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Book Review: Chad Weidner, *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 200 pp.



Since ecocriticism on the works of the Beat Generation only tends to address the poetry of Gary Snyder and a few others, Chad Weidner's *Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* has as its main goal a reconsideration of Burroughs' body of work in an ecocritical light. Weidner readily admits that this is a monumental task for two reasons: ecocriticism often emphasizes a type of nature writing that Burroughs is not known for; and previous criticism on Burroughs' canon does not outwardly lend itself to an ecocritical reading. But much like Burroughs's own eclectic, complex aesthetic, the field of ecocriticism has blossomed into a multifaceted, diverse arena in recent years, growing out of conservationist movements and taking on issues of climate change, the anthropocene, anti-industrialism, animal and plant studies, nonhuman agency, back-to-nature movements, not to mention cross-disciplinary lenses (queer ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental justice, environmental humanities, etc.). So why not take on Burroughs' unruly and often composite archive in this context?

A fraught and controversial figure within the Beat Generation, Burroughs occupies a space of critical veneration usually reserved for those scholars brave enough to take on his experimental style and provocative subject matter. Weidner proves he has done this critical work but now wants to complicate Burroughs' literary legacy by reclaiming him as a writer of the "ecological mind"—not a "traditional" nature writer, necessarily, but one immersed in a conservationist, ecological ecocritical, and a biocentric/ deep ecological ethos. These three ecocritical frames, Weidner explains, explore the ways humans interact with the natural world in general as well as with specific bioregions and ecosystems—both metaphorical and real. A large part of Burroughs' ecological project is the notion that the human imagination cannot fully explain or explore the "biotic sphere," a deep ecological view that unseats human authority over the nonhuman world in favor of regarding humans as part of a larger, global, ecosystem (4-5). Reflective of Burroughs' problematic and fraught relationship to the literary canon and to theoretical frames at large, application of these ecocritical theories do not fit seamlessly within a unified ecocritical vision, but, to my mind, the whole point of ecocriticism is to explore the various ways we inhabit and imagine the world around us. Burroughs' worlds and prose are permeable, chaotic, aberrant, fragmentary, and often terrifying, and that is what makes them worthy of contemporary ecocritical examination.

After identifying four phases of Burroughs' writing—from the early texts (*Junkie* and *Queer*) to his most popular, subversive works (*Naked Lunch*, namely) through the experimental works written in the cut-up style to his later, more linearly conventional

narratives—Weidner notes that the readings of Burroughs’ work often identified and analyzed in previous critics’ works and biographies are multifaceted but ultimately miss the ecological tendencies within his canon. Seeing a “green anarchism” reminiscent of Thoreau’s literary and political work, Weidner argues for a reading of Burroughs’ canon that not only does not ignore his tendency towards using violent means to achieve an ideological end (his brief description of Burroughs’ obsession with guns and the militia movements is particularly interesting here) but also acknowledges his encounters with the frontier, the primitive, and the pastoral. All these elements emphasize how Burroughs “was drawn to the ideas of the past as a way to improve the future” (17). What Weidner ultimately proves, however, is that examining Burroughs’ subject matter is just as much about an ecological imagination as is the material landscape of the texts themselves.

Throughout the six chapters of literary analysis, which are roughly chronological, Weidner invokes such current ecocritical keywords as: toxic discourse, the trash aesthetic, biopiracy, ecoterrorism, animal studies, and apocalyptic thinking. The most effective descriptive phrase comes in Chapter Four with “the Dada Compost Grinder.” Utilizing Dada ecopoetics and the trash aesthetic, Weidner makes an apt case for the “cultural cannibalism” and “literary sabotage” of the *Nova* trilogy, written in Burroughs’ famed cut-up style. The narrative encourages readers to literally cut-up the world around them, not just material objects but also the conventions of language in order “to contaminate the public discourse with what can be considered a destabilizing virus” (68). The *Nova* trilogy is composed of the discarded, raw material of existing texts, resulting in “a textual ecology, an inanimate textual organism that reacts, contracts, and moves based on reader involvement” (72). Dada ecopoetics, besides destabilizing language and cultivating new texts from rubbish, include a “trash aesthetic as rich compost for creative rebirth that goes beyond human agency” (160). This sentence, to me, essentially sums up Burroughs’ entire aesthetic, and Weidner makes sense of which many readers through the decades have not been able.

Further, Weidner coins the term “the Toxic Human” early in his book to examine the junkie characters in Burroughs’ first novels as well as the most famous one, *Naked Lunch*, arguing that “the modern toxic condition is a form of contemporary ecological identity that challenges stereotypical environmental views” (27). The novels reveal the presence of toxins in the form of “an alien agent that takes hold of, damages, and pollutes the human body” so that the Toxic Human becomes almost a parable or metaphor for inhabiting the modern toxic world (23). There seems to be no escape from toxicity, no matter where it comes from, and Weidner notes that Burroughs most powerful encounter with environmental thinking in these early works comes from the idea that everybody is worthy of healing and wellness. But the “junkie universe,” since it is a modern, urban, toxic environment, is always already apocalyptic, and the “Toxic Human is rather a fact and a present form of human existence” since “modernity engenders both the toxic body and a sense of inevitable doom that accompanies apocalyptic thinking” (35).

But apart from the chemical toxins of *Naked Lunch*, the “quest for the ultimate natural drug” in *The Yage Letters* reveals “radical techniques for reality transformation” (accompanied by mention of the West’s exploitation of the environments in the developing world), which makes the fragmentation within the narrative parallel the fragmentation of the readers’ experience. In these cut-up style novels, Burroughs encourages a radical reading practice that forces the reader to engage with the text in innovative and unexpected ways. Weidner argues that Burroughs’ style in these montage works are actually apt for the “radical ambiguity” of “expressing both increasing isolation from the natural world and the fragmentation of the human consciousness in an increasingly uncertain age” (63). Part of this uncertainty also relies on the deep ecological idea that the human imagination simply cannot comprehend nor process the entire complexity of the nonhuman world. These limitations, that make the knowability of the nonhuman world impossible—whether it is through encounters with nonhuman animals, including companion species and those lost through mass extinction, the invention of the pastoral, or the general anti-industrial turn of the Beat Generation—also make redemption ultimately impossible. An ecological apocalypse, then, is inevitable. Burroughs seems to oscillate between despair and hope for humanity throughout his career, and he is, along with humanity in general, I would argue (at least in this ecological vision), is “an eternally ethereal green ghost,” susceptible, fragile, and vulnerable even as he inhabits a world he seemingly and falsely rules (1).

The whole book manages to feel, in the spirit of Burroughs’ literature, simultaneously experimental and sure-footed in its application of theory, making one wonder why more has not been written about Burroughs’ “ecological mind.” While I am no fan of Burroughs any longer, this book has come close to convincing me to revisit his work in this light. Additionally, Weidner’s secondary goal to make a case for extending and expanding our ecological readings of midcentury texts takes on an appropriate urgency about apocalyptic and anti-human thinking that is all over ecocriticism at the moment. There is not merely one way for humans to interact with or experience ecologies and environments, and the more often we are reminded of this, the better.