“SQUINTING THROUGH GUNSMOKE”: WILLIAM BURROUGHS’ ERRANT, WORLDED WEST

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Abstract

William Burroughs had been challenging closed worlds since the 1960s. Haunted by the West, born in St Louis, Missouri and dying in Lawrence, Kansas, it was as if he knew America’s inheritance was seeded on the frontier and his characters were caught up in a conditioned cycle of mythic action. His fiction, with its wild experimentation, hallucinogenic cut-up forms, and extreme states of dislocation strove to interrupt such mythic systems and cycles through what I term in this chapter errantry. Burroughs’ fiction presents alternative, errant worldings – carnivalesque plural worlds that refuse to fit into a presupposed pattern, always wandering astray from prescribed paths.

Keywords: Errantry, the American West, Worlding, Cut-ups.

“SQUINTING THROUGH GUNSMOKE”: EL OESTE ERRANTE DE WILLIAM BURROUGHS

Resumen

William Burroughs ha desafiado los límites del mundo desde 1960. El autor nacido en San Luis, Misuri y fallecido en Lawrence, Kansas, siempre mostró una predilección especial por el Oeste. De alguna manera, parecía aceptar que la semilla y la herencia de los Estados Unidos se encotraba en el mito de la frontera y que sus propios personajes estaban condicionados por ese ciclo mitológico. A través de la experimentación que puso en práctica en su obra, con su uso alucinógeno de la técnica del cut-up o sus estados extremos de dislocación, Burroughs perseguía la interrupción de esos sistemas y ciclos mitológicos. Es lo que en este artículo denomino con la cualidad de lo errante. La obra en prosa de Burroughs ofrece alternativas, mundos errantes, carnivalescos, que rechazan los patrones presupuestos, buscando siempre un camino alternativo a lo prescrito, aunque esto signifique deambular.

Palabras clave: Errante, Oeste Americano, Worlding, Cut-ups.

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In a sense, it's all one book. All my books are all one book.
Philippe Mikriammos

It was precisely because the wilderness was gone that we needed the cowboy.
Zeese Papanikolas

All art attempts the impossible.
William Burroughs

WILLIAM BURROUGHS'S WEST

William Burroughs' writings are haunted by the American West, with countless references to its geography, history, and mythology scattered throughout his novels, nonetheless he rarely appears in any books of Western Studies and has become truly its "El hombre invisible".[1] One critic even called him "a cultural dodo-bird" (Norval 2018).[1] This article begins to correct this. He confessed in his autobiographical essay "The Name is Burroughs", that at the age of 12 he "wrote bloody westerns" (2013, 4). As early as 1965 Conrad Knickerbocker in the *Paris Review* asked him, "You've said your next book will be about the American West and a gunfighter", to which Burroughs replied, "Yes, I've thought about this for years and I have hundreds of pages of notes on the whole concept of the gunfighter … I've been thinking about the Western for years" (Knickerbocker 1965). Subsequently, his work was littered with references to westerners like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, Wyatt Earp, and Bat Masterson, but it was not until *The Place of Dead Roads* in 1983 that he turned his attention to writing his version of a Western. Born in St Louis, Missouri, schooled in Los Alamos, New Mexico, stationed during the war in Coldspring, Texas, and dying in Lawrence, Kansas, it was as if Burroughs, despite his global travels during his life, always felt a magnetic pull back to the West.

In *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), the focus of this chapter, this fascination is referred to as "The drag of the West … an inexorable suction … stepping westward a jump ahead of the Geiger" (1987, 263). If was as if Burroughs knew instinctively that America's inheritance in the present was seeded on the frontier, with its initial promise of new freedoms and possibilities, but equally lost there in the rampant exploitation and control described by Zeese Papanikolas as "represented by the western push of white America, and the sense of loss and sorrow under the triumphs of a restless, unstable population" (2007, 16). Burroughs' West shares Papanikolas's "anticipatory shiver of disappointment … embedded in the American inheritance" and hidden in the silence "of something withheld, of something locked behind the omissions of the printed words" (2007, 16, 19). These were the words and images of the Western myth of progress, opportunity, and the promised good life which

[1] This is a name given to Burroughs by the Spanish boys in the Native Quarter of Tangier. Michael Prince's article is a rare exception (see bibliography).

