is in constant metamorphosis and that this does not solely apply to the human species, simply because for Burroughs, the human species is not particularly relevant. What controls the human species formed much of his interest, but even that is not limited in *The Western Lands* to language, his old enemy, but also conceptions of time and life. By refuting any sense of linear or teleological conceptions of time, Burroughs avoids regarding the human species as the pinnacle of anything or the singular goal species

[73] (Lydenberg 1978).
[74] (Bolton 2016).
[75] (Bolton 2016, p. 50).
[76] (Deleuze 1995, p. 178).
[77] (Colebrook 2014, p. 27).
[78] Colebrook *ibid.*

evolution. The human species is headed for extinction, which is the same as transformation in *The Western Lands*.

As for life, that is a transversal, animist process that does imitate the human species or is singularly human. Most of *The Western Lands* portrays human beings as constantly changing, dying, or transforming, all on the same level of life as cats, dogs, gods, and other entities. Even cancer is a form of life: "The ultimate purpose of cancer and all virus, is to replace the host. So instead of trying to kill the cancer cells, help them to replicate and to replace host cells."[79] Everything is just life, all on the same plane of existence. In other words, life is ecological in Colebrook's sense. Extinct as stable entity but alive as constant variation. This Deleuzian conception of life would see species as finite articulations, plateaus that stabilize for a period of time only to mutate and become something else. Species have their time only to mutate on to something else. My argument here is not that we should accelerate our transformation but to note that the human species is not a static object in the world. As such, our relation is also changeable, and we must face and accept this changeable position.

There is a danger in this valorization of variation. It produces variation as the stable element itself. Such a Heraclitic view of life and nature, where change is the only constant, risks positing change as a positive force. That is not the case, and it is why *The Western Lands* is a book of the dead. The journey to the Western Lands holds an uncharacteristic amount of hope for Burroughs; that we can somehow move beyond the human impasse and magically transform into something better, possibly more benign. In this way, the theory-fiction of Burroughs posits that there is a way out of the human equation. Through his writing's engagement with time, animism, and extinction, we can see what this way out looks like. It is through a generic, which is to say broadened, humanity that exists as part of a larger, more inclusive world. Because there can be no separation between the human species and the world of which it is part, we cannot limit life to the human species, nor accept that the human species stands as a form of apex atop any kind of hierarchy. That conception of the human species must die and transform into something else.

We must allow for the emergence of the specific against the overdetermination of the human species.[80] That is to say, we must make extinct the idea that we can define the human species as anything other than a singular and universal relation to the world without performing a synthesis that would stabilize this relation. There is no human species apart from the world, and any definition of the human species would stabilize world-human relations and (re)introduce the human equation. *The Western Lands* allows us to think outside of the human equation and is not as focused on destruction as Burroughs' earlier writings. Instead, *The Western Lands* gives us tools for thinking through a transformation. This is the work that this novel does for us as ecocritics; it provides tools for transforming the ways we think of the human. In a way, this is to take one of Burroughs' most famous claims and turning it in its head. If language is a virus, we can use that virus to change our thinking.

Is transformation of the human species an ethical good that we should pursue? In a sense, this is the wrong question, because it extends from an anthropocentric perspective of human exceptionalism. What does need to happen is the recognition that the human species does not and cannot stand apart from a broader ecology. There is not the world and the human as two distinct entities. Even a world–human relation is misleading; better to understand ecological humanity as *h*w*u*o*m*r*a*l*n*d—co-mingled, inseparable, part of the same equation. That is a deeply ecological message, while it is also one that resists easy conceptualization (as the ugly typographical expression testifies to). The future of extinction is not the extinction of the human species, or so this article hopes. It is the extinction of thinking that the survival of the bee is of little significance to us, unless we eat honey; that COVID-19 is of no significance to us if we are healthy; that the polar ice caps melting only concerns those living below the water line; and so on. We can consider this form of thinking as its own kind of

---

79 (Burroughs 2010, p. 60).
80 (Konior 2017, p. 116).

magical thinking. Magical in the sense that it produces a sense of human exceptionalism; that we are somehow a species that stands above other forms of life. Burroughs, as I hope is evident, holds no such illusions. While much of his own views of life were deplorably misanthropic and misogynistic, we need not follow him there. What is useful about Burroughs' writings is his rejection of what conventionally ground human assumptions and conceptions. By rejecting not only the human species as anything other than a relation within a larger ecology, rejecting teleology, embracing magic as a practice of thinking differently, and accepting a world of animism as a way of making the human species unexceptional, Burroughs has furnished us with tools that are eminently suitable for the twenty-first century and for the Anthropocene.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

References

Bolton, Michael Sean. 2016. William S. Burroughs, Michel Serres, and the Word Parasite. *Journal of Beat Studies* 4: 1.

Bostrom, Nick. 2009. The Future of Humanity. In *New Waves in Philosophy of Technology*. Edited by Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen, Evan Selinger and Søren Riis. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bostrom, Nick. 2013. Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority. *Global Policy* 4: 1. [CrossRef]

Burroughs, William S. 1993. May 1, 1950, Allen Ginsberg. In *The Letters of William S. Burroughs: 1945–1959*. Edited by Oliver Harris. New York: Penguin Books.

Burroughs, William S. 1996. On Writing. In *With William Burroughs: From the Bunker*. Edited by Victor Bockris. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Burroughs, William S. 2010. *The Western Lands*. London: Penguin Classics.

Burroughs, William S. 2013. *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*. New York: Grove Press.

Burroughs, William S. 2014a. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. New York: Penguin Books.

Burroughs, William S. 2014b. *The Ticket That Exploded*. New York: Penguin Books.

Burroughs, William S. 2014c. *The Soft Machine*. New York: Penguin Books.

Christiansen, Steen Ledet. 2014. Biopoetics of Control and Resistance in William Burroughs' The Nova Trilogy. *Prospero* XIX: 165–84. [CrossRef]

Colebrook, Claire. 2014. *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*. London: Open Humanities Press, vol. 1.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1995. *Negotiations, 1972–1990*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dolan, Frederick M. 1991. The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs's *The Western Lands*. *Contemporary Literature* 32: 534–51. [CrossRef]

Fornari, Roberta. 2003. William S. Burroughs' The Western Lands. In *America and the Mediterranean*. Edited by Massimo Bacigalupi and Pierangelo Castagneto. Torino: OTTO.

Hassan, Ihab. 1963. The Subtracting Machine: The Work of William Burroughs. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 6: 4–23. [CrossRef]

Hume, Kathryn. 2000. Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon. *Modern Philology* 97: 418. [CrossRef]

Irwin, Jones. 2012. William Burroughs as Philosopher: From Beat Morality to Third Worldism to Continental Theory. In *The Philosophy of the Beats*. Edited by Sharin N. Elkholy. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.

Konior, Bogna. 2017. Generic Humanity: Interspecies Technologies, Climate Change & Non-standard Animism. *Transformations* 30: 111.

Laruelle, François. 2015. *Photo-Fiction, a Non-standard Aesthetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lydenberg, Robin. 1978. Cut-up: Negative Poetics in William Burroughs and Roland Barthes. *Comparative Literature Studies* 15: 418.

McDonald, Anne. 1983. William Burroughs: Subversion of the Word Machine. *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture* 1: 196.

Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Roberts, Ron. 2004. The High Priest and the Great Beast at The Place of Dead Roads. In *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*. Edited by Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh. London: Pluto Press, pp. 225–40.

Shaviro, Steven. 1995. Two lessons from Burroughs. In *Posthuman Bodies*. Edited by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 38–54.

Skau, Michael. 1981. The Central Verbal System: The Prose of William Burroughs. *Style* 15: 401–14.

Smith, Anthony Paul. 2013. *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Stengers, Isabel. 2012. Reclaiming Animism. *e-flux*, 36. Available online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/ (accessed on 25 November 2020).

Taussig, Michael. 2001. Dying is an art, like everything else. *Critical Inquiry* 28: 308. [CrossRef]

Weidner, Chad. 2013. Mutable Forms: The Proto-Ecology of William Burroughs' Early Cut-Ups. *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 11: 314–26. [CrossRef]

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

humanities MDPI

Article

The Dark Ecology of *Naked Lunch*

George Hart

Department of English, California State University Long Beach, Long Beach, CA 90840, USA;
George.Hart@csulb.edu

Received: 15 September 2020; Accepted: 22 October 2020; Published: 30 October 2020

Abstract: In this article, I argue that William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* engages in a "perverse aesthetics" that is analogous to Timothy Morton's theory of dark ecology. The novel's main themes of consumption and control are directly related to the Anthropocene's twin disasters of global warming and mass extinction, and the trope for addiction, junk, reveals Burroughs' deep analysis of the political and social forces that attempt to control life, what Burroughs calls biocontrol. By placing the novel's obsession with hanging/lynching in the context of dark ecology, its critique of racism can also be seen as a critique of speciesism.

Keywords: William S. Burroughs; *Naked Lunch*; dark ecology; consumption; control; Timothy Morton; speciesism; consumerism; mass extinction

---

In the introduction of *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*, Chad Weidner rejects Timothy Morton's dark ecology as a model for reading *Naked Lunch*. Drawing from *The Ecological Thought*, Weidner dismisses Morton's claims that thinking ecologically is viral (an idea that would seem to appeal to the author of *Naked Lunch*), and that ecology includes such things as human emotions, mental illness, and capitalism, because such a theory "cast[s] a very wide net indeed". According to Weidner, Morton "seems to accept the notion of nature as a cultural construct ... but at the same time advises that we abandon romantic notions of nature altogether, to develop a more skeptical postmodern position. A more straightforward understanding of ecological concentrations is more helpful for framing this particular study" (Weidner 2016, p. 4). Weidner proposes an ecocritical reading of Burroughs' entire body of work, so his needs may indeed be better suited to other ecocritics and ecotheories than Morton and dark ecology, but I believe that when it comes to *Naked Lunch*, Morton's work has much to offer. The novel's two main concerns, consumption and control, are at play in the Anthropocene's twin catastrophes, global warming and mass extinction, and we need a less straightforward, more twisted and queer, understanding of what this means.

Although it began as the phrase "naked lust",[1] one meaning Burroughs attributed to *Naked Lunch*'s title is nicely captured in *The Ecological Thought*: "We can't spit out the disgusting real of ecological enmeshment. It's just too close and too painful for comfort. So it's a weird, perverse aesthetics that includes the ugly and the horrifying, embracing the monster ... We have to make do with the nasty stuff that has been handed to us on our plate" (Morton 2010, p. 124). Morton's point is that ecology, rather than Nature (he likes to capitalize it to indicate its unnaturalness, as Weidner notes above), requires a "perverse aesthetics" because Nature is a conceptual containment strategy produced by agriculture that has been in place for 12,000 years (Morton calls this system agrilogistics). The aesthetics of agrilogistic Nature is heteronormative, ethnocentric, ableist, and sublime, the opposite of queer

---

[1] Oliver Harris traces the title's origins to the first version of the novel when it was a composite of *Junky*, *Queer*, and *Interzone* in the early 1950s (Harris and MacFadyen 2009, pp. 14–15). Burroughs' later remark that "the title means exactly what the words say" (Grauerholz and Miles 2001, p. 199), according to Harris, is a feint meant to distract from its original reference to the author's "naked lust" for a reluctant lover.

or perverse. Ecology, on the other hand, means that everything is connected to everything else, so foreground (human concerns) and background (Nature) can no longer be easily distinguished. "With dark ecology", Morton explains, "we can explore all kinds of art forms as ecological: not just ones that are about lions and mountains, not just journal writing and sublimity. The ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (Morton 2010, p. 17). In other words, dark ecology is exactly the ecocritical frame that *Naked Lunch* requires.

Burroughs' approach to writing also connects *Naked Lunch* with dark ecology. In a 1965 interview, he explicitly links his writing with anti-nuclear and environmentalist political action: "All of my work is directed against those who are bent, through stupidity or design, on blowing up the planet or rendering it uninhabitable". In the next sentence, however, Burroughs describes his aesthetic strategy in terms that would not be seen as ecological: "Like the advertising people we talked about, I'm concerned with the precise manipulation of word and image to create an action, not to go out and buy a Coca-Cola, but to create an alteration in the reader's consciousness" (Plimpton 1999, p. 32). It is indeed perverse to propose to use the techniques of consumerism and advertising to alter people's consciousness in order to produce social change. By identifying himself with "advertising people" who manipulate words and images, Burroughs indicts authorship as another form of control, and in terms of *Naked Lunch*, this associates the author himself with the character of Dr. Benway, "a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control" (Burroughs 1991, p. 19). In *Naked Lunch*, as David Ayers points out, "junk" is the major trope of control: "Heroin addiction provides Burroughs with the metabolic model of control which structurally informs other models of control which he will subsequently employ" (Ayers 1993, p. 225). As Burroughs explains in the interview, "I think drugs are interesting principally as chemical means of altering metabolism and thereby altering what we call reality" (Plimpton 1999, p. 7). Perversely, as we will see, consuming drugs in *Naked Lunch* becomes a kind of consumerism that is a way of being ecological.

According to Morton, "there are some ecological chemicals in consumerism, just where we weren't thinking to look" (Morton 2015, p. 120). The ecological chemicals in consumerism are desire, which in Lacanian terms is what is left when *need* is severed from *want*, and the narcissistic loop of doing something for its own sake. If the title *Naked Lunch* can default to its original meaning of "naked lust", then eating and desire can be seen along the same lines. Indeed, this is exactly how Harris accounts for the play between *lust* and *lunch*: "what Burroughs termed *schlupping*—which features first in *Queer* and then *Naked Lunch*—was a fantasy of devouring the body of his elusive object of desire and so very much a matter of making lust into lunch" (Harris and MacFadyen 2009, p. 20). The consumption of bodies in *Naked Lunch*, when read through dark ecology, involves not only sexual fantasy and science-fiction ectoplasm but also racism and speciesism. One of *Naked Lunch*'s figures for junk is the Black Meat, which is derived from a giant aquatic centipede and, as the name suggests, is eaten rather than injected. Many bodies become "lunch" in the course of *Naked Lunch*.

