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Kick That Ugly Spirit Habit

Davis Schneiderman

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BOOK REVIEWS

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MINUTES TO GO REDUX

Sinclair Beiles, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin

Oliver Harris, ed.

Moloko Print

www.sea-urchin.net/books/moloko-print/
256 Pages; Print, € 20.00

THE EXTERMINATOR REDUX

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The most important question in 2021 for any reader picking up these three wonderfully designed editions of two small-press pamphlets and one newly published text, as well as for anyone interested in the work William S. Burroughs and his long-time collaborator Brion Gysin, is simply this: why are these works, slight in first appearance, relevant to the *current* moment?

Never quite canon, or at least establishment canon, Burroughs's standing has passed through various hills and swales. Much of his initial and still-longstanding reputational fire was stoked by decades of romanticized deification. The image of Burroughs who exists in the popular imagination owes more to the Beat Generation and *Naked Lunch* (1959) than it does to the much more interesting aspects of his textual production. As understood by the critics working since his death in 1997, Burroughs was a writer whose small press pieces, film, and visual art — when taken together — suggest a body of work that well exceeds in importance the tired limits of the “gentleman junkie” persona.

For anyone interested in the work of William S. Burroughs in this second and most important context, Oliver Harris is *the* key figure. Although certainty not alone in his emphasis on genetic and textual histories, Harris has been the foremost Burroughs critic of the last three decades. His contributions have taken the form of the first collection of Burroughs's letters, *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, Vol. 1: 1945-1959* (1993) and an important critical work, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (2006). *Fascination* is a probing and significant study, yet it has been to some extent overtaken by the sheer number of Harris's many editorial contributions to the field. No other critic has dived as deeply as Harris in revealing the variants of individual cut-up phrases and their elusive origins. The absurdity of this

project is part of its attraction, and when paired with Harris's exhaustive introductions and notes, his volumes offer the gravitas of comprehensive critical editions even though assembled by a single editorial hand.

These new Moloko Print editions, therefore, arrive as the latest in a series of Harris's important editorial works, which include two other major trilogies — *Junky: The Definitive Text of “Junk”* (2003); *The Yage Letters Redux* (2006); *Queer* (2010), and — and restored editions of the Cut-Up Trilogy (formerly the Nova Trilogy) — *The Soft Machine: The Restored Text* (2014), *Nova Express: The Restored Text* (2014), and *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text* (2014) — along with a facsimile edition called *Everything Lost: The Latin American Notebook of William S. Burroughs* (2008); and one additional new editorial project not included in this review — *Dead Fingers Talk* (2020).

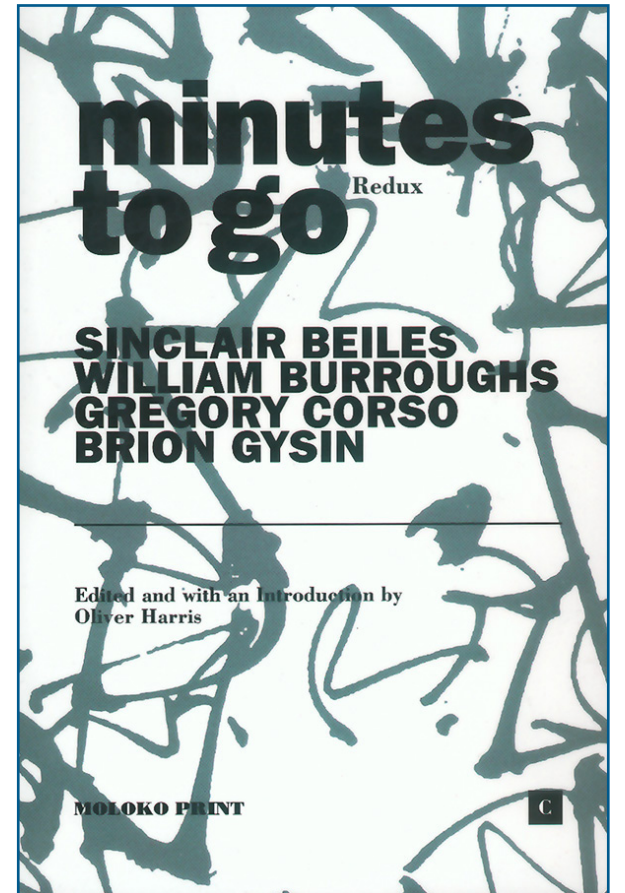
To start, *Minutes to Go*, *The Exterminator*, and *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* are beautiful objects, conversant with each other in ways that make the earlier cover-based connective threads of the Cut-Up Trilogy seem like mere surface strategies. The paper is of a more-than-suitable stock, the Gysin paintings pop, and even the design of the notes — oceans of notes — integrate with the text in a manner that provides heft to the project. And that heft is important, since the two previously published