"locked" something behind them in what Burroughs calls "a black hole" where "light itself cannot escape" (1987, 263). In Burroughs' writing there was a constant and frenzied attempt to "unlock" language as if to open up such black holes and let light in, since "The new way of thinking grows in this hiatus between thoughts" (1974, 91).

As always in Burroughs's work, the lure of fixed images or dominant mythology is a dangerously stultifying process in need of mutation, unlocking, and derangement. In *The Naked Lunch* (1959), his breakthrough novel, he refers to "infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action" as always preferable to "basic American rottenness", which like an "inflexible machine" replicates ideas and images "always reproducing more of its own kind" like a hideous virus (1968, 156). This is Burroughs' ever-present dark vision of a control society whose population have been conditioned and reduced "to generalized sub-humanity, to elements in a scheme, to mere shifts in energy" (Mottram 1977, 269).[2] For Burroughs, this is inexorably connected to the West and "the theme of failure that inevitably accompanies the dream of conquest" (Papanikolas 2007, 20). With this in mind, he wrote in his "Red Night" trilogy, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), *The Place of the Dead Roads* (1983), and *The Western Lands* (1987), of the failure of a utopian community in the Americas: "The chance was there. The chance was missed. The principles of the French and American revolutions became windy lies in the mouths of politicians" (2010, xiv).

For Burroughs, the "windy lies in the mouths of politicians" expresses the broader corruption of the missed chance of the West (and of America) as incorporation, capitalism, bureaucracy, and control increasingly overtook the potential of such early freedoms. Under a pull to nation-building unanimity, the West became the crucible and testing ground for a version of the American people forged on the frontier, as defined most famously by Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". As Gilles Deleuze famously explained of such a process of unanimity, or what we might term myth-building, it addresses a people "presupposed already there" (2000, 217). Thus, rather than still becoming whilst changing, and challenging the world in which they existed, such "presupposed people" became fixed and contained by the controlling power of what Burroughs saw as preprogrammed discourses, beliefs, and stories. Deleuze admired Burroughs greatly, and clearly saw in his writing a struggle against this very notion of programmed or presupposed controls and recognised his push towards "the

[2] Even *The Naked Lunch* opens with a western road trip, from Kansas City into Texas to Houston, and across the border into Mexico: "On through the peeled landscape, dead armadillos in the road and vultures over the swamp and cypress stumps. Motels with beaverboard walls, gas heater, thin pink blankets" (1968, 31). One of his most infamous characters, Bradly Martin, epitomising control and corruption appears in *White Subway* (1964) as a cattle rustling rancher sitting on his porch in an 1899 Western. He is "A God of stupidity, cowardice, ugliness … the spirit of our age" according to Burroughs and "Mr Bradly Mr Martin is a high level behind the scenes manipulator. Gunslinger?" (http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=1268&page=2)

invention of a people" in the imaginative disruption of his work (2000, 217). Writing in 1977 of his respect for American literature, Deleuze could be directly referring to Burroughs when he commented: "The great and only error lies in the thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life; the flight into the imaginary or into art. On the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon" (2002, 49). For as we shall see, Burroughs' work unlocks this "error" engaging with and "weaponizing" flights into the imaginary, forging new and different spatial dimensions. For him, "Space is the new frontier" and "[t]o travel in space you must leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, country talk, mother talk, love talk, party talk" (2013, 168). Similarly, Deleuze argued that the function of writing is "to be a flux … which combines with other fluxes … intensive, instantaneous and mutant – between a creation and a destruction … through which life escapes from the resentment of persons, societies, and reigns" (2002, 50).

