

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.

John Clellon Holmes, in a 1952 article “This is the Beat Generation” wrote that Beat literature “involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness”. When one’s identity is essentialised to a singular aspect of their lives, in the case of Beatniks, their “bedrock”, a framing effect is produced, where the individual’s perception is shaped by the lens of their essence. The Beat writers were isolated figures as their voices were emerging after World War II, when society was amputated and fragmented. In such a culturally repressive environment, the Beatniks sought to explore the last vestiges in their lives — their consciousness. Their stylistic experimentation was influenced by quests conducted in real life, which could be in terms of a spiritual quest, or the quest of the body with sex, travel, religion, etc.

The Beat Generation comprised the minds of William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neal Cassady, etc. Out of them, Burroughs can be accredited as shaping the intellectual sphere of the Beats, who propounded his unconventional methods of exploring their consciousness. Andrew Weil, in *The Natural Mind* (1998), wrote: “It is my belief that the desire to alter consciousness periodically is an innate, normal drive analogous to hunger or the sexual drive” (9), an aspect that is accurately manifested in the writings of William S. Burroughs. Older than most of the Beatniks, Burroughs’ style showcased experimentation in themes, such as his addiction, his relationship with people such as Lewis Marker, who is characterised by Eugene Allerton in his books, etc.; and in his vulgarised presentation of it. His experiences with substances were mostly shaped by analgesics and euphoriant. In *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, or *Junky* (1953), Burroughs wrote:

Junk is a cellular equation that teaches the user facts of general validity. I have learned a great deal from using junk: I have seen life measured out in eyedroppers of morphine solution. I experienced the agonizing deprivation of junk sickness, and the pleasure of relief when junk-thirsty cells drank from the needle... I have learned the junk equation. Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life. (Burroughs 5)

Being the intellectual figure amongst the Beatniks, he sought the inner self to its extreme degrees, where he wanted to move past and challenge the linearity that is often associated with the spatial and the temporal. He often associated 'yagé', which he misspells as 'yage' across all works, as "space-time travel" — upon consumption, he is taken to the "Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market" (Ginsberg and Burroughs). However, this "space-time travel" is not devoid of its problems. The way yagé is treated in his writings follow a tradition of imperial travel writing. His descriptions of indigenous knowledge in *The Yage Letters*, including the misspelling of the titular drug, reinforces colonial hierarchies, even as he is as a counterculture expatriate.

The contention of this paper is to analyse how William S. Burroughs narrativises yagé in his writings, as a pharmacological substance and strips off the cultural context it is embedded in, and how it shaped discourse around psychedelics in Beat Literature. The paper will combine ethnobotanical and postcolonial approaches, for example, the Foucauldian discourse on knowledge/power dynamics, to study the commodification of indigenous psychedelic knowledge for the sake of the Beat Generation's literary self-fashioning.

The impact of psychedelics on the beat generation

Works belonging to the Beat Generation saw a significant transformation in terms of treatment of the literary material. Prior to the Beats, drugs were explored more as a thematic vessel, however, it shifted when people such as William S. Burroughs started using it to facilitate their creative process. These substances allowed Burroughs to synthesise the sensuous and the sensual, as they pushed him to seek aesthetic forms that mirror altered states of consciousness. This shift can be observed in the form of Beat writing, as the reader is disoriented due to fragmentation, temporal loops and gaps, etc. — mirroring the psychedelic experience. The experimental fashion of writing also induces abjection within the reader, making them feel what Burroughs calls ‘junk sick’, as the grotesque synesthetic descriptions of the body are portrayed — such as in the lines, “Got nauseous, rushed out and began vomiting, all covered with snakes, like a Snake Seraph... I felt like a snake vomiting out the universe.” (Ginsberg and Burroughs 60). The psychedelic and the literary coalesce to produce an experiential rather than a mimetic product.

The Beat experimentation also sought to challenge the limitations of Western rationalism. To pose this challenge, Beatniks delved into substances, using them as epistemological means, as a way of knowing, rather than taking them just as an escape mechanism. Their epistemic rebellion against capitalist logic led to a ‘cut-up’ style of writing, as aforementioned, leading to sensory derangement. Furthermore, they refused to confine themselves in one form, as their craft bled into collaborative forms such as cinema, photography, artwork, etc.

Psychedelics: An epistemological tool

In *Mind-Altering Drugs: The Science of Subjective Experience* (2005), drugs are described to have the potential to become methods that generate knowledge, especially to study consciousness, perception,

and cognition: “Psychedelic drugs were originally called ‘consciousness-expanding’: in such states, one does not see hallucinated, illusory objects; rather, one sees the ordinary objects but also sees, knows, and feels associated patterns and aspects that one was not aware of before” (Earleywine 34).

By this definition, the idea that substances like yagé can be classified as research tools rather than recreational escapes can be legitimised. Substances, here, are a means of access that unlock epistemic domains inaccessible via ordinary perception. In *Mind Altering Drugs*, a concept termed “apperception” is defined to be “the reflective awareness of the experiencing subject and understanding of associated elements of context.” Burroughs’ letters consistently move beyond sensorial description toward meta-observation. Exemplified in the statement, “I experienced at first a feeling of calm and serenity like I could sit there all night. I glimpsed a new state of being.” Burroughs names his affective state, then identifies it as a state, depicting a shift from experience to awareness, observed to observer (Ginsberg and Burroughs 95). Moreover, *Mind Altering Drugs* explores radical empiricism as it states that all experience — including subjective, altered, and relational experience — constitutes valid empirical data. Burroughs’ most explicit alignment with radical empiricism appears in his rejection of conventional Western epistemological frameworks while under the influence of yagé — “I must give up the attempt to explain, to seek any answer in terms of cause and effect and prediction... I must change my whole method of conceiving fact” (Ginsberg and Burroughs xxiii).