The "unexamined meme" of consumerism, for Morton, is "*First there was need. Then there was want*". Dark ecology, however, recognizes that "there is no 'proper' amount, and the proper is where need lives in historical accounts of want versus need. In those accounts, *need* is precisely calibrated not to be excessive" (Morton 2015, pp. 120–21). We are told in the "Deposition" that "Junk yields a basic formula of 'evil' virus: *The Algebra of Need*" (Burroughs 1991, p. 201). If "opium is profane and quantifiable like money", then there is no limit on how much the addict needs, just as there is never enough money for a miser: "The more junk you use less you have and the more you have the more you use" (Burroughs 1991, p. 201). Junk scrambles the distinction that the metaphysics of presence requires between *want* and *need*, which is the metaphysics of the *proper*. Such is the typical way of being ecological: we should only use as much as we need and not give in to *wanting* more. Junk "is the ultimate merchandise" because "the junk merchant ... sells the consumer to his product". This is also the "basic formula" of consumerism: need without limit or control "suggests we follow directives emanating from thoughts and Coke bottles rather than deliberately and reasonably 'needing' them" (Morton 2015, p. 123). Environmental ethics typically fails to examine Morton's "unexamined meme".

To consume something just for the sake of consuming it is the "evil" virus of capitalism that is ravaging the planet, just as the "dope fiend" uses heroin for no other reason than using it: "Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: '*Wouldn't you?*' Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do *anything* to satisfy total need" (Burroughs 1991, p. 201). Global warming and mass extinction are the results of the "carbon-fiend" total need for fossil fuels.

Dark ecology and *Naked Lunch* agree that the algebra of need is also the solution, whether the problem is the total need of junk or carbon. *Algebra* is derived from the Arabic word that means "the restoring of broken parts" and originally entered English as a term for setting broken bones. It is the art of restoring or balancing, so learning the algebra of need suggests a balancing of need and want—or, even better, a chiastic reversal of them. The fragment of "Word" that begins the conclusion of the restored text ends with the claim: "Through these orifices transmute your body . . . The way OUT is the way IN . . . ".[2] Morton's algebra is a chiastic reversal of the same formula: "*The way in is the way out*".[3] For Morton, being takes a loop form, a twisted circle like a Moebius strip that has no definable inside or outside. Agrilogistics and its literary correlatives such as nature writing "tr[y] to straighten out" such loops, and, unfortunately, "attempts to straighten things are violent" (Morton 2015, p. 57). In agrilogistics, *in* and *out* are not chiastically reversible directions but rather firmly established binaries that must be policed. In dark ecology as in *Naked Lunch*, going deeper into consumerism allows the twist, the perversion, in being to escape agrilogistic control and avoid being "straightened" out.

If we need a perverse aesthetics that "embrac[es] the monster", then *Naked Lunch*'s examination of "biocontrol" is central to dark ecology (Burroughs 1991, p. 136). Gilles Deleuze, accounting for the shift from a disciplinary (in the Foucauldian sense) society to a control society in the postwar era, cites Burroughs: "These are the societies of control, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies. 'Control' is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster" (Deleuze 1992, p. 4). Thomas Nail reports that "according to Deleuze, Foucault was inspired by Burroughs' analysis of social control so much that he based the concept of biopower on it". He continues,

> "Foucault and Deleuze are both quite clear in their examples of biopolitics that it includes the management of city-planning, money, transportation, crime, information, communication, water, sheep, grain and the climate, just as much as it is the statistical management of human births, deaths, marriages and illness. These are all living forces insofar as they are ultimately uncertain and non-totalizable phenomena. Accordingly, they cannot be managed as individuals, but only as populations with non-assignable limits: as multiplicities, as zones of frequency". (Nail 2016, pp. 254, 261)

Nail's account shows that biocontrol runs incipiently throughout the agrilogistic era even as it mutates from feudalism into industrialism into the information economy. Morton writes, "Neolithic humans needed to survive (mild) global warming, and so they settled in fixed communities that became cities, in order to store grain and plan for the future" (Morton 2018, p. 11). We cannot separate the "living forces" (demographics) from the material substrate that sustains them—controlling the regulation of life requires the control of non-life as well.

Naked Lunch itself records the shift from discipline to biopower in the political conflicts between the parties of Interzone. Deleuze tracks the change in the different types of machines in each era: in feudal power, it is simple machines such as pulleys and levers; disciplinary power uses machines powered by industrial energy sources such as coal and oil; and "the societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses" (Deleuze 1992, p. 6). Control societies operate by codes and passwords rather than by force or discipline; in other words, language is the means of control. The most "evil" of

[2] (Burroughs 1991, p. 191), original ellipses.
[3] (Morton 2015, p. 120), original emphasis.

the Interzone parties is the Senders, whose ultimate goal is to control the planet through "one-way telepathy", though they must begin with the "crude" technique of installing electronic receivers in the subject's brain. A Sender technician explains, "The biocontrol apparatus is prototype of one-way telepathic control. The subject could be rendered susceptible to the transmitter by drugs or other processing without installing any apparatus. Ultimately the Senders will use telepathic transmitting exclusively" (Burroughs 1991, pp. 136–37).

Of course, the Senders themselves are susceptible to addiction, and the result of constant one-way sending is that "one Sender could control the planet ... *You see control can never be a means to any practical end ... It can never be a means to anything but more control ... Like junk*".[4] Control and junk operate on the same principle, and "junk is the ideal product". The junk pyramid and the control pyramid are the models of consumerism: "The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product" (Burroughs 1991, p. 201). Deleuze identifies the shift from production to marketing as a characteristic of capitalism in the control society: "This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed" (Deleuze 1992, p. 6). Each of the political parties of Interzone, other than the Factualists, attempts their own control society paradigms: the Senders through one-telepathy, the Divisionists through replicating themselves, and the Liquefactionists through absorbing (or *schlupping*) their opponents. Although the Factualists are against all of these groups, they do not oppose everything about their methods ("the parties are not in practice separate but blend in all combinations"). They reject replicas because "such creatures constitut[e] an attempt to circumvent process and change"; the Factualists accept the "protoplasmic core" that the Liquefactionists exploit, but they want to allow it "a maximum of flexibility"; the Factualists do not "oppose telepathic research", but they do "oppose ... the use of such knowledge to control, coerce, debase, exploit or annihilate the individuality of another living creature" (Burroughs 1991, p. 140). Although every character seems to be a double agent, and everyone's motives are suspect, it appears that the Factualists would be the party most likely to be the resistance against those intent on "blowing up the planet or rendering it uninhabitable".

Each of the parties in opposition to the Factualists are manifestations of biopower, and Morton observes that "an ecological politics like that would be a monstrous situation, a 'control society,' a useful term invented by philosopher Gilles Deleuze to describe our contemporary world. An ecological control society would make the current state of affairs ... look like an anarchistic picnic" (Morton 2018, p. 11). For Morton, there are "*styles* of being ecological in *thought mode*" and the dominant ways of "being ecological" are not adequate. A "very popular style", according to Morton, is "the efficient style", which "value[s] a smoothly functioning biosphere optimized for human existence without too much damage to other lifeforms". This style, as opposed to other ones Morton calls immersive, authentic, and religious, treats nature as a blank slate that can be manipulated and formatted at will—geoengineering would be an extreme example—and "the seduction of this approach is the sense of mastery it bestows" (Morton 2018, p. 148). Dr. Benway is both the paradigm and parody of the efficient style. His operations parody medical efficiency because they have "absolutely no medical value", and his associate Dr. "Fingers" Schafer proposes that the "human body is [so] scandalously inefficient" that it should be modified to "have one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate" (Burroughs 1991, pp. 52, 110). Schafer's proposal, of course, prompts Benway to tell the story of the talking asshole. The talking asshole routine is the most famous allegory of control in the novel, and it is therefore a distinctive parody of the efficient style (which usually ends with unintended consequences). The framing dialogue between Benway and Schafer, as we will see, is also related to the novel's recurring references to lynching.

---

[4] (Burroughs 1991, p. 137), original ellipses and emphases.

The most notorious hangings, as opposed to *lynchings*, in the novel are the sadomasochistic scenes of eroticized violence in Hassan's rumpus room and A.J.'s annual party.[5] The lynching of Black people, however, occurs or is referenced five times in *Naked Lunch*—six if we include one of the "outtakes" in the restored edition—and lynching, which usually involved burning the body as well as hanging, is distinctly different than the eroticized hangings favored by A.J. and Hassan.[6] Certainly, the ritualized hangings and pornographic movies are control devices being employed by Hassan and A.J., devices which evoke the underground world of sex trafficking and snuff films. Lynching, however, evokes a distinctly mainstream form of control, the system that W. Jason Miller calls "American lynching culture": "a uniquely American practice that was enacted, sustained, and tolerated by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, psychological, racial, sexual, and political motives" (Miller 2011, p. 4). One of Burroughs' figures for addiction, "the Black Meat", takes on new meaning when the connections between American lynching culture and speciesism come into focus. The Black Meat is a figure for junk, of course, and it is related to the Heavy Fluid excreted by Mugwumps, whose addicts are known as Reptiles. It is the "flesh of the giant aquatic black centipede" and its addicts are "Meat Eaters". The Black Meat is sold in the Plaza of Interzone and Reptiles frequent the Meet Café, also located in the Plaza, to obtain the "addicting fluid" from the Mugwumps' "erect penises". Two recurring characters are associated with the Black Meat, the Sailor and "Fats" Terminal. It appears that the Sailor is a Meat Eater because he is the middleman between Fats and Reptiles who sell "eggs" filled with the Black Meat. One form of junk is liquid and is absorbed through a "fan of green cartilage" behind the ear, and the other is solid and is ingested: "(The Black Meat is like a tainted cheese, overpoweringly delicious and nauseating so that the eaters eat and vomit and eat again until they fall exhausted)" (Burroughs 1991, pp. 45–47). The Black Meat, as a figure for junk, is directly connected to consuming, eating specifically.

The "struggle against racism is exactly the struggle against speciesism", Morton asserts (Morton 2017, p. 133). For Morton, species is "spectral"—it is both there and not there at the same time. Because we share most of our DNA with our nearest primate relatives, we are not 100 percent human. There is a gap between what we are as individual lifeforms and what we are as a species: "Racism exists when one fills in the gap between what one can see (beings starting engines and shoveling coal) and what this human thing is: the human considered as a species, namely as a hyperobject, a massively distributed physical entity of which I am and am not a member, simultaneously" (Morton 2015, p. 15). Species is not a stable container in which lifeforms can be confined and thereby controlled. It is the ambiguity of evolution, which works by mutation—things turning into other things—that threatens the hierarchy of control. "The impulse behind racism … is also what empowers a thin and rigid distinction between humans and nonhumans. … We and all other lifeforms exist in an ambiguous space in between categories" (Morton 2018, p. 16). *Naked Lunch* itself is such an "ambiguous space" as well as its primary setting, an "in-between" place called Interzone.

The "*Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry*" is one place in Interzone where an evolutionary metamorphosis occurs. Dr. Schafer presents his "Master Work" to the conference: "*The Complete All American Deanxietized Man*".[7] On stage, "The Man wriggles … His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede. Waves of unknown stench fill the room". The other doctors see that Schafer has gone too far and decide to

---

5 Rob Johnson traces Burroughs' weird obsession with hanging back to "Word". He writes, "I'm not enough of a psychologist to begin to speculate on Burroughs' sexual fixation with hanging, but it does seem to have something to do with the involuntary nature of the erection." (Johnson 2020).

6 References to or images of the lynching of Black people occur on pages 88, 106, 133, 147, and 174 of the restored edition; the "outtake" is "The Black Meat", pp. 266–69.

7 Another version of this hanging can be found in "Word" when "Mr. America" is hanged "a monster centipede squirms in his spine". (Burroughs 1989, p. 137).

destroy the centipede because their "duty to the human race is clear".[8] The course of action is clear as well:

> "We must stomp out the Un-American crittah", says a fat, frog-faced Southern doctor who has been drinking corn out of a mason jar. He advances drunkenly, then halts, appalled by the formidable size and menacing aspect of the centipede . . .
>
> "Fetch gasoline!" he bellows. "We gotta burn the son of a bitch like an uppity Nigra"! [9]

In speciesism, humans must clearly be distinguished from centipedes just as, in racism, white people must be distinguished from Black people. Once the ambiguity is resolved, the violence is justified.

In the outtake "The Black Meat", there are no giant centipedes or Meat Eaters; in fact, the phrase "black meat" does not occur in the outtake. The episode begins with the dedication of a Generalissimo's statue in which "some joker of an apprentice had made an ass hole" that produces "loud farting noises" and "a horrible stink" when the statue is unveiled (Burroughs 1991, p. 267). The smell pervades the scene and the narration follows it through suburbs in America, houses in Spain, the streets of Bogota, then abruptly shifts to Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. "Paul never miss a burning", we are told, and then the scene shifts to the American South: "Yes", the sheriff said, pushing a wad of snuff into his cheek. 'Nothing like a good *slow* Nigga Burnin' to quiet a town down for a piece . . . And folks go around all dreamy and peaceful looking and sorta sleepy like they just ate something real good and plenty of it . . . "[10] The vicarious feeling of being sated by symbolically consuming an actual Black body is not a fiction (though it is powerfully portrayed in fiction in James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man"). *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, for example, reproduces a 1916 postcard with a picture of Jesse Washington's burned body, on which the sender writes, "This is the Barbecue we had last night".[11] The "black meat" that white Americans are addicted to (because it is what produces whiteness) is a literal as well as figurative addiction.

It is not hard to read "*The Complete All American Deanxietized Man*" and "The Black Meat" as allegories of what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence, ultimately showing us how racism is linked to mass extinction. There are multiple allegorical parodies of control society in these scenes—academia, medicine, law, state—each of which exposes the violence of the metaphysics of presence, the insistence on consistency and non-ambiguity, its enforcement of binary norms: American/Un-American, White/Black, sane/crazy, human/"crittah". Racism has "to do with thinking one can point to certain physical features as indicators of the proper" (Morton 2017, pp. 135–36). The idea of the proper is related to notions of property and possession that are the basis of racism. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida talks about the "proper body" and relates it to "the *metaphysics of the proper* [*le proper*—self-possession, propriety, property, cleanliness]".[12] This is the logic of colonialism and ethnocentrism—whatever one wants to define as other lacks a proper self to possess; therefore the other is unable to be proper or to own property, and is otherwise a pollutant. In dark ecology, "the struggle against racism is thus also part of the deanthropocentrization project" (Morton 2017, p. 136). Reading *Naked Lunch* through dark ecology demonstrates that Burroughs' analysis and critique of control extends to racialization and American lynching culture.