The original dream of America epitomised by the promise of the West, soon became "The entropy of false traditions of fixed centre and linearity, god and priest, king and tycoon, chief of police and chief surgeon" (Mottram 1977, 269), "the poker-playing, whiskey-drinking evil old men who run America", through "cattle, oil, and real estate" (Burroughs 1987, 96), all servants of the "inflexible machine" (Burroughs 1968, 156). In 1986, three years after *The Place of Dead Roads*, Burroughs wrote a scathing poem, "Thanksgiving Day," in which he exclaims, "Thanks for the American dream, / To vulgarize and falsify until / the bare lies shine through", relating this terrible loss once more to the West: "Thanks for a continent to despoil /and poison. / Thanks for Indians to provide a /modicum of challenge / and danger" (1989). Thus, for Burroughs, "America is not so much a nightmare as a *non-dream,*" with its aim of wiping any genuine dream out of existence, a process that he insists "was well laid by the turn of the century" (1974, 102).[3] Appropriately, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the Western frontier "closed" in 1890 whilst *The Place of Dead Roads* opens in 1889 and concludes in 1899, as if framing this non-dream process.

As Burroughs put it in *The Job*, "The last frontier is being closed to youth" and so the nineteenth century dream of opportunity once set out by Turner has dissolved into corruption and control. It is the artist's role to find new spaces of expression, for "there are many roads to space … [and] freedom from past conditioning" (1974, 21). "The old settlers," Burroughs said, "are stuck back in the 19th century … [and] create a gap [between different peoples] by assuming that it exists" (53). The opening section of *The Place of Dead Roads* is an example of how such past conditioning might be interfered with and disrupted. The written text is preceded by a sketch map showing precise geographic locations in the American West, from Colorado to Kansas, and into Missouri, all which figure in the novel and yet, in chapter 1, Burroughs disrupts this apparent cartographic certainty. Immediately, we are told that we are reading about "What *appeared to be* an Old Western shoot-out" in 1889

[3] As he writes, "dreaming is a biologic necessity … Deprived of this airline we die. The way to kill a man or a nation is to cut off his dreams" (1987, 44).

between an author of "western stories", William Seward Hall and one Mike Chase (1987, 13 – emphasis added). But Hall himself writes under a pseudonym "Kim Carsons", who, as we soon discover, is also a character in the book we are reading. The Hall /Carsons' book *Quién Es* is now quoted from via a Sunday paper and appears to be a time-shifting tale set partly in 1920s New York.

For the reader then, these openings are deliberately disorientating, unsettling stable Western history and mythology so that we have no certainty of time, place, or character, only "what appeared to be". As Simon O'Sullivan explains, "Fiction – in the guise of typical communication and the dissemination of information – operates here as a strategy of control" (2016, 215) and for Burroughs this "typical" fiction or myth must be undone and reframed. Hence, the novel's opening is an elaborate labyrinth of collaged quotations, texts within texts: newspaper, novel, poem, and film, like a version of his own famous cut-up method precisely achieving what that technique had always intended, "a stuttering and stammering – a deterritorialization – of typical representation, pitched against the dominant fictioning-machine and its productions" (215). Burroughs' reworked cut-up method disrupts and re-arranges this consensual, mythological world in the opening of *The Place of Dead Roads* culminating when the controlling figure of the "Director" shouts as Kim Carsons "shoots a hole in the sky" causing a "Rip in the Master Film" (1987, 17). In this surreal dislodging of reality and of cultural control in its form as the Master Film, Burroughs' technique allows us through its layers, behind the performance, and towards what the rest of the novel will explore, an alternative *spaced-out* world where, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "one single dream", like that maintained by myth, is challenged and an "opposite dream" created, "something other than a literature of masters" (2003, 27, 17). In other words, what Burroughs, using a Western metaphor, calls the "Big Ranch" is to be countered by Kim Carsons' flight plan, his "Big Picture" (1987, 154-55; 98).[4]

