

Borrowed Visions: Psychedelics, Power, and Indigenous Knowledge in the Beat Literary Imagination

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ABSTRACT

The Beat Generation is known for their quest for spontaneous expression and altered forms of spiritual consciousness. Known for using psychedelics and other illicit substances, Beatniks revered deviancy not only in their lives but also in their craft. Their works often featured these substances as a thematic concern, or were a tool themselves to question structured forms. William S Burroughs, a figure who can be credited with shaping the intellectual attitudes of the Beats, often made trips to South America in search of these substances, seeking to expand his consciousness. This paper argues that these ayahuasca trips were imperial in nature, where the idiosyncrasies of indigenous cultures are stripped off their roots and reduced to a scientific conquest. Past research in this area showcases Burroughs as the White Man on South American soil, and this paper extends the argument by showing his research for a mind-altering experience as a colonial practice. Using frameworks by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who focus on decolonising research methodologies, and the Foucauldian discourse on the relationship between knowledge and power, this paper will depict the use of psychedelics in Beat literature as a way of attaining knowledge, knowledge that ultimately influences their writing, rooted in imperial methods. It will synthesise ethnobotanical and postcolonial approaches to form a cohesive lens on how the freedom of the Beats was attained at the cost of indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: Beat literature, Psychedelics, Decolonisation, Indigenous knowledge systems.
