

Burroughs's Postcolonial Visions in The Yage Letters

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Abstract: In her article "Burroughs's Postcolonial Visions in *The Yage Letters*" Melanie Keomany discusses the contents of William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters* which could be dismissed as openly bigoted and racist. Keomany posits that the text reveals valuable connections between the colonial expansion of the eighteenth century and 1950s USA and Latin America. By re-shaping Burroughs's lived experiences in the Amazon into a text where the narrator William Lee mimics sardonically and parodically the colonial scientific explorer, *The Yage Letters* provides valuable insight into the complex postcolonial context of the mid-twentieth century.

Melanie KEOMANY

Burroughs's Postcolonial Visions in *The Yage Letters*

While many are familiar with William S. Burroughs's travels through Europe and the several years he spent in Tangier, Morocco, less attention has been paid to the significant time he spent in Mexico and Latin America. Burroughs moved his family to Mexico City in late 1949 to avoid further trouble with the law after being charged for possession of heroin while living in New Orleans (Miles, *El Hombre* 3), and his first novel *Junky* (1953) ends with the narrator, William Lee, preparing to leave Mexico for lands further south: "I decided to go down to Colombia and score for yage ... I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk ... Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix" (152). Burroughs travelled to Latin America twice specifically looking for yagé (also known as ayahuasca), with the first attempt being in 1951 when he travelled to Ecuador with Lewis Marker. It was only a few days after Burroughs returned to Mexico City from this first trip that he accidentally shot and killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, on 6 September 1951. Burroughs's second attempt (made in 1953) to search for and try out this drug forms the basis of the first part of *The Yage Letters*, "In Search of Yage," where a "William Lee" pens letters addressed to Allen (Ginsberg) dated between January and July 1953. While Burroughs's work does not overtly address the legacy of colonialism, Lee's quest for yagé as detailed by Burroughs nevertheless reveals connections between scientific and commercial endeavors in Latin America and a continuation of imperial domination into the twentieth century. Lee's satirical observations throughout his letters point to an awareness of the problematic role of US-American involvement in Latin America, but Burroughs's own participation in the exploitation of Mexican migrant workers throws up difficult questions of complicity in a postcolonial twentieth century. *The Yage Letters*, then, provides both the reader and the critic with a problematic and complex representation of neo-imperial relations between US-America and Latin America, and the individual's enigmatic place within this geopolitical scenario.

Howard Campbell, John Lyons, and Paul H. Wild detected the creative influence that Mexico and Latin America exerted on Burroughs, but have largely limited discussion of this to Burroughs's use of Maya culture (albeit in significantly altered, re-imagined form) throughout his works. Not only did Burroughs study "Maya culture and language at Mexico City College in 1950-1951" (Wild, "Maya Gods" 38), but Campbell's "Beat Mexico" in particular provides a thorough overview of the various anthropological and archaeological studies Burroughs engaged in that extend beyond the Maya to other pre-modern world cultures (217). While Burroughs does not draw upon this knowledge of the Maya specifically in *The Yage Letters*, the trips he made to the Amazon area in Latin America signal a continuation of his interest in the culture and practices of Latino peoples. Despite the fact that Oliver Harris has produced a new edition of *The Yage Letters*, titled *The Yage Letters Redux* (2006), and written about it in an article and a book chapter, little other critical work has been done on this text. The notable exception is Manuel Luis Martínez's *Countering the Counterculture*, though even here the work is considered rather briefly. Although Martínez also takes a postcolonial approach to *The Yage Letters*, the conclusions he draws are somewhat simplistic. His reading portrays Burroughs as a wilfully ignorant colonizer, who "acts out cynical, neoimperialistic fantasies: in South America Burroughs hopes to operate freely in a colonized space of managed inequality" (43). While Burroughs's writing is certainly at times bigoted and offensive by today's standards, Martínez bases his assessment on a mistaken conflation between Burroughs and the William Lee of the letters in *The Yage Letters*, and makes no distinction between the actual correspondence Burroughs wrote and sent while in Latin America and the published text of *The Yage Letters*. By contrast, this article takes a more nuanced approach that deliberately acknowledges this often blurry boundary between Burroughs and his narrator.