Furthermore, when viewed from a decolonial lens, one can argue that yagé is seen as an extractable epistemological resource, rather than a rooted knowledge practice. Linda Tihuwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), states that Western research traditions view Indigenous knowledge as raw material to be extracted, translated, and owned: removing it from the relational system of cultural and communal ethics. As it has been established earlier, descriptions

of Burroughs' yagé trips mirror colonial travel writing. By labelling yagé to be a "final fix", he essentialises the psychedelic and removes all context. In *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use*, Albert Hoffman states that yagé or ayahuasca is employed for "prophecy, divination, sorcery, and medicinal purposes, and is so deeply rooted in native mythology and philosophy that there can be no doubt of its great age as a part of aboriginal life" (Hoffman 120). Therefore, it can be said that Burroughs saw yagé as a detachable tool for producing insight. Colonial knowledge prioritises speed, access, and control, without accounting for it. Exemplified in the lines, Burroughs disregards the idiosyncrasies of ritualistic practices, rendering them to be unnecessary and something that gets in his way of accessing the drug: "The Brujos say they are the only ones competent to prepare it... croon over it and spit in it and shake a whisk broom over it otherwise the Yage is nowhere... The fact is Yage is Yage and anyone can prepare it in an hour or so if he has enough of the Yage vine" (Ginsberg and Burroughs 82).

Drawing parallels between Smith's descriptions of imperial practices, and Burroughs' actions, a lens is formed where Burroughs attempts to showcase his mastery by depicting indigenous systems as deceptive, as exemplified in the lines, "Most of these secrets turn out to be a con the Brujo puts down on the public so he can preserve a semblance of monopoly" (82). Furthermore, his need for possession, stemming from his addiction, "That wasn't enough. I need more.", goes against the collective identity of indigenous communities. In a collective, the resource is supposed to be shared, taking only what they need, however, when Burroughs' addiction imposes on their society, it provides him self-proclaimed authority, disregarding the practices of the community.

Epistemic violence in *the Yage letters*

“Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (Foucault 131), as stated by Foucault in *Power/Knowledge*, is a statement that forms the core foundation of our understanding of epistemic violence. It showcases how neutrality of knowledge as a concept cannot exist, because as soon as one body of knowledge is the truth, the other is rendered false and irrational. He provides the term ‘subjugated knowledge’ to connote knowledge systems that have been ‘disqualified’. In *The Yage Letters*, Burroughs performs this act of disqualification with respect to tribal knowledge. He does not merely misrepresent the subaltern, but participates in a “regime of truth”, that establishes authority for his experience and disregards the Indigenous episteme.

His quest for chemical salvation as he looked for his “final fix”, showcases how the importance placed on his experience leads to epistemic disqualification: “The most inveterate drunk, liar and loafer in the village is invariably the medicine man” (Ginsberg and Burroughs 16). Indigenous knowledge, as it is collective in nature without the concept of intellectual property, is deemed to be extractable and monetisable, as exemplified by: “[The medicine man] had let him in on ‘a trade secret.’” (Ginsberg and Burroughs xxii). Here, local knowledge is stripped off cultural nuances and absorbed into Western scientific discourse, which Foucault calls the circulation of knowledge through institutional power. Burroughs’ interactions with scientists also raises questions as to how research was being conducted. The ubiquitous presence of men representing science, who have also taken ayahuasca for their personal benefits, showcases Western encroachment in indigenous lands. Moreover, Burroughs’ assumption of authority over knowledge mirrors the ‘terra nullis’ notion of colonialism. Norman K. Swazo in “Research integrity and rights of indigenous peoples: appropriating Foucault’s critique of knowledge/power” writes, “To speak a ‘scientific’ discourse is to transmit knowledge as power.” Burroughs repeatedly frames yagé experiences as

discoveries, findings, and reports. Through a Foucauldian lens, his letters function as a discursive practice that converts subjective experience into authoritative knowledge. Writing to Ginsberg, Burroughs does not merely narrate intoxication; he claims epistemic authority over what yagé reveals. The letter form itself becomes a technology for transmitting knowledge-as-power, even while disavowing institutional science. This authority is not only reflected in his act of writing (deemed to be a colonial practice by Linda Tihuwai Smith), but also in his egoistical sense of ambition for discovery: “No doubt about it. Yage is a deal of tremendous implications, and I’m the man who can dig it.” (Ginsberg and Burroughs xiii).

Conclusion

The Yage Letters frames yagé less as a constituent of Indigenous epistemological systems and more as extractable instruments within a mechanical system of Western knowledge production. Burroughs uses strong vocabulary such as ‘must dig’, which depicts a forcible method to access and control collective knowledge. By detaching the drug from its context, he separates it from its ontological functions, which according to Smith, is a characteristic of imperial research. Furthermore, following the Foucauldian discourse on the relationship between power/knowledge, *The Yage Letters* is an example of epistemic violence, where the indigenous episteme is portrayed as deceptive and time-consuming. The prevalence of scientific figures in the text, for example, German scientists and Colombian botanists, depicts science as a colonial force which naturalises the stoic idea of Western reason. Although Burroughs and the other Beatniks sought to defy the Western methods of literary discourse, their imposition on indigenous lands, where they stripped off the ethnobotanical characteristics of their knowledge systems, showcases how in their defiance, they were also compliant in colonial epistemic invasion.

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