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pamphlets of these three — *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* — are just that, pamphlets. Harris therefore needs to provide enough information to justify these appearing separately (and so respecting the extant originals) while also keeping the reader from feeling as if they are taking a bath in alienating and idiosyncratic shallows.

Harris's reconstructions can feel scientific in their precision, with excursions about variants passages and even individual lines that on the micro level demonstrate genetic histories while on the macro level suggest that so much of the received wisdom about Burroughs and his working methods is simply wrong. Harris has done more to demolish Burroughs-as-persona than any other critic in the field, yet the result is much more ambivalent than many would like it to be. Burroughs's relation to the current muddle of American and global politics demonstrates that his textual project to disrupt Control and to fight the misinformation of media elites flies very close to the right-wing landscape and its channels (QAnon, Parler, election “fraud,” etc.). The only previously unpublished entry of these three, *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS*, sits most uncomfortably within this context.

Yet even with abundant contemporary interest, this latest trilogy is probably not for the casually interested reader. Lacking the scale and platform of the Cut-Up Trilogy works, these pamphlets were intended to be much more



ephemeral in both length and importance. They are indie-label EPs between major-label releases, and while Harris makes a strong case that their status as “lesser” is a wildly unfair judgement (in that they avoided the problem of the Cut-Up Trilogy's reception as “novels”) there are also “real estate” considerations. Harris's introduction and editorial materials make up the largest portion of each volume; they get the most ink, by far. The second obstacle to wider appreciation is structural: not one of these is a “single authored” work, and the collaborative aspects of these texts remind us that the romantic vision of Burroughs is tightly tethered to outmoded ideas of genius and eclectic counter-culture rebellion. Of course, the secret is there *is no secret*, and that Burroughs's collaborative motivations, while not always clearly defined, are never in question. He wanted to drown the “Author.” Even so, these works remind us of the complexities of such arrangements in general, and of the particular importance and the persistence of Burroughs's long-time partnership with Brion Gysin, most evident among these three in *The Exterminator*.

MINUTES TO GO

Much of Harris's methodology can be expressed in what he writes early in his introduction to *Minutes to Go* (originally 1960), the first published cut-up work, co-authored with Sinclair Beiles, Gregory Corso, and Gysin:

[T]he standard history is just cut-up mythology. Piecing together a clear story of its creation and refusing to take the text at face value, we discover not only what didn't make the cut and is hidden in the archives, but also what's been hiding in plain sight.

Harris's project to reveal the truth behind the “truth” approach would have long ago become

————— Schneiderman continued on page 18

repetitive were it merely rhetorical. Rather, he cuts immediately to the quick of why *Minutes to Go* has been heretofore largely forgotten or relegated as “unimportant” — a throwaway experiment from a cast-off period of Parisian exile. The culprit, though, is indeed the text’s multiple authorship, and Harris wisely asks whether the text is truly “collaborative” or more accurately “collective.” The former implies shared authorship while the latter suggests a shared set of tactics for producing individually authored texts that arise from a single creative moment and engage in conversation with each other.