Whatever scholarly interest and respect Burroughs had for the local people he met during his time in Latin America or their culture and history is not reflected in *The Yage Letters*—Lee is not interested in learning about the peoples or cultures of Latin America. The distinction between Burroughs's knowledge and Lee's attitude is crucial because it points to and arises from the circumstances in which the text's seemingly autobiographical letters were written. In the introduction to *Everything Lost*, Burroughs's journal from 1953, Oliver Harris explains how Burroughs's "'Yage' manuscript was effectively composed in three stages. Firstly, he completed a 9,500-word typescript in early June 1953, which was epistolary in neither form nor origin, that became the first three-quarters of 'In Search of Yage.' He then produced additional material during June and July, about half of which was used to make the last quarter of 'In Search of Yage.' Finally, all this material was reworked in Ginsberg's New York apartment between September and early December, by which time it had acquired the formal appear-

ance of letters" (xviii). *The Yage Letters*, then, are no straightforward memoir of Burroughs's time there. The epistolary format of *The Yage Letters* allows the reader to assume—and even cultivates the impression—that the work consists of edited actual correspondence between Burroughs and Ginsberg. But as Harris makes clear in the introduction to *The Yage Letters Redux*, the appearance of letters was a deliberate construction produced during the extensive composition process prior to the text first being published in its entirety in 1963 (xxxi-xliv). It follows, then, that the William Lee presented in these "letters" is also a construction, albeit one that is obviously based on and overlaps with Burroughs himself.

The Lee Burroughs presents fills his letters with observations and descriptions of a neo-imperial US-American presence wherever he travels in search of yagé. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt describes an "orientation toward interior exploration and the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history" (15) as enacted in scientific expeditions into colonized lands that occurred during the eighteenth century, and in doing so details how the conduct of scientific inquiry was a crucial tool of colonization. Lee's travels in Latin America and his expedition for yagé demonstrate that the conduct of scientific inquiry in the twentieth century can still operate as an apparatus of neo-imperial domination just as much as it was the colonial one that Pratt recognizes. Viewed in this way, Lee can be understood as a New World, satirical, construction of Pratt's "'seeing-man,' an admittedly unfriendly label for the white male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (9). Using Pratt's theoretical concepts to grasp Burroughs and *The Yage Letters* brings into focus the challenges and complexities of this text. For while neither Burroughs nor his narrator mount any overt criticism of the neo-imperial structures observed, there are points where the seemingly totalizing gaze of Lee the "seeing-man" is complicated and disrupted, and where Lee's observations and the satirical, pseudo-scientific voice he employs undermine, to a certain extent, the imposed authority of twentieth century neo-imperialism.

Throughout his letters, Lee constructs a totalizing impression of Latin America by using the tone of the natural scientist seeking to make objective recordings and relay facts about the unfamiliar environment around him, giving the impression of a detached observer who remains essentially uninvolved in what is happening around him. For example: "vegetation semitropical with bamboo and bananas and papayas, Cali is a relatively pleasant town with a nice climate. You do not feel tension here" (Burroughs and Ginsberg, *Yage* 11). These are declarative statements of fact said in an authoritative tone, not self-reflective impressions; nothing is subjective—he doesn't, for example, refer to feeling any personal tension while in Cali—but instead insists that the reader does "not feel tension." It is when Lee's pseudo-scientific observations extend to the local people where the pretence of measured objectivity falls away: "I am speaking of the South American at best, a special race part Indian, part white, part god knows what. He is not, as one is apt to think at first fundamentally an Oriental nor does he belong to the West. He is something special unlike anything else ... South American is a mixture of strains all necessary to realize the potential form. They need white blood as they know—Myth of White God—and what did they get but the fucking Spaniards. Still they had the advantage of weakness. Never would have gotten the English out of here. They would have created that atrocity known as a White Man's Country" (*Yage* 33-34).