UNPLOT, UNWRITE THE WEST

Burroughs' "techniques of discovery" (1974, 21) including multiple narrative strands, cut-up techniques, identity splices, and endless time-space shifts are some of the ways in which he counters such elements of "Big Ranch" control and conditioning. The West becomes an elaborate performance space to play out his new mythic struggle and delve behind its facade: "Guns glint in the sun, powder smoke drifts from the pages as the Old West goes into a penny-ante peepshow, false fronts, a phantom buckboard" (1987, 182). Consequently, the "last frontier" mythology, rooted in the Western genre, is both used and disrupted throughout the

4 Space in Burroughs is intergalactic but also something less material, "related to flows, energies and the liveliness of things … always 'in construction', rather than fixed and certain, let alone static" (Crouch 2010, 11).

trilogy, being intercut or interrupted with science fiction, gangster and pirate stories. Hence, as a reader, such as in the opening discussed above, we swing between and across genres, discomfited and unsettled by montage techniques resulting in a kind of "delirium" in which "multilevel events and characters" coexist (1974, 30). Above all, the aim of Burroughs' writing is a direct assault on the reader, to force him "out of his own frame of reference" (1974, 36) and into alternative spaces, however unpleasant, where new and different thought is possible. Only then, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, is there "the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (2003, 17).

This latter "community" emerges in *The Place of Dead Roads* through the figure of Kim Carsons, whose name echoes ironically the Western adventurer "Kit Carson", and yet as a "gay shootist" his goal is to assemble an "opposite dream" in the form of the underground Johnson Family, "a cooperative structure" with no boss man and an egalitarian ethos (1987, 106). Like Carsons himself, the Johnsons are fluid and flexible: "We're all actors and we change roles", moving through unlikely, shadowy spaces, "freight cars and jails … seedy rooming houses and precarious compounds" (1987, 106; 98-99). Burroughs' antithetical Western hero Carsons is both "all square-jawed and stern and noble like the Virginian" (1987, 125), "like any old John Wayne cowboy" (1988, 72) and *unlike* them simultaneously. Gay with "unwholesome proclivities" (1987, 23), he reads Rimbaud and Aleister Crowley, and he can't even tame his horse like all good cowboys should. "In short", as the novel puts it, "Kim is everything a normal American boy is taught to *detest* … but he is also given to the subversive practice of *thinking*" (1987, 23). Going against the American grain, and, as such, reformulating the American Western's norms, Carsons unleashes subversive, contradictory, errant thought into the West, through his own actions and that of the Johnsons, turning assumptions upside down and inside out, always working against "the sacred cows on which the West is built" (1987, 125).

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Hence, Carsons can perform a role in the Master Film, but persistently acts to counter these stereotypes of Westness and masculinity with his extreme actions and interruptions. For example, he is often seen assuming a pose for a real or imaginary camera, wishing "there was someone here to take his picture" (1987, 59), as if constructing an alternative performance than the scripted stereotypes of the Master Film. One of his lovers, Tom Dark, is a photographer who explains the possibility of such an alternative film: "we attempt the impossible: to photograph the present moment which contains the past the future" (1987, 85). Like Carsons' multiple identities cloned across the novel, this "impossibility" stretches and breaks time, "stands outside the film" and so disrupts the "control-oriented universe" by creating spaces containing present, past, and future (1987, 195).

As a result, Carsons' very existence is described as "inferential", like an ethereal construction of "traces … fossils … fading violet photos, old newspaper clippings" (1987, 181). He is as much a collage or cut-up as the novel itself: "Kim didn't fit, and a part that doesn't fit can wreck a machine" (97). His presence wrecks the *machine* of myth, of expectations, temporality, and of the presupposed contained in America's epic story of a nation built from the West, an idea underpinning the struggle within the central book of Burroughs' trilogy.