Minutes to Go, following this method, comes in for extensive treatment, and we are given a series of fascinating revelations: the intertwined role of small presses and independent bookstores (including the role of English Bookshop owner Gait Froge, who provided emergency funds for publication); the crucial and previously understated booster role played by South African expatriate Sinclair Beiles (the least-known of the four authors); the answer to precisely who wanted to “settle a score with literature” as the edition’s original band proclaimed in French (“*un règlement de comptes / avec la Littérature*”); the less antagonistic than assumed reticence of Corso (embodied in his famously dismissive postscript); the practical impossibility of Gysin’s supposed “discovery” of the cut-up method taking place on the same day and time as Burroughs’ famous interview with *Life* magazine on Oct 1, 1959 (textual evidence suggest Gysin was at work earlier); Burroughs’ curation working against a myth that these are first drafts produced in single sessions; the intrigues between the publishers of the two editions (Jean Franchette 1960; Mary Beach 1968, respectively); and the fetishizing of “errors” — spelling, punctuation, etc. — that connect so closely with the Harris’s archival praxis.

Overwhelmingly poetic, or prose poetic, the texts in *Minutes to Go* read like series of darts that dissolve prior to impact on a historical corkboard. The organizational structure is apparently casual (if not random), and *Minutes to Go* can be entirely consumed in some number of minutes (rather than hours). Burroughs and Gysin enthusiasts will know the text from its extensive mentions in subsequent years, its pride of place in the 1978 version of *The Third Mind*, and its availability on the internet. While far from merely a pamphlet in this edition, there is pleasure in reading *Minutes to Go* surrounded by Harris’s extensive context, which offers a strangely compelling cohesiveness.

THE EXTERMINATOR

Published months after *Minutes to Go*, *The Exterminator* (often wrongly confused with the 1973 short fiction collection *Exterminator!*) is the second pamphlet in what was, for a time, a potential series. The number of collaborators halved

from *Minutes to Go* — with Beiles and Corso dropping away. As the first Burroughs and Gysin publication, *The Exterminator* is the first major step on the path that would ultimately become *The Third Mind* (assembled in 1965; aborted by Grove in 1970; eventually published in diminished form in the 1978). *The Exterminator*, Harris notes, is Burroughs’ text with the most use of the word “virus” — a surprise for those who associate this concept with the Cut-Up Trilogy; it also is the first to feature extensive “prose” sections using the cut-up method (opposed to the largely poetry-centered *Minutes to Go*). This makes *The Exterminator*, for all is slightness within the Burroughs canon, a direct link to *The Soft Machine* and the other major cut-up works to come. Put another way, far from weak sauce, *The Exterminator* has a kick.

Harris’s revelations again do not disappoint, noting that the word “the” is the subject for literal extermination (“a machine for exterminating the definite article ‘the’”); the absurd commercial aspirations of the text; its reuse of materials from *Naked Lunch*, its direct debt to the Surrealist pamphlet *Un Cadavre* and Gysin’s still underexplored connection to Andre Breton); and the privileging of spelling errors and a casualness of layout decisions that suggest either a deliberately active praxis or Warholian nonchalance. These

Burroughs always held unrealistic fantasies about the accessibility of his work, while simultaneously caring very little about the comfort of his readers.

tensions are explored as a proof of concept for *The Third Mind*, when the stakes in terms of potential audience and reputational impact would be significantly higher. Beyond this, the most astounding reveal for *The Exterminator* is the fact that it was likely sent in its first form to Auerhahn Press publisher Dave Haselwood *not* as the text in this volume, but likely as *Minutes to Go*. Once again, textual evidence flips received chronology on its head, suggesting that *The Exterminator* as a concept was meant to be the *first* cut-up pamphlet, rather than the second.