The talking asshole routine and the "*Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry*" are linked by the smell of the giant aquatic centipede and the burning Black Meat. Before the talking asshole routine, Benway appears to be discussing Schafer's lack of success with "*The Complete All American Deanxietized Man*": "Don't take it so hard kid . . . *Jedermann macht eine kleine Dummheit*.

---

8 (Burroughs 1991, p. 87), original ellipses.
9 (Burroughs 1991, p. 88), original ellipses.
10 (Burroughs 1991, p. 268), original ellipses.
11 (Allen 2000), plate 26.
12 (Derrida 2016, p. 28), original emphasis.

(Everyone makes a little dumbness)". Schafer has his doubts, but he concedes, "Yes, yes of course ... and yet ... I can't get that stench out of my lungs ... " To which Benway ("irritably") replies, "None of us can ... Never smelled anything remotely like it".[13] Benway abruptly turns back to their task at hand, and Schafer, still lingering on his failed experiment perhaps, proposes his return to surgery to make the human body more efficient, prompting Benway's recounting of the talking asshole routine. Benway's point in telling the story is not to discredit Schafer's theory of efficiency, but to comment on American culture's prurient and puritanical attitude toward sex (or the repressed in general). "That's the sex that passes the censor", he explains, "squeezes between bureaus, because there's always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils". The metaphysics of presence requires the Law of the Excluded Middle because it needs binary distinctions with no gray area.[14] Benway's anti-bureaucracy tirade that follows is an implicit argument for the excluded middle, for "a space *between*" bureaus that is not supposed to exist. Michael Jarvis describes the critical debate around Benway's rant against bureaucracy here. The "two possibilities for the presence of this passage within a Benway monologue" are either to read it naturalistically as the character's own opinions or "as narrated by Burroughs' direct authorial voice". He proposes that to avoid "the author/character debate altogether" we can "allow ourselves merely to read this as the novel's own voice of critique" (Jarvis 2017, p. 199). The notion of "mere" reading assumes a pre-theoretical idea of reading and severely abuses the idea of "voice" in writing. Burroughs' distrust of character and authorship are certainly at play here, but it is safe to say that Benway is a mouthpiece for Burroughs' political critique: old Bull Lee, the character based on Burroughs in *On the Road*, expresses the same opinion (Kerouac 2007, pp. 133–34).

Bureaus, according to Benway/Bull Lee/Burroughs, are a cancer upon democracy. The "American rottenness" spurts out into these between spaces, like the "Undifferentiated Tissue" that covers the carny performer's mouth as the asshole takes control, and "grow[s] into some degenerate cancerous life-form, reproducing a hideous random image". According to Benway, as opposed to a cooperative, "Bureaucracy is [...] a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action" (Burroughs 1991, p. 112). "*The Complete All American Deanxietized Man*" reveals the Blackness at the center of American whiteness, and the talking asshole reveals the human institutions that corrupt and control potential, difference, and life ("independent spontaneous action").

Benway, as is commonly noted, is not only the master figure of control in the novel's Interzone chapters, he is also a figure for authorial control, or anxiety about authorial control: if characters exhibit "independent spontaneous action" then the author has lost control, "The Crime of Separate Action" has occurred (Burroughs 1991, p. 186). However, the point of these comments from the "Atrophied Preface" is to problematize the idea of *voice* in the first place:

> Sooner or later The Vigilante, The Rube, Lee The Agent, A.J., Clem and Jody The Ergot Twins, Hassan O'Leary the After Birth Tycoon, The Sailor, The Exterminator, Andrew Keif, "Fats" Terminal, Doc Benway, "Fingers" Schafer are subject to say the same thing in the same words, to occupy, at that intersection point, the same position in space-time. Using a common vocal apparatus complete with all metabolic appliances–that is, to be the same person—a most inaccurate way of expressing *Recognition:* The junky naked in sunlight ...

If we can hear "the novel's own voice", it is because there is "a common vocal apparatus" that all speakers in the novel share—the author's. Bakhtinian heteroglossia notwithstanding, Burroughs' voice is the narrator's voice, is Benway's, the Vigilante's, the Rube's, and Lee the Agent's voices. It is an "inaccurate" representation—as all representations are—of what happens when "the writer sees himself reading to the mirror as always" and realizes "what it means in terms of lost control when the

[13] (Burroughs 1991, p. 110), original ellipses.
[14] For Morton's discussion of the Law of the Excluded Middle, see (Morton 2015, pp. 87–88).

reflection no longer obeys".[15] Intersection points are like Interzone itself and the in between spaces in which "independent spontaneous action" occurs.

The character from the above list who is the intersection point for the themes of consumption and control as they relate to eating and the Black Meat is "Fats" Terminal. The first passage with Fats as an actor occurs immediately after the talking asshole routine, in which Fats sponsors "the Hunt Breakfast" for a motorcycle gang, The Huntsmen, in a gay bar. Such A.J.-like hijinks indicate that "'Fats' is connected in some unspecified way with every underground of the world", as we are told when he appears in "Word" (Burroughs 1989, p. 184). Fats' significance in *Naked Lunch* is his association with "The Algebra of Need":

> "Fats" Terminal came from The City Pressure Tanks where open life jets spurt a million forms, immediately eaten, the eaters canceled by black time fuzz . . .
>
> Few reach the Plaza, a point where The Tanks empty a tidal river, carrying forms of survival armed with defenses of poison slime, black flesh-rotting fungus, and green odors that sear the lungs and grab the stomach in twisted knots . . .
>
> Because Fats' nerves were raw and peeled to feel the death spasms of a million cold kicks . . . Fats learned The Algebra of Need and survived . . . [16]

Fats is associated with the evolutionary life process, the ability of species to adapt to new environments and survive. If junkies exist in a state of suspended animation because they slow their metabolisms down with heroin, "Fats" Terminal's association with living beings means he has found the way out by the way in. Biological processes appear as a positive force against biocontrol twice in the novel. The "great blue tide of life" represented by "pictures of men and women, boys and girls, animals, fish, birds, the copulating rhythm of the universe" is how A.J. disrupts Hassan's "rumpus"; and, in the section "describing The City and the Meet Café [which was] written in a state of *yagé* intoxication", the narrator feels a "beautiful blue substance" flow into him as he "turn[s] into a Negress" and "everything stirs with a writhing furtive life".[17] The yagé vision of Interzone, where "all houses [. . .] are joined", is a dark ecological version of the *oikos*, the interconnectedness that Morton calls "the mesh" (Morton 2010, p. 28).

The "open life jets [that] spurt" out lifeforms that immediately eat each other are precisely the image of Morton's "disgusting real of ecological enmeshment" that we find on our plate. It is also captured in one of the most famous ecological figures, Aldo Leopold's "biotic pyramid". The key distinction between the control pyramid and the biotic pyramid is that the former operates on the principle of monopoly. Leopold's pyramid is a much more unruly affair: "Each species, including ourselves, is a link in many chains . . . The pyramid is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure" (Leopold 1949, pp. 214–15). As a work that is constantly undoing itself, that "resists the idea of a fixed text" and, as Harris puts it, "torment[s] us by presenting an experience we cannot master", the biotic pyramid might be the better model for reading *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs 1991, p. 233; Harris 2003, p. 217). Leopold's pyramid is self-deconstructing (and therefore, self-renewing, ideally): the energy that flows upward in the pyramid has to return to the lower levels through detritus pathways or else the system collapses. As the "Deposition" suggests, there is a way to undermine any pyramid: "If we wish to annihilate the junk pyramid, we must start with the bottom of the pyramid . . . *The addict in the street who must have junk to live is the one irreplaceable factor in the junk equation*. When there are no more addicts to buy junk there will be no junk traffic" (Burroughs 1991, p. 202). As dust bowls, droughts, and crop

---

15 (Burroughs 1991, p. 186), original ellipses.
16 (Burroughs 1991, p. 172); original ellipses.
17 (Burroughs 1991, pp. 69, 91–92). Although yagé is supposed to be a cure for heroin addiction, Burroughs (or Benway) associates the color blue with junk in the *Paris Review* interview: "You see, as Dr. Benway said, I've now decided that junk is not green, but blue" (20).

failures demonstrate, the same is true of the biotic pyramid—remove the bottom layer, the soil, and the pyramid collapses.

Here, then, is a composite of Burroughs' political theories: bureaucracy is cancerous because it tries to control a process monopolistically. In fact, he speaks of capitalism in ecological terms when he refers to Rockefeller as "a specialized monopolistic organism" (Plimpton 1999, p. 24). Burroughs speculates that Rockefeller would not survive as an "organism" in the post-monopoly capitalist economy. The force of "independent spontaneous action", however, breaks through the space between bureaucracies and monopolies, though it is deformed in the process. Ecology does not function on the "basic principles of monopoly", which, according to *Naked Lunch*, are give nothing away for free, keep a reserve, and take as much back as you can (Burroughs 1991, p. 200). If the bottom level of the pyramid does not have something returned to it, it will stop functioning. The tangled food chains in the biotic pyramid mean that everybody has lunch and everybody is lunch. Fats' surname associates him with "the fibrous grey wooden flesh of terminal addiction", whereas his nickname associates him with the "flesh of cure", in which "thirty pounds materialize[] in a month when you kick" (Burroughs 1991, pp. 195, 203). The junk pyramid and the biotic pyramid function by consumption, and Fats is fat because he is a dealer as well as an addict: "(it is no accident that junk higher-ups are always fat and the addict in the street is always thin)" (Burroughs 1991, p. 200). The Mexican dealer Lupita twice proclaims, "'Selling is more of a habit than using,'" and "non-using pushers" develop "a contact habit, and that's one you can't kick" (Burroughs 1991, pp. 14, 193). So, unlike Bradley the Buyer, an agent whose contact addiction becomes terminal when he turns into "a creature without species" and must be destroyed with a flame thrower, Fats survives because he is both an addict and a dealer, a short circuit in the junk pyramid. The Algebra of Need is itself the short-circuit that turns consuming into consumerism.

Fats learns the Algebra of Need and survives because he is both addict and dealer, both terminal and fat. Being in a loop is the way lifeforms exist according to dark ecology, and being in a loop is evil in the metaphysics of presence (that is, it is narcissism). Binaries such as in and out cannot be reversed in agrilogistics—there must be a definite inside so what is not proper can be exiled to the outside—but they can in the Algebra of Need. For Lee the Agent, control addiction is a particularly American phenomenon, and he links it directly to eating, metabolism, and the efficient style: "Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference. They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out" (Burroughs 1991, p. 179). *Naked Lunch* and dark ecology practice the perverse aesthetics required to embrace the monster, to give up control, and, since we are being ecological, to enjoy "the nasty stuff that has been handed to us on our plate".

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Allen, James. 2000. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers.

Ayers, David. 1993. The Long Last Goodbye: Control and Resistance in the Work of William Burroughs. *Journal of American Studies* 27: 223–36.

Burroughs, William S. 1989. *Interzone*. New York: Viking.

Burroughs, William S. 1991. *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October* 59: 3–7.

Derrida, Jacques. 2016. *Of Grammatology*, 40th ed. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grauerholz, James, and Barry Miles, eds. 2001. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. New York: Grove Press.

Harris, Oliver. 2003. *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Harris, Oliver, and Ian MacFadyen, eds. 2009. *Naked Lunch @ 50: Anniversary Essays*. New York: Grove Press.

Jarvis, Michael. 2017. All in the Day's Work: Cold War Doctoring and Its Discontents in William S. Burroughs's. *Naked Lunch*. *Literature and Medicine* 35: 183–202. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Johnson, Rob. 2020. A Note on "The Great Peters' in Burroughs's Word. *RealityStudio*. May 9. Available online: https://realitystudio.org/scholarship/a-note-on-the-great-peters-in-burroughs-word/ (accessed on 20 August 2020).

Kerouac, Jack. 2007. *Road Novels, 1957–1960*. New York: Library of America.

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miller, W. Jason. 2011. *Langston Hughes and American Lynching Culture*. Gainesville: UP of Florida.

Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Morton, Timothy. 2015. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Morton, Timothy. 2017. *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. London: Verso.

Morton, Timothy. 2018. *Being Ecological*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Nail, Thomas. 2016. Biopower and Control. In *Between Deleuze and Foucault*. Edited by Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail, Daniel W. Smith, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Plimpton, George. 1999. *The Paris Review Interviews: Beat Writers at Work*. London: The Haverill Press.

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

humanities

Article

Green Jack: Naïveté, Frontier and Ecotopia in *On the Road*

Michael Amundsen

School of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies, Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ 85306, USA; michaelamundsen@asu.edu

Abstract: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is among the seminal texts of the Beat Generation canon, and the author himself is renowned as a hero of American letters and freedom. Kerouac's book is clearly one of the most inspirational of the last century and helped to spur the culture of mobility, spiritual yearning and adventure in the decades following its release not only in the USA but in many other parts of the world. A close reading of *On the Road* reveals other realities about the author, through his character Sal Paradise, and the America he discovers in his travels. This article looks at the files from Kerouac's aborted stay in the US navy, letters, journal entries and the text of *On the Road* itself to demonstrate that the author's Whitmanesque longings and ennui are very much rooted in a romantic vision challenged by the realities of mid-20th-century American life. However, Kerouac's "ecotopia of the West" also suggests other ways of living which would influence America's counterculture and environmental movements.

Keywords: Kerouac; *On the Road*; frontier; ecotopia

Citation: Amundsen, Michael. 2021. Green Jack: Naïveté, Frontier and Ecotopia in *On the Road*. *Humanities* 10: 37. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010037

Received: 19 January 2021
Accepted: 22 February 2021
Published: 26 February 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

On the Road is a seminal text of the Beat Generation, part of the early foundational legends of the movement along with Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Its author, Jack Kerouac, is a heroic figure to millions around the world, including giants of art and popular culture such as Bob Dylan, David Bowie and members of the Grateful Dead, as an exemplar of freedom.

On the Road is a revealing text on many levels. The first glimpse the American mass reading public got of the nascent Beat Generation milieu came from this book. Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs (Dean Moriarty, Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee, respectively) found their way into the American consciousness through reading *On the Road*. All reached legendary status in their lifetimes. The fact that Kerouac wrote about friends who became famous cultural figures is something of a miracle, in keeping with the novel's hagiographic tone in respect to Neal Cassady and its outsized influence on the young people who have read it around the world for more than 60 years.