Here, in revealing Lee's own fascination with racial otherness Burroughs draws attention to the racial prejudices inherent in ethnographic discourse where people of foreign, non-Western cultures are treated as objects to be studied, and thus always remain Other. Lee's detailed attempt to develop his own classification system for what he believes to be the South American race is laced with an ugly, prejudiced tone demonstrating how ignorant and absurd such a task is. For example, Lee declares the South American to be unique, but then promptly contradicts himself by asserting that the South American is inclusive of all other races. He also says "they need white blood," and presents this not as his own observation, but as something that the South Americans themselves know and desire as expressed in the indigenous myth of the White God. In making such an assertion, Lee places himself—a white man with white blood—at the top of a racial hierarchy, evidently superior to the South American who apparently willingly acknowledges him as such. He further complicates this racial hierarchy by implying that the Spanish are somehow not white, or at least not white enough, and yet he simultaneously criticizes white people for producing "that atrocity known as a White Man's Country." Of course, South America is not populated by one homogenous race, and Lee's failed attempt to classify Latino peoples as such demonstrates their resistance to such categorization. In the end, Lee's classification system is meaningless and he is unable to articulate what or who a South American really is.

Although Lee praises South America for not being "a White Man's Country," the letters he writes continually document the presence and influence of white men such as himself: "Next day I went to the University to get information on Yage ... I saw a man looking for something he could not find with

an air of refined annoyance. He caught my eye ... The man had a thin refined face, steel-rimmed glasses, tweed coat and dark flannel trousers. Boston and Harvard unmistakably. He introduced himself as Doctor Schindler. He was connected with a U.S. Agricultural Commission" (*Yage* 8). Unlike his strained attempt to hypothesize exactly where the South American sits on a presumed human racial hierarchy, "White Men" are classified in terms of class background and education. While Lee's encounter with Doctor Schindler appears personal, his account remains subtly objective and scientific, underpinned by a reliance on sharp visual observation: not only does he state that Doctor Schindler "caught my eye," but he is able to classify him as "Boston and Harvard unmistakably" simply on the basis of his clothing, with his overall appearance bearing the visual markers of an academic of Western (both European and US-American) upbringing and education. Lee's description of Doctor Schindler establishes his intellectual authority as a botanist who not only brings Western, US-American knowledge to Latin America, but also seeks to incorporate Latin America into the body of Western scientific knowledge. His mentioning of Doctor Schindler in this way not only works to legitimize Lee's own presence in Latin America, but it portrays his own search for yagé as a similarly serious scientific endeavor; it even makes him seem like Doctor Schindler's colleague and equal.

The presence of these "White Men" in a foreign land is also portrayed as perfectly natural, with Lee never questioning why a US-American doctor connected with an American (i.e. US) Agricultural Commission would be in Columbia. In doing so Burroughs provides an example of what Pratt labels an "anti-conquest," which she defines as "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (9). Of course, in this case Lee's search for yagé is a US-American "anti-conquest" rather than one of European origins, but Lee naturalizes his own presence in Latin America—as well as that of other US-Americans—in the same way as "the naturalist naturalizes the bourgeois European's own global presence and authority" (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 26). By noting the presence of other US-Americans, Lee reinforces his own presence as ordinary, familiar, and legitimate; thus, Latin America is not so much conquered as it is naturalized as US territory through the continual presence of Lee and his fellow white men in its foreground. Nevertheless, Lee's letters continue to document his ongoing sense of alienation, and a constant desire to leave wherever he is—perhaps signalling that this naturalization effort is resisted by Lee's surroundings, undermining such neo-colonial "anti-conquests" by never allowing him to feel truly at ease.