As a reading experience, *The Exterminator* is an acquired taste. Burroughs and Gysin enthusiasts, particularly those already familiar with Gysin’s long understated importance, will find much to enjoy here even if it’s only on the surface level of rediscovering aspects of their shared vision. The texts themselves are of varying interest, which is, of course, entirely beside the point. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *The Exterminator* is the banners that run across the top and bottom of each page. Here’s a typical example on the opening page of the section “OUT FLAG WAS STILL THERE” — EXTERMINATOR? OUT FLAG IS STILL THERE. CUT. SEE. YOU HAVE. WATCHING [header] / UNIMAGINEABLE DISASTER..ROYAL KNIGHTS T E N AGE FUTURE TIME. [footer]. *Minutes to Go* does something similar in the headers of the “CUT ME UP * BRION GYSIN” section, but the running chyrons become something more impenetrably delightful in *The Exterminator*.

BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS

The most difficult of the three books to consider for reasons of structural integrity and content, *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* is a new publication that suggests only a semblance of its place in an aborted-yet-sequential canon of cut-up pamphlets. A core section written in all capital letters (discovered by Harris as a mislabeled typescript in the Berg collection at the New York Public

Library) suggests it was the intended sequel to *The Exterminator*, at times known as *The Exterminator II* or *The Initiator*. Harris quickly recognizes that he’s working from revisions to a missing master manuscript and admits that the book we are reading now is something else: “So rather than trying to realise [sic] or restore a missing whole. *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* brings together a series of closely related typescripts in various stages of drafting from two period of Burroughs’ post-Paris work united in form and genre.”

Because we cannot have the usual pattern of Harris’s revelations about previously unpublished text — showing to what extant genetic myths are unwound by the textual evidence — Harris’s introduction instead covers different ground: rightly establishing the genetic bonds of the materials collected here, he argues convincingly for the importance of the all capital letter text; noting the text’s maturation of the Hassan I Sabbah concept; setting the text as more didactic than the other two (the narrative is much “straighter” and contains less cut-up material than its two predecessors); establishing the mode as having both spoken and broadcast elements (a “radio” rather than a written voice), and defending the deliberateness of the many (ahem) textual repetitions.

Even so, the effect of reading pages upon page of block capital letters — particularly in an age that has firmly established that method’s cultural shorthand as SHOUTING — becomes a somewhat headaches-inducing experience. Whereas one might yearn for the safe harbor of a period or a paragraph break as a tonic in, say, Proust or Beckett, the reader lost deep in *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* will need a more immediate anti-inflammatory solution. Burroughs always held unrealistic fantasies about the accessibility of his work, while simultaneously caring very little about the comfort of his readers. These are both migraines, but of a different kind.

All of the above would still justifiably float the relevance of *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS*, yet Harris has uncovered a much controversial and difficult-to-explain aspect of the text. The muddle begins with an explanation of the way Burroughs often locates his controversial statements — many of these as a version of “just sayin’” that he borrows from Emma Jane and Chris Fleming’s *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (2014). The Trumpian overtones are obvious, here and elsewhere, but the valence of *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* takes a darker turn via numerous anti-Semitic references. Harris counts these numbering in the forties in just two of the texts in *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* (“MINUTES TO GO FROM ALAMOUT” and “CALLED THE LAW”) and including two important phrases that are part of the more widely celebrated Burroughs corpus.

Both the “Insect People of Minraud” and “Rub out the Word” (the latter a widely used shorthand for the anti-Control praxis of Burroughs’ oeuvre), have explicit anti-Semitic content in their original form. There may well be an argument that Burroughs is an equal-opportunity critic, assuming a “just sayin’” voice in his routines to channel ugly Americanism as its most abhorrent. And yet Burroughs self-censorship of the anti-Semitic content in the published version of these phrases suggests a difference between 1) routines that give voice to hate as an overheard method of shameful revelation, and 2) stereotypes that serve as ideological scaffolding to later fall away (while still carrying elements of the initial, noxious framing). Burroughs often pushed across the boundary of his “real” thoughts from his “fiction” and cut-up work, and sought to activate the reader through withholding as little as possible.