Carsons, who is also the *nom de plume* of William Seward Hall, you will recall, is the “man of many faces and many pen names, of many times and places” whose goal is to “unplot, and unwrite” the controlling Master Film and “to invent his way, write his way” into new spaces (1987, 107; 45).[5] His aim is, therefore, ironically, a peculiarly *Western* one, to find space beyond the restrictions of the world he was born into, a world of “monumental fraud … [where] the game is rigged”, and regenerate “Potential America” (PDR 98-99; 140). As Charles Olson wrote, “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy” (1967, 15). Carsons’ “imaginary space trips” are practice for the possibility of “the real thing”, “like target shooting” (1987, 43), and conjure up a dreamed-of new community, no longer dedicated to the “controlled proliferation of identical objects and persons” (1987, 93). This is a vision of a Johnson-style community run “by those who actually do the work” (1987, 98) and who are willing to oppose the rich and powerful. As he puts it perfectly, “Ever see the marks wise up and take a carnival apart?” (98). Mustering all this weird, transgressive energy, in these flights into the imaginary, Carsons and the Johnsons reimagine the West as a speculative vision for America and the world, as if, as he puts it, “the promised land hit back” (1987, 147).

BURROUGHS’ ERRANTRY

Burroughs’ desire to “unplot and unwrite” the Master Film of history and literature is fundamentally, I would argue, an example of errantry. Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant argued that errant thought “challenges and discards the universal [or mythic] – this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny”, favouring instead opacity, relations, and diversity (1997, 20). Rejecting universalizing thought, like that encompassed by Western mythology and replayed in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and countless speeches by US politicians, Glissant emphasised instead diversity and opacity in what he famously called the “poetics of relation”, projecting interrupted, mobile, and unfixed worlds rather than a single, unanimous one. As I have shown, Burroughs’ work shares this same, radical goal. The primary sense, etymologically, of errantry and error is related to the French verb *errer*, from the Latin *errare*, to wander off or stray from a path. As Samuel Talcott explains, “Error is that which I can no longer think, but what I could think before. In recognizing the duty to no longer think what I thought, I aver in the same moment, *the power to think otherwise than I should*” (Talcott 2019, 93, quoting Georges Canguilhem – my emphasis).

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[5] Carsons is cloned and so exists as “thought patterns in a number of different brains and nervous systems” (1987, 105).

Such *thinking otherwise* is the lifeblood of Kim Carsons' opposite dream in the novel and central to his speculative quest for an alternative, potential new community disavowing the founding myths of the West and "rewriting history" (1988, 59). Jean-Luc Nancy explains this urge using similar terms, "myth is not simple representation, it is representation at work … it is *fiction that founds*. And what it founds is not a fictive world, but fictioning as the fashioning of a world" (1991, 56 – emphasis added). For Nancy, like Burroughs, myth is constantly at work shaping society, "fashioning" a particular version of the world, and yet this can be "interrupted" and undone at its limits: "The myth does not end, nor is it lost, but in fact, because it itself does not disappear, it must be interrupted, its mything or fictioning diverted" (Biro 2019, 68). To understand Burroughs' cut-up Western, *The Place of Dead Roads*, therefore, one must recognise these perpetual interruptive diversions whereby time, identity, and place all shift from what appears to be a regular "19th century western", as he calls it (2013, 53), into a worlded whirlwind of space and place with no origins, no stability, no foundations.

As his early cut-up method evolved into his later works, Burroughs's time-space collages, as in *The Place of Dead Roads,* echo Anna Gibbs' experimental "cut up technique" whereby "the plot is uncertain; place is displaced; setting becomes unstable; site gives way to constantly shifting situation" (2020, 25). Any sense of a "prerecorded" reality is being undone in Burroughs' endlessly shifting "interruption, appropriation and collage-montage" narratives (2020, 31). Deliberately repurposing "what remains of myth", Burroughs breaks apart, *cuts-up*, the reader's expectations and assumptions derived from the "seduction" of mythology and all its attendant control systems (2020, 31). Gibbs calls this "the overarching protective shelter of story" guiding us along particular well-trodden, narrative paths (2020, 32). However, as one reads *The Place of Dead Roads*, any "protective shelter" fragments, and its safe pathways become errant or even aberrant, like "a series of interruptions … a stuttering account of something that does not produce a narrative" (2020, 33).