Greg Mullins suggests that "Burroughs parodically staged himself in the role of the European explorer/scientist, a kind of modern von Humboldt, wearing a pith helmet and collecting samples for laboratory analysis" (*Colonial Affairs* 67), and both Doctor Schindler and Lee could be described as twentieth century incarnations of what Pratt terms "the herborizer." She explains that "In the second half of the eighteenth century, whether or not an expedition was primarily scientific, or the traveler a scientist, natural history played a part in it ... Alongside the frontier figures of the seafarer, the conqueror, the captive, the diplomat, there began to appear everywhere the benign, decidedly literate figure of the "herborizer" ... desiring nothing more than a few hours alone with the bugs and flowers. Travel narratives of all kinds began to develop leisurely pauses filled with gentlemanly 'naturalizing'" (26). The twentieth century "herborizing" of Doctor Schindler and Lee is not nearly as bucolic, however, not least because Lee brings to mind "a psychotic Indiana Jones on drugs" (Campbell, "Beat Mexico" 216). In addition, while Pratt's imperial "herborizer" was portrayed as a civilizing and benign figure, the experiences of Burroughs's Lee lay bare the exploitative foundation of the colonial project, which continues in this neo-imperialistic era. It becomes clear that Lee's quest for yagé is merely the latest in a long tradition of U.S. scientific expeditions in Latin America, most of them having to do with the mining of natural resources for profit. Much to Lee's gain, the promises of benefitting the local economy made by these past expeditions mean that his treatment is on a par with the leaders of big US corporations: "This trip I was treated like visiting royalty under the misapprehension I was a representative of the Texas Oil Company travelling incognito. (Free boat rides, free plane rides, free chow; eating in officers' mess, sleeping in the governor's house.) The Texas Oil Company surveyed the area a few years ago, found no oil and pulled out. But everyone in the Putumayo believes the Texas Company will return. Like the second coming of Christ" (*Yage* 22). As well as characterizing Latinos as needing the blood of white men, here Lee depicts them as needing white men's money, and being desperate for it. As Eduardo Galeano explains, in the mid-twentieth century, US companies' private investment in Latin America is a form of "new-model imperialism ... [that] radiates technology and progress" (*Open Veins* 227). Despite the promises of development and economic riches, though, in the end what these US corporations offer to Latin America is nothing but an elaborate scam: "we find that the new model does not make its colonies more prosperous, although it enriches their poles of development; it does not ease social and regional tensions, but aggravates them; it spreads poverty even

more widely and concentrates wealth even more narrowly" (Galeano, *Open Veins* 227). Though the influence of US capitalism appears pervasive beyond the borders of the USA, it serves only to enrich US-Americans and not the local communities of foreign countries. Sooner or later, as in the Putumayo, these US companies will abandon Latin America.

Throughout *The Yage Letters*, Lee continues to observe the presence of these White Men and of US influence, and yet does so without critique. In line with his pseudo-scientific search for yagé, Lee purports to be an objective observer who relays facts. And yet, Lee's privilege underscores his own status as one of these White Men, and there is never any suggestion that he aspires to be anything more or less than this. And so, there is no questioning of why it is US Americans and Europeans who lead expeditions in the Amazon, nor is there a recognition of the potentially troubling dynamics between wealthy, educated foreigners, and the economic, scientific resources they have come to seek in Latin America.