Figuring *On the Road* in the life of the author is an intriguing exercise. Because it took so long to get published, when *On* the *Road* finally appeared in 1957, it was the work of a much younger man. Kerouac was 35 when *On the Road* first found its way into the bookshops, hands of reviewers and readers. He was on the cusp of a decline which led to his death 12 years later as a bitter drunk living with his mother in Florida. This is the Kerouac people wish to forget and, aside from biographies, the last years of his life tend to be ignored by scholars.

However, alienation, as much as adventure and freedom figure prominently in Kerouac's oeuvre. *On the Road* has been seen as a Whitmanesque love letter to America and certainly the book features some of this sentiment. These are also the parts of the novel which have come in for criticism. The kind of "forced" feeling for the everyday people and societal flotsam that, aside from Kerouac's friends, appear in the novel. Kerouac's search for the numinous in the commonplace is a striking feature not only of *On the Road* but of

Beat Generation literature broadly. However, there is much disappointment in the voice of the author through his narrator Sal Paradise.

Kerouac struggled with aspects of his mental health throughout his life, most notably his alcoholism. The author was aware as well of his dual nature, one that required at least as much solitude as traveling adventures. Kerouac noted in himself a kind of split personality in a letter to a friend around the time of his brief sojourn in the United States navy:

> "My mind, split up, as it were, in two parts ... the bent and brooding figure sneering at a world of mediocrities, complacent ignorance, and bigotry exercised by ersatz Ben Franklins, the introverted, scholarly side; the alien side ... My normal counterpart, the one you're familiar with, is the half-back-whoremaster-alemate-scullion-jitterbug-jazz critic side, the side in me which recommends a broad, rugged America; which requires the nourishment of gutsy, redblooded associates; and which lofts whatever guileless laughter I've left in me rather than that schizoid's cackle I have of late."
>
> (Kerouac 1995)

The second half of this quote is redolent of Jack London's butch hyperbole, his work *The Road* being an inspiration for Kerouac's similarly titled work. The reflexive Kerouac understood his inconsistencies, the quiet scribe and the macho action man, the successful synthesis of which was personified in the shining intellect and wild adventures of *On the Road*'s hero, Dean Moriarty. It was the inconsistencies of America which the author found hardest to reconcile. In this paper, I do not equate Sal Paradise and Jack Kerouac. Sal Paradise is a literary creation from the imagination of the author. Nicosia (1983), for example, has noted biographical differences in Kerouac's relationships as depicted in *On the Road* and experienced in his life, including with Neal Cassidy. In addition, we know that even straight autobiographies are necessarily selective and not exclusive representations of facts. However, there is much of Kerouac in Sal. The naiveite, romanticism and disappointments of Sal Paradise are mirrored in letters, journal entries and the experiences of the author in his short-lived stint in the US navy.

2. Ecotopia and *On the Road*

In the general sense, a "green" society is one we can live and thrive in. It is "clean", conducive to health mental and physical and promotes both the need for human striving and coexistence with other life forms which is harmonious. Though Kerouac's work *The Dharma Bums* more explicitly deals with notions of consumption, right living and nature, *On the Road*, as a foundational text of the counterculture, lends itself to ideas of utopian visions.

The term utopia goes back to Thomas More's work *Utopia: a little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia*. More's book, published in 1516 in Latin, was a political satire about a new world kingdom's ideal society; the neologism "utopia" was coined in this work and is derived from Greek, meaning literally "nowhere".

Likewise, the term ecotopia is a neologism coined by an author for the purpose of a novel, in this instance *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* by Ernest Callenbach, a work of utopian fiction with an emphasis on environment and society. In this instance, the coined word is not "nowhere", but somewhere very specific. "Eco" comes from the Greek oikos for household or home and "topia" from the Greek "topos" or "place". In this sense the term ecotopia is very apropos for the quest of Sal Paradise in Kerouac's novel, as Sal seeks the meaning of his home, that is, America, and his place in it.

It has been noted that utopian visions lead to an ecological point of view, of how society and nature can be arranged more harmoniously (Holquist 1968, p. 113). *On the Road* can be read from many different perspectives but it is not explicitly a "green" book expressing environmental concerns. It does, however, obviously and implicitly critique aspects of American life related to ecology and notions of place. These related themes include freedom, authenticity and lifestyle. In common with much utopian literature, Kerouac expresses

in *On the Road* that simpler and more physical ways of living, a precursor to the "back to nature" perspective he explores in *The Dharma Bums*, are preferable to urban, intellectual life. Kerouac's hero Sal hopes to discover these lifeways in the West.

More and Callenbach's vision has been described as pastoral and romantic (McCutcheon 1995, p. 152). Kerouac's ecotopia is likewise oriented. One of the ways in which Kerouac challenges dominant notions of mid-20th-century American life in *On the Road* is through a differing appreciation of time (Mortenson 2001). The "corruption of time" through the dictates of economic practice, where the worker punches a clock and spends the majority of their waking hours involved in alienated labor, stands in opposition to Kerouac's ecotopian vision of self-directed action, adventure and work as a means to living not consuming. This type of work is frequently lionized in *On the Road* as physical and performed in rural settings.

However, in many ways *On the Road* chronicles a picaresque quest seeking transcendence. Kerouac's character's name speaks to this. Sal Paradise can be said to be an immigrant like Kerouac with an ethnic name. "Salvatore" is an Italian name meaning savior, a reference to Kerouac's basic worldview as a Catholic. Paradise is what Sal and his friends seek in their frenetic travels, an ecotopia of self-understanding where the American landscape and its possibilities are realized. This kind of searching after personal and spiritual truths inspired the idealistic mindset of the hippies which included environmentalism, not the mere conservationism of the progressive element of their American forebearers. Conservationists wish to protect nature through set asides like national parks. Environmentalists seek a wholly new or perhaps syncretic and very old way of relating to the natural world as humans.

But was Kerouac an "environmentalist"? The evidence suggests he was not. Kerouac was derisive of hippies, referring to them as "parasites" and, though it is wrong to conflate environmentalism and the hippie youth movement, they broadly overlap under the banner of counterculture of which Kerouac is rightly or wrongly the godfather (Kerouac 1969). This can be understood as one of the many paradoxes in Kerouac's relationship with American cultural life. Less an environmentalist, Kerouac was an old-fashioned urban bohemian who held more in common with Baudelaire and Poe than Emerson and Thoreau. This stance towards life put him at odds with the work/consume paradigm underpinning American society making him at once a kind of subversive and friend of nature that could appeal to a broad swath of philosophies. His flaneuring in cities became gasoline-fueled improvised expeditions with Neal Cassady.

The Beats certainly drew inspiration from Thoreau, Emerson and the 19th century transcendental movement in their own utopian quests. Ginsberg, in particular, turned to his "transcendental predecessors articulating a mystical impulse to drop out from the 'moral' restraints of modern society, restoring ways of being defined in and through an always already sense of togetherness, of community" (Shipley 2013, p. 233). From this perspective, it is Ginsberg who can be more rightly ascribed as the founder of the American counterculture and its utopian vision. Kerouac, the keen individualist, is an unlikely candidate for communalism of any kind. However, of the original triumvirate of Beat figures, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs each in their own way drew on the transcendental tradition which includes attention to environmental concerns. Kerouac and Ginsberg celebrate the American landscape a la Whitman, whereas Burroughs' commitment to "direct action" aligns him with Thoreau's anti-government *Civil Disobedience* (Weidner 2016, p. 12). Burroughs' obsession with firearms and his marijuana farming shows a Beat affinity for ruralism and libertarianism. At the stage of Burroughs' life described in *On the Road*, as the character Old Bull Lee, we also have an example of dropping out of square society which became an important part of the American counterculture ethos. For the Beats, traditional notions of American freedom are often approached through non-traditional or emerging cultural vantage points from drug use, to alternative lifestyles, to Buddhism (Garton-Gundling 2017, p. 200).

The feeling of the reader of *On the Road* is that Kerouac *wants* to be a Thoreau, finding transcendence, as in *The Dharma Bums*, he wants to be Han Shan, a crazy wise poet living on a mountain top. He wants to love America, its landscape and people. He wants to love the authentic and true America like the romantic that he was. He strives to be a modern Walt Whitman, but the world he encounters differs from his naïve hopes. Kerouac's record as a failed navy recruit, his journal entries and the text of *On the Road* show the internal and external paradoxes of the man and his country. However, Kerouac's critique of assumptions about American life pointed to new potentials and orientations including environmentalism. The writings of the Beat Generation have long been seen as a space of cultural and political contestation (Haslam 2009, p. 444). Though the Beats have been appreciated as largely an urban phenomenon living outside social, sexual, religious and political norms, this oppositional stance fed America's green movement. For Kerouac, freedom is at the center of his ecotopia as well as a naïve appreciation of the concept of frontier.

3. Kerouac as Frontiersman

On the Road makes much of the difference between East and West in the United States. For Kerouac, the East, represented by his stay at Columbia University, is New York City and effete intellectualism. The West is open spaces, freedom and physicality. The personification of the West is Dean Moriarty, as Sal Paradise says, "A western kinsman of the sun, Dean."

However, Sal Paradise had never been to the West. "I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off." So, his understanding of the West is derived from his own imagination and his meeting with Dean Moriarty, who he first encounters in New York. Sal Paradise idolizes Dean and conflates his qualities with the West of his dreams and the one he hopes to discover. "My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry-trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent-a sideburned hero of the snowy West. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Wall's in Colorado, before marrying Marylou and coming East." (Kerouac 1957, p. 2).

How much Sal Paradise can be conflated with Jack Kerouac is a matter of debate. However, the original version of *On the Road* used the actual names of the protagonists. Kerouac's letters and journal entries mirror the naivete of the novel's narrator. The reader can assume there is much similarity between them, while allowing that Kerouac was also an intelligent man and fine writer who knew what he was writing and the kind of authorial voice he was projecting. The puerile idealism of Sal Paradise is demonstrated in an unmailed letter Kerouac wrote about the time he entered the US Navy in 1943.

> For one thing, I wish to take part in the war, not because I want to kill anyone, but for a reason directly opposed to killing—the Brotherhood. To be with my American brother, for that matter, my Russian brothers; for their danger to be my danger; to speak to them quietly, perhaps at dawn, in Arctic mists; to know them, and for them to know myself . . . I want to return to college with a feeling that I am a brother of the earth, to know that I am not snug and smug in my little universe.
>
> (Kerouac 1995)

The sort of sweet absurdity of this note shows that the romantic Kerouac was the real Mccoy, not just a literary contrivance. So, as strange as it may seem to modern readers or for a book produced in 1957, the author is apparently convinced on some level that a freebooting frontier is still to be found out there in the "West".

Here, it may be useful to take a short historical detour. Historian Frederik Jackson Turner stated in his famous Frontier Thesis of 1893 that the American frontier had in fact ended as a reality in 1890. He quotes the superintendent of the census from that year. "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not,

therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." Turner believed that the strength and vitality of the America identity lay in its land and vast frontier. Turner stated the traits of the frontier are "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness." (Turner 1893). In America, there is "dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom." The end of the American frontier called its future developments and institutions into question.

In Turner's statement can be seen the one part of Kerouac's personality, his physical "half-back", "whoremaster" side and also the person of Dean Moriarty. The red-blooded frontiersman may live on in Sal and Dean, but the frontier is missing, which in part explains the quixotic nature of their journey.

For Sal Paradise, the frontier equals the "real America". The real America in *On the Road* is encountered not as much in the country's landscapes and "frontiersmen" but in offbeat fringe characters, everyday people in commonplace settings like diners, in his scattershot artistic friends and the vague hope of the road, of what might be around the next turn. The improvised nature of Sal and Dean's travels is evident in their quest for transcendence. As Dean Moriarty says:

> "Sal, we gotta go and never stop going 'till we get there."
>
> "Where we going, man?"
>
> "I don't know but we gotta go."

The holy grail of "there" does involve frontiers but perhaps not those initially envisioned by Sal Paradise or Jack Kerouac. When the travelling cohort traverses the frontier with Mexico, this is a seminal and threshold moment, of before and after, inauthentic and authentic. Likewise, the transcendence of experiencing jazz music performed by black Americans is a frontier between the prosaic and the fantastic. Dean Moriarty is a frontier between square society and yea-saying, life-affirming reprobation. The frontier is the margins of society or in a different society altogether.

On the Road also finds Sal Paradise reaching the margins in himself. In a very telling passage, the novel's narrator crosses a boundary and finds himself in a liminal state. Sal's fragile personality and sense of self are conflated with a specific geographic locale, the middle of America, and his westward movement:

> I wandered down to the railroad tracks-and there're a lot of them in Des Moines-and wound up in a gloomy old Plains inn of a hotel by the locomotive round-house, and spent a long day sleeping on a big clean hard white bed with dirty remarks carved in the wall beside my pillow and the beat yellow windowshades pulled over the smoky scene of the rail-yards. I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was-I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon.
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 11)

4. The State of Jack and the Navy Prognosis

In 2005, the National Personnel Records Center released extensive files on Jack Kerouac's time as a failed naval recruit during World War II. The records are quite revealing of the young man who would go on to write *On the Road* based upon experiences that would soon come to pass. Kerouac initially wanted to be a naval aviator, and though

he performed well on intellectual tests and had glowing recommendations from former authority figures in his life he was found unsuited for flying.

This was just the beginning of Kerouac's naval failure. During his initial examination in the spring of 1943, he was considered sufficiently abnormal to be given trial duty status. After 10 days of basic training, he was sent to the hospital because of headaches and an unsuitable disposition including restlessness, apathy and the need for seclusion. It was then that his psychiatric examination began.

The navy doctor's neuropsychiatric examination disclosed auditory hallucinations, ideas of reference and suicide, and a rambling, grandiose, philosophical manner. Diagnosed with dementia praecox (schizophrenia), Kerouac was sent to the Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland (Kleiman 2011). There he went through thorough interviews about his life history and relationships.