In Burroughs' own words, "Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands" (1978, 5). "This happens in dreams of course", he writes in *The Western Lands* (138), where errantry runs amok and as in all his novels forms of travelling (into space, back and forward in time, into and out of the human body, beyond human identity etc) are commonplace. Thus, it is the founding fiction of the West he *cut-ups*, rearranging existing order, language, and mythology, offering up a scrambled, errant counterforce: "If you want to challenge and change fate", Burroughs famously wrote, "cut up the words. Make them a new world" (quoted in Mottram 1977, 37). Just like Kim Carsons resisting the Master Film: "He just did not *fit*" (1987, 97).[6]

[6] As Brion Gysin explains in The Third Mind, "Shuffle the pieces and put them together at random. Cut through the word lines to hear a new voice off the page. A dialogue often breaks out. 'It' speaks" (1978, 44).

Recalling Nancy's point above, Burroughs' textual and psychic interruption functions as errantry precisely because it "disrupts by *sending myth's propriety astray*, bringing into play fragmentation and variance, it suspends 'fusion and communion' and in this interruption 'something makes itself heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted'" (Biro 2019, 68, citing Nancy 1991, 61–62). Indeed, what remains of myth in Burroughs' novel wanders astray from prescribed paths performing alternative, *errant worldings*, carnivalesque plural worlds that refuse to fit into a presupposed, preprogrammed pattern. His is an errant, worlded West opened-up and intercut with London, Tangier, Paris, Panama, and New York, to set against the ever-controlled lost promise of an American society corrupted and exploited by the wealthy, powerful few, the owners of what Burroughs called the Reality Studio, makers of the Master Film. Burroughs anticipated such a worlded vision in *The Yage Letters* and *The Naked Lunch* through his "Composite City" with "New races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized … where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market … where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum" (2006, 50, 53). For Burroughs, therefore, writing is delirium, madness, straying, assembling a different kind of "we", a people (or a community), as Deleuze put it, that is missing and not already there, scripted and prerecorded, but rather *becoming* like "the seeds of the people [and a world] to come" (2000, 221).

Burroughs' delirious writing constantly stutters and strays in battling to interrupt the control virus eating away at difference and possibility. He terms it the "right virus" because it claims always to be right: "This RIGHT virus has been around for a long time … from the Inquisition to the Conquistadores, from the American Indian Wars to Hiroshima" and it is the job of the artist, to be "cutting off this air line" and so stalling its growth (2013, 19-20; see also 1987, 140-1). As the virus operates within linear forms, within established language structures, and according to presupposed conditioning, it is art's function to counter and disrupt these frameworks through errantry.[7] Early on, Burroughs stated his aim clearly: "I am attempting to create a new mythology for the space age. I feel that the old mythologies are definitely broken down and not adequate at the present time" (Mottram 1999, 80). He continued, "Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning" (80).

As Glissant explained, errantry works against these old mythologies, emerging from "the destructuring of compact national identities", seeking "new forms of identity" "experienced as a search for the Other … rather than an expansion of territory" (1997, 18). For Glissant, like Burroughs, this would come through

[7] As Burroughs wrote, "When art leaves the frame, and the written word leaves the page, not merely the physical frame and page, but the frames and pages of assigned categories, a basic disruption of reality occurs. … Instead of appropriating by framing and signing, remove the frames and the pedestals, yes, even the signatures. Every dedicated artist attempts the impossible …" "Apocalypse" at https://www.haring.com/!/art-work/65

"detours that lead away from anything totalitarian" (1997, 18). Once again, this helps explain Burroughs' use of the cut-up method through which anything totalitarian is "constantly being cut by seemingly random factors" creating "bits and pieces, shreds and patches" that serve as "interruptions" to the Reality Studio (2013, 53). Hence, linearity and conventional patterns of time are altered as if "your whole life spread out in a spatial panorama, a vast maze of rooms, streets, landscapes, not sequential but arranged in shifting associational patterns" (1988, 138). Such spatiality is uncontrolled by the Master Film, unsettling the "prerecorded universe" of totalitarianism and rejecting the controls of time, as sequence, labour, and destiny, since "as soon as anyone goes into space the film is irreparably damaged" (1987, 194, 195).