The influence of US capitalism revealed by Lee's experience as a fraudulent representative of the Texas Oil Company in some ways recalls the time Burroughs spent in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas, where he lived from 1946-50 while farming the land he owned there in partnership with his friend, Kells Elvins. In *Junky*, Burroughs describes how the Valley has become infected with the corruption of human society: "There are no cities in the Valley, and no country. The area is a vast suburb of flimsy houses ... A hot dry wind starts every afternoon and blows until sundown ... The whole Valley has the impermanent look of a camp, or carnival. Soon the suckers will all be dead and the pitchmen will go somewhere else" (105). Humanity has created the Valley out of desert, but it is not a positive transformation bringing fertility and life. Instead, it has become an unpleasant suburban limbo that is neither urban nor rural. Geographically situated at the southernmost edge of the USA, the Valley acts as a vessel that collects the corrupt effluent of US society as it trickles down from above, "all the worst features of America have drained down to the Valley and concentrated there" (108). As in Latin America, it is the fundamental exploitation of others, which lies at the heart of US capitalism, that is to blame; while technology has converted this desert into a productive agricultural area, Burroughs believes it has actually polluted it, since its artificial fertility has merely provided another way for people to exploit others: "During the Twenties, real estate operators brought trainloads of prospects down to the Valley ... One of these pioneer promoters is said to have constructed a large artificial lake and sold plots all around it. 'The lake will sub-irrigate your groves.' As soon as the last sale closed, he turned off the water and disappeared with his lake, leaving his prospects sitting there in a desert" (105). Lee's history of the Valley shows the great US-American capitalist dream to be a lie that serves only those who have already profited: "in the Valley economic laws work out like a formula in high school algebra ... The very rich are getting richer and all the others are going broke" (108). The investors taken advantage of in the Valley, then, are much like the Latin Americans who rely on hoped-for US investment to bring prosperity to their communities. In the end, Burroughs reveals that US capitalism both at home and abroad is an empty promise. As in the Rio Grande Valley, Latin America absorbs the corrupt lie of the American dream that has trickled down from the north.

In *Junky*, the corruption that Burroughs focuses on is that of gullible investors being swindled by unscrupulous conmen, but as a Valley landowner, Burroughs himself became directly involved in a different side of the corrupt capitalist economics that he observes, one which points to his being willingly complicit in the exploitation of others. Interestingly, there is only the barest of passing references to his exploitative role in the narrative of *Junky*: "You have to make it now before something happens, before the black fly ruins the citrus, before support prices are taken off the cotton, before the flood, the hurricane, the freeze, the long dry spell when there is no water to irrigate, before the Border Patrol shuts off your wetbacks" (106). This allusion to "wetbacks" refers to illegal Mexican immigrants who were used as cheap farm labor by Burroughs and the other landowners in the Valley. Lee (here, the narrator of *Junky*) dehumanizes these people, not only with his use of the degrading term "wetbacks," but also by reducing them to one of several items in a list of natural and economic phenomena—these are not people, but simply a means to achieve economic prosperity for landowners. Thus the dehumanization of non-US others is undeniable in both *Junky* and *The Yage Letters*: in the Valley, Mexicans are a nameless and faceless resource for the farmers, while Lee in *The Yage Letters* considers Latin American people as merely an object of his faux-scientific studies. Although the Rio Grande Valley lies directly on the border with Mexico, this oblique reference to "wetbacks" is the only mention of the country or the people on the other side of the river that is made in this section of *Junky*; Lee offers no further comment or explanation as to who these "wetbacks" are, and indeed he appears to deliberately ignore this Mexican presence.

Significantly, Burroughs demonstrates in his correspondence to Ginsberg (actual letters, as opposed to the fictionalized ones of "In Search of Yage") that he was well aware of his exploitative role;