Kerouac's naval experience provides a window into the mindset of a shiftless young man who seems to be throwing his promise away. A gifted athlete, he quit playing football. A gifted student, he dropped out of prestigious, Ivy League, Columbia University. Now, a washout as a navy recruit, where even average people are expected to succeed, Kerouac seemed to be hitting bottom. His naval interlocutors were very intrigued by his self-styled occupation of "writer". At the time, Kerouac was unpublished, which did not add credence to his artistic credentials. He had, however, done quite a bit of writing by this stage of his life, including three novels and endless journal entries. He was, in fact, a writer and had been all his life. The navy saw this as "delusions". They considered his occupation as "writer" further evidence of his mental imbalance. This can be considered an early example of the Beat Generation encountering the obstinacy and incomprehension of an official bureaucracy. Kerouac's interviewers were hard pressed to understand the sort of man they were dealing with and his perspective as an artist.

> Patient describes his writing ambitions. He has written several novels, one when he was quite young, another just prior to joining the service, and one he is writing now ... patient states he believes he might have been nervous when in boot camp because he had been working too hard just prior to induction. He had been writing a novel, in the style of James Joyce, about his own home town, and averaging approximately 16 h daily in an effort to get it down. This was an experiment and he doesn't intend to publish. At present he is writing a novel about his experiences in the Merchant Marine. Patient is very vague in describing all these activities. There seems to be an artistic factor in his thinking when discussing his theories of writing and philosophy.
>
> (Kleiman 2011)

Kerouac noted his inability to adapt to military life. In concord with the transcendentalists, the integrity of independent perspective and conscience is foremost in his thinking. He found in his naval experience a constitutional incompatibility with military discipline, explaining the situation this way:

> Independent thought ... now go ahead and put me up against a wall and shoot me, but I stand by that or stand by nothing but my toilet bowl, and furthermore, it's not that I refuse Naval discipline, not that I wont take it, but that I CANNOT. This is about all I have to say about my aberration. Not that I wont, but that I cant.
>
> (Kerouac 1967)

The navy's final diagnosis was a constitutional psychopathic state, schizoid personality. The navy doctors noted he bordered upon but had not reached psychosis. In all, Kerouac spent around five months in the navy, almost all of it hospitalized. In between interviews, he had much time to consider his situation and plans. His stance against authority and for art crystalized at this time. Kerouac's stubborn independence and need for freedom was the seed of his ensuing lifestyle and creativity. The episodic hedonism of *On the Road* was

already on his mind. As Kerouac noted at the time, "Each debauchery is a private though short-lived insurgence from the static conditions of his society."

5. Green Jack

There is much to glean from a green reading of *On the Road* which illuminates the author and Sal Paradise's understanding of the America he is discovering while he discovers himself. Kerouac's romantic approach to living emphasizes emotional life and experience. The feelings of Sal Paradise are projected onto the landscapes he encounters. Sal loved the Mississippi River before he ever saw it, an aspect of the narrator's imaginative understanding of his homeland, a conception that would be challenged on his journey. The author conveys a strong sense of the phenomenology of place in this passage:

> And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. Rock Island-railroad tracks, shacks, small downtown section; and over the bridge to Davenport, same kind of town, all smelling of sawdust in the warm midwest sun. Here the lady had to go on to her Iowa hometown by another route, and I got out.
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 9)

The author tends to see the environment in the context of human relationships and civilization. Kerouac's view is very much anthropocentric in contrast to a writer like Gary Snyder, who celebrates nature for its own sake and who could easily envisage a world without humans at all. Of all the writers associated with the Beat Generation, it is perhaps Snyder who has most systematically envisioned and lived an ecotopia of right living in an ethical communion with the natural world. As Snyder says, "And I would like to think of new definition of humanism and a new definition of democracy that would include the nonhuman, that would have representation from those spheres. This is what I think we mean by an ecological conscience." (Snyder 1974, p. 106).

Kerouac commiserates with people and things, often with a sense of sadness and pity, whereas Snyder empathizes with the natural world and its creatures in a way that underscores agency, autonomy and the ethical right to exist unfettered from human control. In terms of Kerouac's development in his relationship to nature, *On the Road* is a prequel to *The Dharma Bums* where Kerouac figures Snyder, through the character of Japhy Ryder, as the novel's hero whose attitudes he strives to emulate, something he fails to achieve.

For Sal Paradise, the natural world is one more thing to "dig", another sensual experience or source of kicks. When Sal, Dean and Stan get to Mexico, they experience a "new tropic" air and landscape. Again, Sal commiserates with a place and feels novel sensations. Sal and the heavy, tropical atmosphere become one:

> Still there was no breeze, but the steel had an element of coolness in it and dried my back of sweat, clotting up thousands of dead bugs into cakes on my skin, and I realized the jungle takes you over and you become it. Lying on the top of the car with my face to the black sky was like lying in a closed trunk on a summer night. For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same. Soft infinitesimal showers of microscopic bugs fanned down on my face as I slept, and they were extremely pleasant and soothing. The sky was starless, utterly unseen and heavy. I could lie there all night long with my face exposed to the heavens, and it would do me no more harm than a velvet drape drawn over me. The dead bugs mingled with my blood; the live mosquitoes exchanged further portions; I began to tingle all over and to smell of the rank, hot, and rotten jungle, all over from hair and face to feet and toes.
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 185)

The reader also feels in *On the Road* that the author's search for authenticity is tantamount to a patriotic duty. After all, it is the work of young people in all societies to uphold

tradition, to preserve and carry forward meaningful aspects of culture life. In his travels west, Sal Paradise finds some of what he hoped was still part of American life. Sal espies a cowboy, for him a semiotic of his imaginative "true" West:

> "We arrived at Council Bluffs at dawn; I looked out. All winter I'd been reading of the great wagonparties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails . . . Then Omaha, and, by God, the first cowboy I saw, walking along the bleak walls of the wholesale meat warehouses in a ten-gallon hat and Texas boots . . . "
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 17)

Wagon parties holding councils also speaks to notions of American democracy and egalitarianism. Finding value in common people is certainly paramount in Sal's consciousness. In this instance, Kerouac conjures up a past of direct democracy, common purpose and the right kind of community which stands in contrast to a plutocracy of elites and anonymous bureaucracies.

Sal also finds deep continuity in the landscapes he encounters for the first time. Like an anthropologist, he gains local knowledge from the informants he encounters. The valley of the river Platte is "almost" as great as the Nile's, and for Sal, the American pastoral becomes at once exotic, familiar and epic:

> We got off the bus and walked clear up the hill, the long hill formed over the millenniums by the mighty Missouri, alongside of which Omaha is built, and got out to the country and stuck our thumbs out. We got a brief ride from a wealthy rancher in a ten-gallon hat, who said the valley of the Platte was as great as the Nile Valley of Egypt, and as he said so I saw the great trees in the distance that snaked with the riverbed and the great verdant fields around it, and almost agreed with him.
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 17)

However, the novel's narrator also discovers blandness and sameness in his westward movements. He admits the "first cowboy he ever saw" looked like any "beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for the getup." And of Council Bluffs he says, "of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn."

If Sal finds sensuality, late in the novel in the Mexico passages especially, as perhaps the most genuinely meaningful parts of his journey, this is symbolic of a kind of capitulation, of admitting that hedonism is his path forward to transcendence. Though Sal Paradise makes much of the West and its decent genuine people, the Mexican parts of *On the Road* reveal an excited young man eager for life, whereas the "forced" appreciation of "western" things shows itself earlier in the story. Throughout his novel, Kerouac valorizes common people, especially rural men of the soil:

> I heard a great laugh, the greatest laugh in the world, and here came this rawhide old-timer Nebraska farmer with a bunch of other boys into the diner; you could hear his raspy cries clear across the plains, across the whole gray world of them that day. Everybody else laughed with him. He didn't have a care in the world and had the hugest regard for everybody. I said to myself, Wham, listen to that man laugh. That's the West, here I am in the West. He came booming into the diner, calling Maw's name, and she made the sweetest cherrypie in Nebraska, and I had some with a mountainous scoop of ice cream on top.
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 19)

A guffawing loudmouth in overalls could be seen as repellent to many people, but for Sal it is a sign of the West, of authenticity. He wants to believe. He even has some cherry pie with ice cream. Sal then makes the dubious claim, "I wished I knew his whole raw life and what the hell he'd been doing all these years besides laughing and yelling like that."

We can see that Sal's idea of ecotopia is inherently linked to people and landscapes. People working the land, farmers, cowboys, laborers, in some kind of balance with nature, a friendly place. As a perpetual stranger, friendliness is important for Sal not only for companionship but for hitching rides and learning the lay of the land. Sal relies on the charity of others. This accessibility and openness are a part of his ecotopian vision of the West. Guffawing men and overalls represent this vision. As does a wholesome slice of cherry pie, the ingredients for which were no doubt grown right there in the local soil.

However, Sal is quickly confronted with a caricature of his ecotopian vision as he travels westward. He enters Cheyenne, Wyoming with Montana Slim who was just his traveling companion in the back of a pickup truck. It was Wild West Week in Cheyenne with everyone emulating what they thought the real wild west was like, no doubt informed by Hollywood movies. Sal's fragile ecotopia is starting to fray.

> "Farther down were the long stringy boulevard lights of new downtown Cheyenne, but the celebration was focusing on Oldtown. Blank guns went off. The saloons were crowded to the sidewalk. I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition."
>
> (Kerouac 1957, p. 30)

Sal comes to realize that the West of his dreams was a callow illusion. Western traditions had been commoditized, overrun by parody and "progress". On this point, Kerouac and environmentalists find concord. Both are dubious of progress' benefits for living well. The post-war interstate highway system was what brought Sal West on his adventures but also what brought the homogenization of American culture. Getting from New York to Wyoming by wagon would have been slower, harder and surely would have provided less kicks. However, it would have been authentic. Perhaps a little too authentic. Kerouac liked urban life, its nightclubs, jazz music, girls and booze. So again, this shows a split in his personality; the seeker after the authentic and the seeker of convenience, pleasure and comfort. *The Dharma Bums* brought this conflict into bold relief. Being a fire lookout in the wilderness was not easy on Kerouac.

Kerouac's notion of ecotopia in *On the Road* is closely tied to his understanding of Oswald Spengler's notion of the fellaheen. Here is timeless authenticity, regardless of political or economic change. Spengler, in his *The Decline of the West*, describes the fellaheen as those on society's margins, unchanging and individually a "ranging animal, a being whose waking consciousness restlessly feels its way through life, all microcosm" (Spengler 1918, p. 89). The boisterous farmer is a fellaheen, as is the Mexican peasant, the black jazz musician and, importantly, Dean Moriarty. Both Kerouac and Ginsberg portrayed Neal Cassady in prose and poetry as a near mythological person and exemplar of life lived to its fullest. Cassady's life story, charisma and abilities were connected with Spengler's description of the essential fellaheen type (Lardas 2001, p. 125).

For Sal, Dean Moriarty promised something better than intellectualism—joy: the pursuit of unfettered sensory and sensual experience; apolitical, amoral, unstructured. Moriarty feels his way through life, improvising, "digging" what is there to be dug. In the author's imagination and theoretical category, he is Spengler's fellaheen, living in the moment, free of the bonds of ordinary work and home-life (Amundsen 2015). The inspiration for the hippie counterculture is evident in this worldview. This is Kerouac's real ecotopia: freedom.

6. Conclusions

George Bernhard Shaw famously wrote in his play *Man and Superman*, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man." Jack Kerouac was noted throughout most of his life as a kind and amiable person. However, he also was just such an unreasonable man as described by Shaw. His inability to adapt to America's establishment and nodes of power shows this unreasonableness. He could not adjust him-

self to naval discipline. He dropped out of one of America's most prestigious universities. In the booming post-war American economy, the handsome intelligent Kerouac could have easily courted success, happiness, marriage and domesticity. A reasonable man would have done these very things. He did not. Kerouac, the seeker after truths beyond material wellbeing, hit the road instead to discover life for himself. The world has not been the same since. The influence of *On the Road* persists to this day.

Part of Kerouac's unreasonableness was a stubborn naivete. His correspondence and journal entries reveal a romantic sensibility which finds resonance in *On the Road's* narrator, Sal Paradise. Societal change often comes from the margins, and this was precisely the stuff of Kerouac's fiction. Indeed, Kerouac adapted the world to himself with the great influence of his novels, especially *On the Road*. Though Kerouac clearly had issues with how his works were grafted on to the counterculture, he nudged America's youth to consider other ways of living aside from career and consumption. This was his greatest contribution to "green" America. Kerouac's artistic vision lends itself to utopian dreams.

For Jack Kerouac, an American ecotopia was a place of expansive freedoms of expression, action and movement. Sal Paradise personified both the hope and disappointment of this notion. There must be a place for freebooting life lovers in America. Sal figured this must be in the West, where people still were connected to the land, who, like the fellaheen, were people of the earth. They worked at places like Ed Wall's ranch out in Colorado, had real Oklahoma accents and were slim hipped and sideburned. They were yea-saying adventurers like Dean Moriarty. They were not intellectuals and they were not political.

This last point is important. Kerouac came to identify intellectualism as a malady. He saw life lived in the mind as not a life lived at all and came to appreciate the necessity of physicality and sensuality. Enter Neal Cassady, the embodiment of the physical life coupled with keen intelligence. Kerouac contrasted this "hero of the West" with his eastern friends, William and Jane Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke and the like and found by comparison their worldview "negative". They were "theoretical", "sociological", "psychoanalytical" and very political. Cassady was as voracious for knowledge as for living. In this sense, he provided a ballast against Kerouac's eastern intellectual friends.

However, the West was not what he hoped for either. Kerouac's travels were hounded by homogenization and police surveillance. This led him to the conclusion that:

> As far as I'm concerned the only thing to do is sit in a room and get drunk and give up your hoboing and your camping ambitions because there aint a sheriff or fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you cook a little meal over some burning sticks in the tule brake or the hidden valley or anyplace any more because he has nothing to do but pick on what he sees out there on the landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station—I have no ax to grind: I'm simply going to another world.
>
> (Kerouac 1960)

And this is exactly how the last 10 years of his life played out. Kerouac became a committed alcoholic, living variously in Long Island and Florida, mostly drinking whiskey at home in front of the television, a lifestyle that killed him before he turned 50.

It is noteworthy that Kerouac's disenchantment with his life as a "writer" began long before his decline after the publication of *On the Road*. His first published novel *The Town and the City* was released in 1950 after a massive edit, cutting around 500 pages from the original manuscript, by Harcourt Brace under the auspices of Robert Giroux. Kerouac had high expectations for the book which sold poorly and from which he made little money, despite discussion of a movie deal. *On the Road* was already percolating in his mind and notebooks. However, he was left scarred by his ordeal in the business of writing. Kerouac still dreamed of the West.