To be errant in Burroughs' work is to err from the path set by controlling forces, by "malefactors who are sabotaging our space program", "vampire mummies", "Venusian agents", "Mafiosi", "Slave Gods", overseeing an imposed "universe" which is "controlled, predictable, dead" because it is reductionist, monological, and regulated (1987, 150, 164, 59, 153, 59). As I have argued throughout this chapter, such "antimagical, authoritarian, dogmatic" thinking in Burroughs' work has its roots in an incorporated West, the "deadly enemy of those … committed to the magical universe, spontaneous, unpredictable, alive" (1988, 59). It is an exemplary space of colonization, violence, and imposition controlled by the few at the expense of the many – a reversal of the original democratic dream of America and the West. In *The Western Lands*, he writes, borrowing from Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 3 Scene 6, "Well, let determined things to destiny hold unbewailed their way" (1988, 59), reminding us of the notion of Manifest Destiny tied to the supposed immortality to be found in the Western Lands.[8] And yet these Western Lands are far from an exceptionalist paradise in the trilogy, but "vampiric … kept solid and operative with fellahin energy" (1987, 173) like "an exclusive country club" for the wealthy and powerful (1988, 196). This "unpleasant, precarious, and dangerous concept" of Western Lands as a destined goal persists because "it works" creating a "whole system" of mythic control (1987, 174). In reality, however, "there aren't enough Western Lands to go around" (174) and so ultimately any notion of democratic freedom and free land soon faded from the Western dream replaced by reservations, range wars, and enclosure. When resources are scarce, they are controlled *not* for all, but for the few.

Blending Egyptian and American cultures, the point is clearly made: "Not only had the rich monopolized the land and the wealth, they had monopolized the Western Lands. Only the members of certain families were allowed to mummify themselves, and so achieve immortality" (1988, 101). As always in Burroughs' fiction space-time and history intersect and overlap, here ancient Egypt with the US West, suggesting the eternal, worldly struggle over control and power, the battle of the

[8] Burroughs uses the paradisal Western Lands from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, but he clearly has in mind also the problematic American version.

powerful and the “fellaheen” whose “blood … flesh and bones” built the Western Lands (1988, 106; 1987, 173-4).[9]

CONCLUSION: QUIÉN ES?

So often in reading Burroughs’ work one encounters the question, “Quién Es?” “Who is it?” Appropriately for this essay, they were the last words of Billy the Kid. This question, with its opacity, uncertainty, and doubt mirrors so much of the reader’s relationship to Burroughs’ fiction. Looking unflinchingly into the darkness, we ask “who is it?” – what is out there and where are we?

Reading the trilogy, and especially *The Place of Dead Roads*, takes us into this darkness, through the West and beyond, tracing themes and motifs familiar in US history and myth whilst divesting them of their exceptionalist authority or triumphalism, for these are *worlded* concerns. Amid this, however, what Burroughs holds on to, somewhat surprisingly, is the possibility of “a land of dreams” (1988, 165) built not on the fixed and regulated controls of a vampiric capitalist elite with “voices full of money … preserved in money” (1987, 111), but upon something more fluid, magical, and “less solid”, as he puts it, like “the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock … the last and greatest of human dreams” (1988, 165). In evoking *The Great Gatsby*, he reminds us of the unfulfilled potential of the West and of the American nation itself. For like Fitzgerald’s novel, Burroughs’ trilogy is a “story of the West” with its infinite regret at freedom’s loss and human reductionism. As he put it in his deeply ironic “Thanksgiving poem” of 1986 with its clear reference back to *Gatsby*, “Thanks for the last and greatest betrayal / of the last and greatest /of human dreams”.