a letter he wrote to Ginsberg dated 30 November 1948 reads: "We farmers in the Rio Grande valley depend entirely on Mexican labourers who enter the Country illegally with our aid and connivance. The 'civil liberties' of these workers are violated repeatedly. They are often kept on the job at the point of gun (at cotton picking time when delay may mean loss of the entire crop). Workers who try to leave the field are shot. (I know of several instances.)" (Burroughs, *Letters* 25). This shows that Burroughs thoroughly understands the terrible conditions endured by the Mexican workers who pick his crops, though he neither expresses shock at the violence nor regret at his participation in this exploitation; the detached tone here is echoed by Lee's supposedly scientific objectivity in *The Yage Letters*. In the same letter he goes on to muse, "my ethical position, now that I am a respectable farmer, is probably shakier than when I was pushing junk. Now, as then, I violate the law, but my present violations are condoned by a corrupt government" (25). Although he openly admits that such brutal treatment of these people is unethical, he appears to believe that the fault lies with the government since it continues to condone such corruption, rather than with himself. As Martinez notes, "Burroughs distances himself from the brutality from which he and the coterie of his fellow Rio Grande farmers benefit, [but] he does not distance himself from the necessary exploitation of cheap labour ... He pointedly suggests that his broken ethical code is justified by the breakdown in ethics in business" (*Countering the Counterculture* 46). On the other hand, Rob Johnson believes that "Burroughs experimented with ways to run his operations fairly and profitably" (*Lost Years* 17), and certainly Burroughs insisted to Ginsberg a few years later (in a letter dated 1 May 1950) that "generally they [Mexican laborers] are well treated, the farmer supplying free housing, free medical care for the entire family, and legal expenses. I have myself driven children to a doctor, paid out of my own pocket to bail workers out of jail, and to care for the families of workers deported" (Burroughs, *Letters* 66). Significantly, in terms of recognizing his fictional texts' slippery political strategies, while Burroughs demonstrates in these and other letters how vital Mexican workers are to the success of the US capitalist system, and how dependent it is on their continued exploitation, in *Junky* he elides this Mexican presence and gives them neither voice nor presence.

In another letter to Ginsberg, written on 2 December 1948, Burroughs goes to great lengths to further distance himself from the mistreatment of Mexican labourers: "I do not mean to convey the impression that Kells and I sit under a palm leaf sun shelter, rifle in hand 'suppressing' the workers. The whole deal is handled by labor and vegetable brokers Some brokers go in for rough stuff, some don't. I recall one broker mentioning casually that 'his foreman had to shoot 2 wetbacks last night.' But like I say, I don't have anything to do with it personally" (*Letters* 28-29). Once again, Burroughs passes no comment or judgment on the shocking revelation of two "wetbacks" being shot, other than to distance himself from the incident. Aside from this, here Burroughs invokes an image of the bygone colonial plantation in order to insist that it bears no resemblance to his farm. It is an interesting image to note, though, given the way that Lee in *The Yage Letters* sardonically embodies the figure of the colonial explorer. While Burroughs denies any personal responsibility for the mistreatment of Mexican laborers in the Valley, his complicity in participating in such exploitation cannot be denied. The contradiction here in Burroughs's personal life, where he (unconvincingly) seeks to deny—to Ginsberg and, indeed, himself—his troubling role in the abuse of non-US-Americans, despite the evidence to the contrary, is echoed in *The Yage Letters* where Lee observes the problematic presence of neo-imperial domination, but is happy to play the role of the White Man for his own benefit. This repetition of patterns of invasion and oppression that are imperialist at root is not merely a fictionalized hypothesis, but part of Burroughs's own lived experience. As this correspondence concerning his period in the Valley demonstrates, though, Burroughs's beliefs and actions frustratingly shut down questions of the individual's complicity and responsibility where political and economic structures are inherently oppressive and exploitative; it is in the fictionalized letters of *The Yage Letters* where these questions confront the reader.

Just as Burroughs and his fellow Valley farmers relied on illegal Mexican migrant workers, so too do Lee and the other White Men of the quasi-expedition party rely on the locals to guide them. And, while Lee believes the locals will do anything for a representative of the Texas Oil Company, they prove to be distinctly unhelpful when it comes to assisting him and his fellow White Men: "Every day we plan to get an early start for the jungle. About 11 o'clock the Colombians finish breakfast (the rest of us waiting around since 8) and begin looking for an incompetent guide, preferably someone with a finca near town. About 1 we arrive at the finca and spend another hour eating lunch. Then the Colombians say, 'They tell us the jungle is far. About 3 hours. We don't have time to make it today.' So we start back to town" (*Yage* 26). So the power dynamic between the White Men who exploit and despoil the land and the Colombians is revealed to be comically upended—for all the scientific knowledge of the Americans and Europeans, their expedition is unable to even begin without the cooperation of the locals,

who see no worth in helping them. Instead, the Colombians actively subvert the authority of the neo-imperial White Men and exploit their ignorance of the unfamiliar environment. Lee's derisive account signals to the reader his awareness of the ridiculousness of the whole enterprise, and the fact that he is being mocked like the other White Men.