> It's about time for me to start working on On the Road in earnest. For the first time in ages, I want to start a new life.

> We—the whole family [Kerouac; his mother; his sister Nin; and her husband, Paul]—are going to move out to Colorado within a year. And within two years I'm going to marry a young lady. My aim is to write, make money, and buy a big wheat farm . . . I stopped at a little shack where a man sold hot, red chili in paper containers. I bought some and ate it strolling in the dark, mysterious streets. I wished I was Negro, a Denver Mexican, or even a Jap, anything but a white man disillusioned by the best in his own "white world." (And all my life I had white ambitions!) . . . anything but myself so pale and unhappy, so dim.
>
> (Kerouac 1998)

Kerouac longed for the simple, meaningful life of the fellaheen tied to the soil and its basic pleasures, "a broad, rugged America" somewhere out West, the free West he discovered was so elusive.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

References

Amundsen, Michael. 2015. On the Road: Jack Kerouac's epic autoethnography. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Antropological Society* 40: 31–44.

Garton-Gundling, Kyle. 2017. Beat Buddhism and American Freedom. *College Literature* 44: 200–30. [CrossRef]

Haslam, Jason. 2009. It Was My Dream That Screwed Up: The Relativity of Transcendence in *On the Road*. *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39: 443–64. [CrossRef]

Holquist, Michael. 1968. How to play Utopia. In *Game, Play, Literature*. Edited by Jacques Ehrmann. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 106–23.

Kerouac, Jack. 1957. *On the Road*. New York: Viking.

Kerouac, Jack. 1960. The Vanishing American Hobo. In *Lonesome Traveller*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kerouac, Jack. 1967. *Vanity of Duluoz*. New York: Penguin.

Kerouac, Jack. 1969. After me, the Deluge. *Los Angeles Times*, October 26.

Kerouac, Jack. 1995. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940–1956*. Edited by Ann Charters. New York: Penguin.

Kerouac, Jack. 1998. On the Road Again. *The New Yorker*. June 22. Available online: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/06/22/on-the-road-again-jack-kerouac (accessed on 10 January 2021).

Kleiman, Miriam. 2011. Hit the Road, Jack! *Prologue Magazine*. Available online: https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/fall/kerouac.html (accessed on 12 January 2021).

Lardas, John. 2001. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

McCutcheon, Elizabeth. 1995. More's Utopia, Callenbach's Ecotopia, and Biosphere. *Liber Amicorum* 52: 149–70. [CrossRef]

Mortenson, Erik R. 2001. Beating time: Configurations of temporality in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. *College Literature* 28: 51–67.

Nicosia, Gerald. 1983. *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*. New York: Grove.

Shipley, Morgan. 2013. Hippies and the Mystic Way: Dropping Out, Unitive Experiences, and Communal Utopianism. *Utopian Studies* 24: 232–63.

Snyder, Gary. 1974. *Turtle Island, with 'Four Changes'*. New York: New Directions.

Spengler, Oswald. 1918. *Decline of the West: Perspectives of World-History*. London: Allen & Unwin, vol. 2.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1893. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Washington, DC: American Historical Association, Available online: http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf (accessed on 11 January 2021).

Weidner, Chad. 2016. *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

humanities

MDPI

Article

"[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage": The Resilience of Pilgrimage Ecopoetics and Slow Travel from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

Susan Signe Morrison

Department of English, Texas State University, 601 University Dr., San Marcos, TX 78666, USA; morrison@txstate.edu

Received: 1 September 2020; Accepted: 28 September 2020; Published: 8 October 2020

Abstract: While the Beats can be seen as critical actors in the environmental humanities, their works should be seen over the longue durée. They are not only an origin, but are also recipients, of an environmentally aware tradition. With Geoffrey Chaucer and Jack Kerouac, we see how a contemporary American icon functions as a text parallel to something generally seen as discrete and past, an instance of the modern embracing, interpreting, and appropriating the medieval. I argue that *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer influenced Kerouac's shaping of *On the Road*. In the unpublished autograph manuscript travel diary dating from 1948–1949 (*On the Road* notebook), Kerouac imagines the novel as a quest tale, thinking of pilgrimage during its gestation. Further, Kerouac explicitly cites Chaucer. His novel can be seen not only in the tradition of Chaucer, but can bring out aspects of pilgrimage ecopoetics in general. These connections include structural elements, the spiritual development of the narrator, reliance on vernacular dialect, acute environmental awareness, and slow travel. Chaucer's influence on Kerouac highlights how certain elements characteristic of pilgrimage literature persist well into the modern period, in a resilience of form, language, and ecological sensibility.

Keywords: pilgrimage; Geoffrey Chaucer; *The Canterbury Tales*; Jack Kerouac; *On the Road*; ecocriticism; ecopoetics; slow travel; vernacular

---

Artfully citing the poet and translator Peter Stambler, Hong Cheng refers to the intertextual links among seemingly disparate authors, time periods, and literary works as "'*encounters*, perhaps conversations'" (Cheng 2006, p. 135; Stambler 1996, p. 13). These metaphors—encounters and conversations—suggest how influence is not simply derived one way in a forward thrusting chronology. A contemporary interlocutor, by encountering and conversing with a past actor, can be seen as changing or reforming that initial inspiration for the revelation of present-day viewers, readers, and witnesses. Shakespeare, for example, adapted the long tragic romance, *Troilus and Criseyde*, of Geoffrey Chaucer to craft his own *Troilus and Cressida* for an early seventeenth-century audience. James Joyce used Homer's *Odyssey* as a blueprint for his protagonist in early twentieth-century Dublin. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* likewise used Homer to very different ends than Joyce as she concocted a feminist indictment of the 'hero'—or is he a villain?—Odysseus. All of these encounters or conversations expand, question, and morph the earlier works in which they are rooted.

The Beats are shaped by previous writers even as they stake new claims on the literary landscape. Critical actors in the environmental humanities, the Beats should be seen over the longue durée as the recipients of an environmentally aware tradition, ranging from the Tang dynasty poet Han-shan to—as this essay focuses on—the fourteenth-century English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. Kerouac's

Anglo-American modernist predecessor, T. S. Eliot, likewise influenced by Asian cultural references, proves instructive here. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot points out how

> the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense [. . .] is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (see Eliot 1919/2020)

While conceptualizing *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac references *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. The parallels between the two authors expose how elements characteristic of medieval pilgrimage literature resiliently persist into the twentieth century. Yet, Kerouac's "historical sense" never trumps his own sense of "contemporaneity". Nurtured by past tradition, Kerouac seeds it with his own innovations for future writers.

While medievalists and Beat scholars rarely converse with one another, such an encounter proves a catalyst for exposing: (1) elements characteristic of pilgrimage literature in general; (2) how an earlier writer surprisingly shapes an unexpected protégé; and (3) the ecocritical aspects of two major works of literary history which are seldom yoked. Recent scholarship in Chaucer studies (see Morrison 2019) explores the ecopoetics of medieval literary pilgrimage. By introducing these insights to Kerouac's novel—as we will see, overtly connected to Chaucer—the ecocritical insights of *On the Road* can be made more readily evident. Both works emerge from pilgrimage ecopoetics, exploring vernacular language, linguistic and physical contingency, and slow walking, where slowness functions as a form of rebellion (see Arnds 2020, p. 2). This resilience of certain literary, religious, and ecological conventions links the medieval with the Beat, the European and Asian with the American, and the physical with the spiritual. Such "'*encounters*, perhaps conversations'" (see above) can then be recognized as expanding, as though through concentric circles, the associations among vastly—only apparently unrelated—modes of writing and thought. This indicates a sophisticated reception by Kerouac of long-established tropes and traditions in literature, religion, and ecological thought and awareness. After establishing clear referential and structural links between Chaucer and Kerouac, this essay looks briefly at an Asian counterpart to highlight aspects of the Anglophone works, before exploring faith, spiritualized landscapes, vernacularity, topopoetics, and the role of slowness in the ecologically-conscious pilgrimage journey.

1. The Literary Tradition of Pilgrimage Literature: Finding the True Path

Pilgrimage as a ritual process expresses the spiritual yearning, interior journey, and physical enactment of the pilgrim actor. Literary works utilizing pilgrimage as a formal element—whether structurally or thematically—are rooted in the metaphor of the road. The central soul of such a work, frequently narrating his or her own literal and figurative pilgrimage, makes mistakes which ultimately guide the individual to God. This section of the essay explores aspects of Kerouac's faith as expressed in *On the Road*, linking that novel to a clear predecessor: Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Both works, structured around pilgrimage, explore false paths on the spiritual journey.

Chaucer, a product of fourteenth-century England, was steeped in Christianity. Late medieval Catholic faith espoused the necessity of pilgrimage, an interior and exteriorized journey to expiate sins and gain absolution. While Kerouac lived hundreds of years later, his religious upbringing, much discussed by his biographers, can be seen as naturally and inevitably leading him to be open to the tradition and concept of Christian pilgrimage. Numerous critics have explored his French-Canadian Catholic ethnicity, with Richard Sorrell arguing that Kerouac took the "'terrible holy majesty' of Roman Catholicism more seriously than most of his childhood peers" (Sorrell 1982, p. 191; also, Christy 1998, p. 87; Charters 1973, p. 199). He describes himself as being "not 'beat' but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic [sic]" (Kerouac 1960, p. vi; also quoted in Charters, The Portable Jack

Kerouac, Kerouac 1995b, p. xxv). Writing that "[b]eat doesn't mean tired, or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for beatific," Kerouac claims that he wants to "'be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis'" (Amburn 1998, p. 205; see Christy 1998, pp. 94, 40, who argues Kerouac most closely resembles St. Augustine of Hippo). But does this Christian dimension alone to his writing mean that this famous novel is a pilgrimage work? Jim Christy argues that *On the Road* is a "religious parable, a holy search for meaning, a supercharged *Pilgrim's Progress*" (Christy 1998, p. 26). Certainly, moments of spirituality infuse Kerouac's prose. Concerning the mambo music in the Gregoria whorehouse in Mexico, Sal hears trumpets "like the sounds you expect to hear on the last day of the world and the Second Coming" (286; all Kerouac textual allusions, unless otherwise noted, refer to Kerouac 1991).

Rather than mere inference, there exists direct evidence for pilgrimage being on Kerouac's mind. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin has Kerouac's unpublished autograph manuscript travel diary dating from 1948–1949, when he was writing the first stages of *On the Road*. Here, Kerouac imagines his work as a quest tale, explicitly thinking of pilgrimage. The narrator would play a kind of Sancho Panza figure to the main character (Charters 1991, p. xv). Concerning this version of the novel, Kerouac writes the following:

> The hero is a man in his late 20's who has lived a lot, and who ends up in a jail, thinking, finally, that he needs to "seek an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away," in the words of [John] Bunyan. (Kerouac 1948–1949, 25 March 1949; see Christy 1998, p. 26)

Explicitly invoking the seventeenth-century Protestant work, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Kerouac ponders pilgrimage. Four days after this journal entry, he writes, "*Pilgrimage* [...]. My interest in the 'beat': it must be because they're not only poor, but *homeless* [...]. Their lives have an exterior air of pilgrimage (wandering + impoverished) [...]" (On the Road notebook, Tues. 29 March 1949).

Three months after these notebook entries, Kerouac writes a letter to Elbert Lenrow, from whom he took a twentieth-century American novel class at the New School in 1948. This letter, from 28 June 1949, includes fascinating tidbits, including how Kerouac picked up a copy of Edmund Spenser's complete poems for fifty cents. Kerouac adds that he was depressed by Boethius's life until he read *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a key work for Chaucer, who translated it into Middle English. In Kerouac's letter, the following passage appears: "In Chaucer, by the way, 'bone' is PRAYER" (Selected Letters, Kerouac 1995a, p. 207). This letter suggests Kerouac clearly understood some Middle English, where the word *bōn* (also *bone*, *boin*(e) *bōnen* and *bones*), signifies *act of prayer*, *petition*, *request*, or *boon* [see McSparran and Schaffner 2000–2018, entry *bōn* n.(2)]. Kerouac must have read Chaucer at some point, possibly exposed to it by his friend William Burroughs, who enjoyed classes on both Chaucer and Shakespeare at Harvard (Schumacher 1992, p. 31).

While seemingly wildly disparate—poetry versus prose, medieval versus modern, pre-industrial versus technologically advanced—both *The Canterbury Tales* and *On the Road* mirror one another in a number of structural ways: both are first-person literary works with a narrator standing in for the author. This is typical of pilgrimage literature in general. A first-person, frequently flawed, individual allows the reader to identify with the speaker and enter into the pilgrimage with the writer-guide-companion. In Chaucer's poem, the narrator is actually named Geoffrey Chaucer, though a bumbling and naïve variation of that sophisticated and revolutionary poet. Sal—reminiscent of Salvatore or Savior—Paradise, whose name alone evokes the pilgrimage author Dante, twice describes his journeys as a "pilgrimage" (139, 303). The third sentence of the novel announces " ... the part of my life you could call my life on the road" (1). Dean is ideal for this expedition, seeing as he was "born on the road" (1). Simply being "on the road" signals the pilgrimage theme. "And this was really the way that my whole road experience began" (7). Sal calls it "the holy road" in conjunction with "pilgrimage" (139). When Sal tells us "the road is life" (212), this fits into the long Christian allegorical tradition of understanding life itself as a pilgrimage.

And not just Christian traditions. As Cheng points out, twentieth- and twenty-first-century American nature writers, such as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums*, draw on ancient

Chinese lore for inspiration to express an echoing "cultural orientation" (Cheng 2006, p. 136). Kerouac repeatedly invokes the ancient Chinese poet "Han Shan" in *The Dharma Bums* (see Cheng 2006, p. 135; also Kerouac 2006, pp. 13–16, as well as later in the novel). While Han-shan dates from a period and geography far distant from Kerouac and even Chaucer, certain aspects of his influential interaction with nature and landscape parallels that of Sal's in *On the Road*. Yes, the technology is vastly different. Sal and Dean travel quickly by means of an automobile. Nevertheless, Kerouac remains influenced by slower modes of understanding the self, as seen in earlier works with pilgrimage as a modifying metaphor.