Carsons’ desire, as both gunfighter and, as it turns out, author ghostwritten by William Seward Hall, is, like Burroughs’, to rekindle the energy of human dreams and defy powers of control and imposition, not to achieve a tangible, material dream of progress, but to produce a dream-space for potential freedom through his narratives themselves. As Charles Olson famously wrote of Herman Melville, “He lived intensely his people’s wrong, their guilt. But he remembered the first dream” (1967, 19). In deranging the codes of language, society, and myth, the weapons that Burroughs “advocate[s] are weapons that change consciousness … weapons of illusion” (2018, 136). In the hyperbolic language of *The Place of Dead Roads* the aim is “to become a god, to shoot his way to immortality, to invent his way, to write his way” (1987, 45). Ultimately, for Burroughs, “Writing, if it is anything, is a word of warning” (1988, 213), and above all, a warning about the abuse of mythology and power.

[9] “Fellaheen” derives from the Arab word for a peasant. Jack Kerouac uses the term in his work, as does Burroughs. Broadly, it signifies the oppressed and the resistors.

As he puts it in *The Western Lands*: "Whenever anyone reads his words the writer is there. He lives in his readers" (45). The reader, therefore, carries the fight through and beyond Burroughs' weird routines, his words, his warnings, giving a kind of immortality beyond the book itself, because, as he said, "that's what art is all about" (1988, 165). This, of course, is never a comfortable, stable process, but "A warning … a shaft of terror, a future of blackness, error and ruin between radiance and darkness" (1988, 245). This latter phrase, "error and ruin between radiance and darkness" echoes back to "Quién Es?" and Billy the Kid looking out from the darkness, whilst simultaneously evoking Burroughs' edgy, errant spirit always working between established paths "trying to make something happen in the mind of the reader" (2013, 75). Errantry, as we have seen, always contains within it the notion of "error", not as a purely negative force, but rather as "the knower's straying afield of himself", as Michel Foucault put it (1992, 8). Indeed, Foucault's transgressive, errant spirit *straying afield of himself* shares much with Burroughs' aim as a writer: "to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there … to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point and in a clearer light" (1992, 11).[10]

Towards the end of *The Western Lands*, Burroughs invokes a spirit that typifies this goal of his writing, and which returns us to my central argument about errantry: "I'm the uninvited mole / The errant lawless soul / … I'm a singularity… I'm a lock without a key" (1988, 243). As with all errant, worlded fiction, Burroughs' novels are transgressive, non-reductive, non-exceptionalist, dialogical, relational, and communal as all worlding texts should be. He is truly "the errant lawless soul" working through the personae of his novels and in an increasingly dehumanising and inhumane world of reductionist politics and closed ideologies, what we need now as much as ever, is more humanity not less. Finally, this errantry pointing towards future worlds is always best expressed in the reclaimed language of the Western: "my saga", he writes dramatically, "will shine in the eyes of adolescents squinting through gunsmoke" (1987, 45).[11]

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[10] "Foucault had a very deep admiration for Burroughs", writes Gilles Deleuze in *Two Regimes of Madness* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007, 326). In 1975 at the "Schizo-Culture" conference at Columbia University organized by Sylvère Lotringer, John Cage shared the stage with Deleuze and Foucault introduced William S. Burroughs.

[11] Even at his death Burroughs maintained a haunted relation to the West. "William had his heart attack while journaling. Armed to the end with piece and pen, he didn't take off his .38 till the paramedics were on their way. Bent over in his writing chair in his green army jacket, grimacing and groaning, clutching his chest like a gut-shot cowboy, he removed the holster and gun from his belt to stash under his pillow, and then they took him away." *Hikuta!* Tom Peschio on Burroughs and His Guns https://realitystudio.org/biography/hikuta/

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