The event that brings this home to him is when he and Doctor Schindler actually go into the jungle in search of yagé only to find out later that obtaining yagé is simple and there is no need to trek into the unspoiled wilderness: "We went out to visit a German who owned a finca near Macoa ... I asked the German about Yage ... A half hour later I had 20 pounds of Yage vine. No trek through virgin jungle and some old white haired character saying, 'I have been expecting you my son.' A nice German 10 minutes from Macoa" (*Yage* 23). It seems that Lee exposes his own expedition as a fraud; yagé is not particularly mysterious or unobtainable after all, but a common substance that he easily stumbles across. Not only that, but instead of obtaining the knowledge he seeks from an indigenous source he obtains it from a fellow Westerner. In the twentieth century the virgin jungle has become a myth of the past, and there are no more astonishing scientific discoveries to be made: "Schindler kept complaining the Putumayo had deteriorated since he was there ten years ago. 'I never made a Botanical expedition like this before,' he said. 'All these farms and *people*. You have to walk miles to get to the jungle'" (*Yage* 25; emphasis in original). Just as in the Valley, which was corrupted by capitalism, so too have the White Men corrupted the wilderness of the Amazon with their neo-imperialist enterprises.

It is only when he is actually using yagé that Lee manages to "see" a world or place that exists beyond the neo-colonial influences that he otherwise cannot escape from. The vision he has is of a composite city of humanity: "Last night I took last of Yage mixture I brought back from Pucallpa ... This morning, still high. This is what occurred to me. 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, Polygot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combination not yet realized passes through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains ... The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market" (*Yage* 44). Lee's description of this Composite City is several pages long and comprises the entire letter dated 10 July 1953 and the detail is almost overwhelming. Here, the White Man has effaced himself in a fantasy of various races and tribes taking over and invading his body. This yagé hallucination reveals the artifice of Lee's earlier attempt to precisely establish a racial hierarchy; Latin America's resistance to such classification erupts physically, spatially, and temporally, overtaking Lee's consciousness and forcing the White Man to acknowledge the agency and power of the racial other in a postcolonial world.

The visionary ending to Lee's letters is an emphatic surrender of the White Man's attempts to master the other through the formal structures of neo-colonial, Western knowledge apparatuses. Lee's experience of yagé appears to be a successful conclusion to his quest, with the drug providing a "kick that opens out" as predicted in *Junky*. In Lee's case, the yagé hallucination opens his very being to a world where the would-be colonizer is himself invaded and overrun by the other. Such a powerful image could be read as an unexpectedly hopeful indication towards a future where the White Man has relinquished all control, as Lee has here, although to him it remains a drug-induced vision rather than a goal to be realized. This vision of a composite city proves highly influential for Burroughs, with him revisiting and expanding it in *Naked Lunch* (Skerl, *Burroughs* 32). It is also arguably a precursor to Burroughs's future travels beyond the US's borders, pre-empting the multicultural city of Tangiers that he would soon settle in. Seven years after Burroughs's excursion into the Amazon, Ginsberg retraces his steps to experience yagé for himself. Frightened and confused by the experience, Ginsberg writes to Burroughs pleading for help and guidance (*Yage* 55). Burroughs's response is "vaya adelante" (59), instructing Ginsberg in Spanish to go forwards, onwards, and ultimately, to discover the world beyond that of the White Man.

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