Asian spirituality and European medieval Catholicism deviate in multiple ways, most clearly in divergent religious cultures. Yet, both play out the metaphor of soul seeking on the literal plane—through pilgrimage, a physical journey which contributes to and sometimes even distracts from the inner journey to self-knowledge, peace, and a deepened faith. Pilgrimage works contain paths which do not lead to pure spirituality, in order, ultimately, to suggest a better way. The pilgrim cannot recognize the correct path to righteousness or enlightenment without first meandering falsely. In Dante's *Inferno*, the pilgrim-narrator is not meant to stay in hell, merely witness and learn from it. The fifteenth-century English pilgrim, Margery Kempe, begins her life story by confessing her sins of lust, pride, and envy before relaying her many visions of Christ. Chaucer and Kerouac integrate counterexamples, dead ends which signal how *not* to act. Going astray literally and metaphorically actually feeds an environmentally aware response to one's surroundings. Straying leads to surprises and disruptions, preventing the pilgrim-actor from feeling as though he can master the world around him.

The pilgrim-narrator establishes his identity through contrast with an unconventional figure—the self-professed conman, as embodied by Chaucer's Pardoner and Kerouac's Dean—to forge his own sense of self on his spiritual journey. The Pardoner, a seller of indulgences, conveys an indeterminate morality. In awe, the innocent narrator—just after he has described how false and conniving the Pardoner actually is—calls the cheating religious actor a "noble ecclesiaste" (I.708 "noble ecclesiast"; all Middle English passages from Chaucer 1987; modern English translations adapted from Chaucer 2019). Similarly, Sal calls his companion Dean "noble", even though his behavior has been far from admirable. Sal calls Dean a "con man"; he was "conning me" (4). Sal naively sees Dean as a conduit to higher spiritual truths, much as Geoffrey mistakes the chiseling Pardoner for a worthy churchman. Both the Pardoner and Dean brag to their listeners about being cheaters before they try to swindle their audience. Chaucer's Pardoner tells the pilgrims in great detail how he dupes his victims, then attempts to get money from those he has just confessed to. Similarly, when a man picks Sal and Dean up in his car, they stop at a hotel: "Dean tried everything in the book to get money from the fag.... Warning him first that he had once been a hustler in his youth, Dean asked him how much money he had" (210). After they have a fight, Sal refers to Dean as the "holy con-man" (214; also 15) (Charters 1973, p. 81; also, Amburn 1998, pp. 353, 105, and Sorrell 1982, p. 194)—exactly what the Pardoner is.

Great talkers, these 'holy con men' are at last stifled when harshly spoken to. After the drunken Pardoner delivers a sermon against gluttony and drinking, the Host threatens to cut off the corrupt churchman's balls. Galatea aggressively deflates Dean with a verbal attack (193), rendering him verbally impotent and reduced to silence, much as the Pardoner is.

> This Pardoner answerde nat a word;
> So wroth he was, no word ne wolde he seye (VI.956–57).
> [This Pardoner answered not a word;/So angry he was, no word would he say.]

After Galatea lays into Dean, Sal reflects, "Then a complete silence fell over everybody; where once Dean would have talked his way out, he now fell silent himself ... " (195). Exposed for what they are—con men whose power emerges from speech—they are denied a voice. Once the false guide is silenced, the pilgrim-narrator can explore true sociality on the right path.

2. Vernacularity, Sociality, and Topopoetics: Shaping the Pilgrim's Soulscape

Pilgrimage poetics reflect the ever-evolving state of the land imprinted by physical pilgrimage. Each writer's vernacular is location-dependent. Tim William Machan, in his exploration of Middle English, carves out a sociolinguistic model to argue for the vernacular language as an ecology (Machan 2003, p. 9). The metaphor of ecology suggests that the living, dynamic vernacular, integral to the ecopoetical aesthetic, constitutes a fertile means for understanding a specific place.

A trait of pilgrimage literature even in the Middle Ages, linguistic vigor reflects the forward propulsion of physical pilgrimage and its topopoetics, the language which springs naturally forth to express a specific and ever-evolving landscape and culture. Both Chaucer and Kerouac write using highly-charged, dynamic, and constantly morphing languages. Writing at the end of the fourteenth century, Chaucer profits from the recent influx of over ten thousand French words into the English language in the wake of the Norman Conquest three centuries earlier. He innovates new usages of words and even coins vocabulary. Kerouac's linguistic energy derives from a globalized English buzzing with slang and colloquialisms. In both texts, dead language inculcates inert spirituality and topographical doom, while linguistic liveliness both reflects and shapes the dynamism of the landscape and environment. Vibrant language signals and sparks a lively awareness of the world replete with both human and non-human actors.

Chaucer and Kerouac avow vernacular authenticity. In works where he emphasizes his role as a 'mere' translator or compiler, Chaucer's narrator emphasizes his powerlessness and lack of free will. He apologies for any rude material he must include in the name of accuracy—in his utterly fictional world. Chaucer's narrator, claiming he is honest, apologizes to the reader for his possibly offensive language.

> But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
> Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
> To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
> Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely . . . (I.725–729).
> [But first I pray yow, of your courtesy,/ That you do not attribute it to my rudeness,/ Though I speak plainly in this matter,/ To tell you their words and their behavior,/ Nor though I speak their words accurately.]

Like Geoffrey, Sal says his readers may have a hard time accepting the truth of what he writes. "And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell" (7). This excuse of merely telling the truth by copying what he has heard echoes comparable sentiments in Chaucer's *Miller's Prologue*. There, the narrator makes sure that his readers know it is not his own personal evil intent for speaking so crudely, rather his aim is to be honest (I.3172–3181). He begs his reader not to chastise him and to choose another tale if preferred. In fact, he prays, "For Goddes love" (I.3171–2; "For God's love"), that the reader not condemn him for his apparent honesty. In Kerouac's work, his evident transparency could be rooted in his Catholicism. His faith is said to have influenced his poetics, with the supposed authenticity of spontaneous prose resembling unfettered prayer and confession. The effect of spontaneity was to permit the author to make associational leaps between languages and enhance wordplay (Kerouac 1998, pp. 69–70). Kerouac was a "man who knelt in prayer before writing and who acknowledged that the sacrament of confession had inspired his 'spontaneous prose' style of composition (it was sinful to hold anything back in the confessional—you purified yourself by telling all in an unrevised, unconstrained rush of words) [...]" (see Sorrell 1982, pp. 195–96). Linguistic contingency constitutes a tool for the pilgrimage writer. Though such protestations legitimate their so-called 'accuracy', both authors have command of what they are doing, perfectly capable of revising and editing as they wish.

Kerouac's iconic novel was influenced both through contingent encounters with authors such as Chaucer and edited by design. While amendment reflects the spiritual change to be undertaken by both literary pilgrim and the pilgrim-reader, the pilgrimage text itself is ever-evolving, obsessively

walked over (metaphorically) by the pilgrim writer (see Morrison 2019, p. 53). In terms of revision of the written text, medieval pilgrimage authors deal with amendment on the *literary* level. *The Canterbury Tales* itself exists in variant fragments. In spring of 2001, the famous scroll draft of *On the Road*, which Kerouac claimed to have completed in three weeks (thereby evoking Truman Capote's famous comment, "That isn't writing; it's typing" (Charters 1991, p. viii), was auctioned at Christie's in Manhattan for 2.4 million dollars (Shattuck 2001). The almost one-hundred-and-twenty-foot scroll consists of sections of paper about twelve feet long pasted together, with the seams reinforced by tape. The mythology that Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in a coffee and Benzedrine frenzy has been questioned. Despite the seductive legend of a spontaneously produced text, Kerouac amended his work considerably, from its initial conception in 1948 until its publication in 1957. The scroll shows Kerouac's editing—"words are changed, punctuation added, paragraphs indicated and entire passages crossed out in pencil and red crayon" (Shattuck 2001)—suggesting that he was a much more careful writer than legend suggests.

Both authors endorse the vernacular speech of their contemporaries by pleading for indulgences—those of the reader for their honest, truthful replication of 'real speech'. This creative use of the vernacular links Kerouac to the pilgrimage literary tradition. Medieval pilgrimage poems acknowledge the importance of using the vernacular on the grounds that such writing could change not only the poet's soul, but also that of the reader. The vernacular, necessary to affect inward spiritual transformation for (potentially) everyone, has a salvational aspect to it. Chaucer's poem, which includes parodies of Northern dialect in the *Reeve's Tale*, provides a map for vernacular language use in late fourteenth-century England, just as Kerouac's prose replicates the jaunty rhythms of mid-20th-century American patter. This vernacularity explodes with multiple unusual terms, from "jalopy" (1), "cold-water pad" (1), "chick" (2), "lam" (3), "benny" (3), "jargon" (4), "dingledodies" (5), "balled the jack" (14), "hobo" (26), "*Pisscall*" (29), "slaphappy" (32), "s'danged" (36), "sonumbitch" (43), "dangle" (43), "you fine gone daddy you" (43), "crazy cat" (48), "jazz American" (61), "beatest", "tea, weed, I mean marijuana", "bop", "boogie-woogie" (87), "hincty" (87), to "'Right-orooni'" (176). One odd parallel between the two writers concerns the influence of French. Chaucer's language reflects the recent incorporation of thousands of Norman French words, a typical sign of late medieval English. Kerouac's first language was French and he understood no English until he was six. Christy suggests that "Kerouac's acute sensitivity to the English language derived from his hearing it as an exotic tongue" (Christy 1998, p. 79; also see Charters 1991, p. xxv; Weinreich 1995, p. 40; and Giamo 2000, p. xv).

David J. Alworth argues that "Kerouac turned to the open road in order to reimagine sociality" (Alworth 2016, p. 82). True sociality requires the glue of the vernacular. Sal associates specific places and their names with the community they invoke: "And I tried to tell him what North Platte meant to me, buying the whiskey with the boys, and [Remi] slapped me on my back and said I was the funniest man in the world" (64). Kerouac increases this sociality through associating places with literary, filmic, and pop cultural references the reader can connect with. These include William Saroyan (81), *Sullivan's Travels* (83), "*Of Mice and Men*, with Burgess Meredith" (91); "I had a book with me I stole from a Hollywood stall, '*Le Grand Meaulnes*' by Alain-Fournier" (103); Hart Crane (119); W. C. Fields (121, and mentioned four times overall); "Louis-Ferdinand Céline" (137); Shakespeare (144), Groucho Marx (154); "[I]t made you think of Sam Spade" (170); "Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*" (192); and Proust (304). Dean is likened to a "mad Ahab at the wheel" (235). Such allusions suture the reader into the scene of Sal's world, making us privy to his social sphere.

Vernacularity is not just a linguistic term but can also refer to material practices. Rob Nixon has argued that "imposed official landscapes typically discount spiritualized vernacular landscapes" (Nixon 2011, p. 13), ones which contingently develop. An example of this tension between vernacular and official landscapes can be seen in Kerouac's novel. Hitchhiking suggests spontaneous movement and holy Mexico constitutes the vernacular landscape. Unplanned meandering, a more instinctual, even 'natural', response to terrain and built environment, allows for fortuitous meetings. While

pilgrimage seems as though it would be highly designed, it remains deeply wedded to the accidental, both on the literal and literary levels (Morrison 2019, p. 44). In actuality, pilgrims not infrequently strayed off the official path. Even in Chaucer's seemingly designed set-up, characters spontaneously arrive and disappear, such as the Canon and Canon's Yeoman. Early on while hitchhiking, Sal has already taken part in "five scattered rides" (10) (though see Müller 2016, p. 596, on how chance encounters diminish as literature increasingly becomes modern). Unlike slow medieval pilgrimage undertaken by walking or as an assemblage on horseback, Sal's pilgrimage is fueled by automotive mechanics and rhizomatic hitchhiking (especially Sections 2–4). The carnival owner in Iowa asks, "'You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?' We didn't understand his question, and it was a damned good question" (21). Unlike his medieval European counterparts who journey with purpose to specific holy shrines (Rome, the Holy Land, Santiago de Compostela) for healing, absolution, and the remission of sins, Sal apparently wanders in a propulsive randomness. Unlike his nineteenth-century urban counterparts, Sal acts as a flâneur of the rural landscape, a kind of "environmental phenomenologist" (Gersdorf 2013, p. 44).

With medieval pilgrimage as a concept helping shape *On the Road*, we recognize the outline of intention with the trip to Mexico. The country to the south symbolizes the ultimate pilgrimage site, due to its profound Catholicism infused with indigenous culture. "Behind us lay the whole of America and everything Dean and I had previously known: about life, and life on the road. We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road" (276). Mexican characters or Mexico itself carry what Ben Giamo calls "biblical magic" (Giamo 2000, p. xv, 21; also Amburn 1998, p. 215). Early on in the novel, Terry, Sal's lover, a Madonna figure, pitiful and childlike, functions as his redemptress, an intercessor reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, a figure Kerouac's brother Gerard claimed to have seen in a vision before he died at the age of nine. After she feeds Sal, "[i]t was Terry who brought my soul back" (97). The intersection between place and soul is most pronounced in Mexico or in conjunction with Terry, whose Mexican origin poignantly calls to Sal. She prefigures Sal's ultimate understanding that Mexico will provide sacred wisdom.

Nature writers, overcome by modern demands on time and psyche, often retreat to wilderness spheres to seek out "the solitude of mind totally free of the noisy material world" (Cheng 2006, p. 138). They escape from so-called civilization, which all too often proves to be detrimental or chaotic, to a *higher* form of living in less-populated places. For Sal, that sphere is Mexico, set up in the novel as—admittedly problematically—a 'primitive', exoticized, and less technologically fraught zone of freedom. However politically suspect the use of Mexico may be in Kerouac's hands, it spurs spiritual awakening, where "landscape and soulscape" (Cheng 2006, p. 138) are one. Wilderness "suggests something like freedom ... to contemporary American nature writers, [becoming] a symbol of civilization in a higher form and a course for deep thoughts and inspiration" (Cheng 2006, p. 141). For Kerouac's protagonist, connections to Mexico personally or geographically catalyze emotional liberation. "It was only Nuevo Laredo but it looked like Holy Lhasa to us" (274). Sal's "soulscape" (Cheng 2006, p. 138) finds peace in Terry's world and culture, one he yearns to be part of.

Just as Chaucer cites natural and built environmental sites to place us geographically in a specific place, Kerouac's linguistic tapestry beautifully evokes the landscape. Concerning New Mexico, Kerouac writes, "We were in the mountains: there was a heaven of sunrise, cool purple airs, red mountainsides, emerald pastures in valleys, dew, and transmuting clouds of gold; on the ground gopher holes, cactus, mesquite" (164). In an ecocritical reading of *On the Road*, we see that in Kerouac's language, toponyms—specific linguistic identifying markers—matter. Sal: "'I love boxcars and I love to read the names on them like Missouri Pacific, Great Northern, Rock Island Line'" (41). A topopoetics is rooted in the vernacular of place through dialectical idiosyncrasies and a precise and local lexicon. As it modifies, the vernacular is uniquely suited to express the physical, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage (Morrison 2019, pp. 47, 50). Kerouac references biologically indigenous plant-life, like "those lovely California cottonwoods and eucalypti" (78) and "yucca cactus and organpipe" (276). For Sal, the environment becomes a literary work for him both to inscribe upon and interpret. In Louisiana,

he reflects, "This was a manuscript of the night we couldn't read" (157). "[T]he sheer contingency of the natural world" prevents us from feeling as though we can master the world around us (de Luca 2016, p. 219). Contingency allows for a measured appreciation of American topography, vernacular accents, and geography.

3. Slow Travel and Environmental Insight

Technologically, Chaucer's pilgrims would be slower than many a present-day pilgrim who speeds to Rome, Jerusalem, or Mecca by plane. Chaucer's poem emerges out the walking tradition of pilgrimage, which "involves slow organic movement through a landscape" (Northcott 2008, p. 215). Our first encounter with Chaucer's Wife of Bath emphasizes how she practiced "wandrynge by the weye" (*The Canterbury Tales* I.467; "wandering by the way"). Wandering here suggests dalliance, both sexual and in terms of tarrying, slowing down to revel in the present moment. Slow travel infuses his characters' actions. The narrator of "Tale of Sir Thopas" takes the time to mark and identify each little aromatic plant, from the "lycorys and the cetewale,/ And many a clowe-gylofre,/ And notemuge to putte in ale" (VII.761–63; "licorice and the zedoary,/ And many a clove-gillyflower;/ And nutmeg to put in ale"). Slowness allows time to be intimate withone's surroundings.

While Kerouac's *On the Road* has been called an "egocentric ... speed trip", I would like to emphasize how it prefigures "eco-centric slow travel". Examples of slow travel famously include William Least Heat-Moon's personal journey on backroads of rural America in his best-selling *Blue Highways* (Arnds 2020, p. 4) and the reflections of Rebecca Solnit in her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Walking, an inherently slow medium, permits the actor unexpected revelations: "[t]he random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don't know you are looking for, and you don't know a place until it surprises you" (Solnit 2000, p. 11). Scholars in the Environmental Humanities have looked at slowness as key to various ecocritical maneuvers criticizing the swift pace of technological globalization. These devices include "[s]low [s]cholarship for the [a]nthropocene" (Bergthaller et al. 2014), promulgated by eco-critics as "an ideal ... which cultivates thinking across different spatiotemporal scales" (Bergthaller et al. 2014, p. 261). Dramatically slow art projects—such as Katie Paterson's *Future Library* project, inaugurated in 2014—are layered with the ideals of slowness and patience as ecocritical strategies. In Paterson's piece, for example, renowned writers and poets have pledged to contribute works which will remain unpublished until 2114. An ongoing concert for 639 years in Germany had its first sound change since 2013 in 2020. This concert of John Cage's organ recital began in 2001 and will continue until 2640 (Hickley 2020). Such slowness urges us to pay attention to the present, while suggesting hope in the future.

For a work typically identified with urgency and propulsion, *On the Road* could be read at a different speed and velocity, one reminiscent of that in Chaucer. Sal Paradise is not just interested in "'balling'" across North America; he, too, shows the ability to sense "the in-between places, in search of people whose relationship with the landscape and environment still shows some authenticity" (Arnds 2020, p. 5). In Denver in spring of 1949: "At dusk I walked. I felt like a speck on the surface of the sad red earth ... At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching ... strolling in the dark, mysterious streets" (179–80). At a jazz club in San Francisco, Slim Gaillard beats the bongos. He will "suddenly slow down the beat and brood over his bongos with fingertips barely tapping the skin as everybody leans forward breathlessly to hear; you think he'll do this for a minute or so, but he goes right on, for as long as an hour, making an imperceptible little noise with the tips of his fingernails, smaller and smaller all the time till you can't hear it any more and sounds of traffic come in the open door" (176). This is what Kerouac does with his own prose, persistently slowing down so we pay attention to each element. Sal becomes one with insects in Mexico.

> I realized the jungle takes you over and you become it. Lying on the top of the car with my face to the black sky was like lying in a closed trunk on a summer night. For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same. Soft infinitesimal showers of

> microscopic bugs fanned down on my face as I slept, and they were extremely pleasant and soothing. The sky was starless, utterly unseen and heavy. I could lie there all night long with my face exposed to the heavens, and it would do me no more harm than a velvet drape drawn over me. The dead bugs mingled with my blood; the live mosquitoes exchanged further portions; I began to tingle all over and to smell of the rank, hot, and rotten jungle, all over from hair and face to feet and toes (294).

Here, Kerouac's slow pilgrimage ecopoetics allows us to pay mindful attention to more-than-human actors, from those on the cosmic scale to microscopic insect life. Kerouac portrays Sal as acting as a temporary tenant of the environment (see Serres 2011, p. 86).

A useful, if venerable, way to explore pilgrimage literature can be found in Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization. He suggests "the technique of art is ... *to increase the difficulty and length of perception* because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and *must be prolonged*" (Shklovksy 1965, p. 12; my emphasis). This lengthening of perception, prolonging our observation, means that we exceed the necessary or utilitarian mode of vision. As their pilgrimage winds to a close, the sacred moment is prolonged and drawn out, lengthening the spiritual impact. Sal writes, "The end of our journey impended ... We'd made it, a total of nineteen hundred miles from the afternoon yards of Denver to these vast and Biblical areas of the world, and now we were about to reach the end of the road" (299).

4. Conclusions: Metatextuality and Literary Encounters

Key to pilgrimage literature extending back into the medieval period is the telling of stories while underway. In *The Canterbury Tales*, each pilgrim is to tell four tales, two from Southwark to Canterbury and two on the return. During the route to Mexico, "Dean and I pounded out plot after plot of books we'd read into Stan" (270). Metatextual allusions parallel *The Canterbury Tales* with *On the Road.* In the medieval work, the figure of the Host cajoles and bullies various figures into telling tales. Works of the historical Geoffrey Chaucer are mentioned in conjunction with his fictional alter ego. In *On the Road*, Sal writes a book that functions as a hook for the reader throughout the novel until it finally becomes published. Each section begins with some reference to the development of his novel. In the opening pages, Sal tells us, Chad "said I was a writer and [Dean] should come to me for advice" (3) and we learn Sal types fast (4). At the start of Part Two, he mentions how he "finished my book" (109). Near the beginning of Part Three, Sal mentions the "book I had finished, which was now accepted by the publishers" (187). At the start of Part Four, "I came into some money from selling my book" (249). By the conclusion of Part Five, the novel has been completed. This self-referentiality by each writer suggests that part of the pilgrimage is a literary journey undertaken through the creation of the written work. Like its medieval counterpart, *On the Road* ends opening outwards: "Did this mean that I should at last go on my pilgrimage on foot on the dark roads around America?" (303).

Kerouac mentions Chaucer, an evident influence, at the outset of shaping *On the Road*. Other influential writers include Shakespeare, whom Kerouac studied with Mark Van Doren, along with Thomas Wolfe, Theodore Dreiser, Goethe, Keats, Proust, and Joyce. In "Shakespeare and the Outsider", Kerouac praises Shakespeare as the greatest writer "in any language in any country anytime in the history of the world [...]. Compared to him Homer groaned, Dante too [...] Chaucer sat up in his grave and glanced curiously that away" (Kerouac 1998, p. 85). The parallels between Kerouac and Chaucer highlight elements characteristic of pilgrimage literature rooted in the Middle Ages and continuing into Beat writing.

Was this the only contact between Chaucer and the beat? Other connections include Carol Bergé's "Fragment (A Gift)", in which she mentions a woman named Alisoun, spelled the medieval way (Bergé 1971, pp. 98–99; see, for example, Chaucer's Miller's Tale I.3401 and Wife of Bath's Prologue III.530, 804). Additionally, in the late 1950s, there were events where people read poetry aloud to jazz. One of these moments occurred at the Five Spot Café in Greenwich Village, which Kerouac himself frequented (Amburn 1998, pp. 283, 286). This particular event featured Miles Davis' album, *Bags' Groove*. At one

point in his life, Kerouac told his friend and fellow writer John Clellon Holmes that he planned to write a novel on the jazz scene, including about Miles Davis (Amburn 1998, p. 184). The reader was George Stade, English professor at Columbia University who, with Amiri Baraka—at that time still known as Leroi Jones—used to organize these poetry-jazz fusions. What did George Stade read (Amburn 1998, pp. 286–87)?

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
> The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
> Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne. (Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, I.1–8).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their invaluable suggestions and insights. In addition, Wendy Maldonado, Steve Wilson, and Lydia Blanchard offered advice and support. The following people generously answered queries in personal communications: Jacques Barzun; Carl Woodring; Quentin Anderson; George Stade; Jocelyn K. Wilk, University Records, Columbia University; Gary Morrison, Registrar's Office, Columbia University; Barbara Connolly, Horace Mann School; William F. Buckley, Jr.; Jean Ashton, Director, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Les Meyers, New School University Libraries; Rodney Phillips, Curator, Berg Collection, New York Public Library; John Sampas; Ann Charters; Martha Mayo, Director, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Center for Lowell History.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Alworth, David J. 2016. *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Amburn, Ellis. 1998. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Arnds, Peter. 2020. Special Focus Introduction: Literary Walks, Slow Travel, and Eco-Awareness in Contemporary Literature. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 44: 1–9. [CrossRef]

Bergé, Carol. 1971. *From a Soft Angle: Poems About Women*. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

Bergthaller, Hannes, Rob Emmett, Adeline Johns-Putra, Agnes Kneitz, Susanna Lidström, Shane McCorristine, Isabel Pérez Ramos, Dana Phillips, Kate Rigby, and Libby Robin. 2014. Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities. *Environmental Humanities* 5: 261–76. [CrossRef]

Charters, Ann. 1991. Introduction. In *On the Road*. Edited by Jack Kerouac. New York: Penguin, pp. vii–xxxiii.

Charters, Ann. 1973. *Kerouac: A Biography*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Edited by Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 2019. An Interlinear Translation of the Clerk's Prologue, Tale and Envoy. Available online: https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~{}chaucer/teachslf/clkt-par.htm#TALE (accessed on 13 September 2019).

Cheng, Hong. 2006. Communication Across Space and Time: Contemporary American Nature Writers and the Ancient Chinese Poet Han-Shan. *ISLE [Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment]* 13: 135–45. [CrossRef]

Christy, Jim. 1998. *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac*. Toronto: ECW Press.

de Luca, Tiago. 2016. Natural Views: Animals, Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso's *Los Muertos*. In *Slow Cinema*. Edited by Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 219–230.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 1919/2020. Tradition and the Individual Talent. Poetry Foundation. Available online: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent (accessed on 25 September 2020).

Gersdorf, Catrin. 2013. Flânerie as Ecocritical Practice: Thoreau, Benjamin, Sandilands. In *Ecology and Life Writing*. Edited by Hornung Alfred and Baisheng Zhao. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, pp. 27–53.

Giamo, Ben. 2000. *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Hickley, Catherine. 2020. A 639-Year Concert, with no Intermission for Coronavirus. *The New York Times*. September 7. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/07/arts/music/john-cage-as-slow-as-possible-germany.html?referringSource=articleShare (accessed on 29 September 2020).

Kerouac, Jack. 1948–1949. *On the Road* notebook, photocopy of handwritten journal. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 1 (folder 3).

Kerouac, Jack. 1960. *Lonesome Traveler*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kerouac, Jack. 1991. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin.

Kerouac, Jack. 1995a. *Selected Letters 1940–1956*. Edited by Ann Charters. New York: Viking.

Kerouac, Jack. 1995b. *The Portable Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Ann Charters. New York: Penguin.

Kerouac, Jack. 1998. *Good Blonde & Others*. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press.

Kerouac, Jack. 2006. *The Dharma Bums*. London: Penguin. First published 1958.

McSparran, Frances, and Paul Schaffner, eds. 2000–2018. *Middle English Compendium*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, Available online: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/ (accessed on 1 November 2019).

Machan, Tim William. 2003. *English in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morrison, Susan Signe. 2019. Slow Pilgrimage Ecopoetics. *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 10: 40–59. Available online: http://ecozona.eu/article/view/2527/3110 (accessed on 13 May 2019). [CrossRef]

Müller, Timo. 2016. The Ecology of Literary Chronotopes. In *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*. Edited by Hubert Zapf. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 590–604.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Northcott, Michael. 2008. The Desire for Speed and the Rhythm of the Earth. In *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment*. Edited by Sigurd Bergmann and Tore Sager. New York: Routledge, pp. 215–32.

Schumacher, Michael. 1992. *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Serres, Michel. 2011. *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* Translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Shattuck, Kathryn. 2001. Kerouac's 'Road' Scroll Rolls Out to Auction. *The New York Times*. March 22. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/22/books/kerouac-s-road-scroll-is-going-to-auction.html (accessed on 29 September 2020).

Shklovksy, Victor. 1965. Art as Technique. In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 3–24.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2000. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin.

Sorrell, Richard S. 1982. The Catholicism of Jack Kerouac. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 11: 189–200. [CrossRef]

Stambler Peter, trans. 1996, *Encounters with Cold Mountain: Poems by Han Shan*. Beijing: Panda Books.

Weinreich, Regina. 1995. *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*. New York: Marlowe & Company.

© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland
Tel. +41 61 683 77 34
Fax +41 61 302 89 18
www.mdpi.com

Humanities Editorial Office
E-mail: humanities@mdpi.com
www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland

Tel: +41 61 683 77 34
Fax: +41 61 302 89 18

www.mdpi.com

ISBN 978-3-0365-2342-2