This is not to say that Burroughs would

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have found any common theoretical cause with the wickedest actors of the current moment, but rather, to confront this new and very problematic parallel. The worst right-wing abuses of our information ecosystem have found success in part by weaponizing the tactics Burroughs helped popularize and promulgate, and it is not clear Burroughs would have objected to any weakening of the system of Control. How far apart are insect aliens from the canard of Satan-worshipping liberal pedophiles?

While Burroughs understood the manner in which language operated in the early days of the multi-channel media ecosystem, he did not predict the specific amplification methods available to today's partisans. That *our* media ecosystem has completely absorbed his own tactics — and the fact that “nothing is true and everything is permitted” has become multiple, competing realities — pushes to Burroughs's own complicity. That was always the case for any of his close readers as a metaphor (“Burroughs called the law called Burroughs”), but we're dealing now with what is on the end of (to recall a line from *Naked Lunch*) Burroughs' own “long newspaper spoon.” And our own.

To Harris's credit, he does not give Burroughs a pass — far from it — and he links the

montage strategies Burroughs deploys as crossing the Modernist ocean in a montage boat, only to find T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound riding along in the skiff. While those figures have taken their punches and emerged (not unscathed but emerged nonetheless) says much about their location in the historical past of the Modernist epoch now largely closed. The different here is that, as Kathy Acker once famously remarked in 1990, “today in the United States, we are living in the worlds of Burroughs's novels. Pray that the wild boys will help us escape.” What if the Wild Boys, though, can't be trusted?

What part of the Wild Boys emerge from a political project that relentlessly pushes past the boundaries of liberal self-censorship? What happens when world history is viewed as one vast conspiracy, a global fiction of false fronts serving the vested interests of alien (insectoid?) others? What happens when “storm the reality studio” sounds like it would work in a QAnon tweet from the Trump-pardoned Michael Flynn?

Although not all readers will agree, Harris has done a service in publishing this material: the hagiography of the past has always been a crooked halo for Burroughs. *BATTLE INSTRUCTIONS* is not a historical document, but like all cut-ups, a prospective and future-focused work. And if the

year 2020, when I am writing this, has taught us anything, it is that the future is far from a guarantee.

Davis Schneiderman is Krebs Provost and Dean of the Faculty and Professor of English at Lake Forest College. His first short-story collection, there is no appropriate #emoji, is forthcoming, and his novels include the largely blank novel BLANK (2011), the plagiarized novel [SIC] (2013), and the ink-smear novel INK. (2015); along with the novel Drain (2010), a cli-fi dystopia story from Northwestern University Press. He is currently working with the University of Minnesota Press on two projects related to The Third Mind by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin (co-edited with Marcus Boon). He co-edited the collections Retaking the Universe: Williams S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization (2004) and The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism's Parlor Game (2009).

I KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT

Larry Fondation

PORN-ANTI-PORN

Harold Jaffe

JEF Books

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193 Pages; Print, \$15.00

I finished reading Harold Jaffe's *Porn-Anti-Porn* during the week after the dual mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton, which in turn came barely a week after the killing spree at the Gilroy (CA.) Garlic Festival.

August 2019 also marked the 50th “anniversary” of the Manson Family massacres at multiple locations in Los Angeles in 1969, the year following the Summer of Love.

Indeed, Jaffe's volumes *15 Serial Killers* (2003) and *Jesus Coyote* (2008) (a fictionalized Charles Manson) form a kind of trilogy with the current book — a trio of volumes centered around America's twisted sensibilities regarding sex and violence.

In July 2011, radical historian Thaddeus Russell wrote (in the online journal of *Zocalo Public Square*) an essay catalyzed by a US Supreme Court decision striking down a California ban on selling violent video games to kids. The decision, Russell wrote “is no victory for free speech. In fact, the majority decision, authored by Justice Antonin Scalia, actually maintains America's oldest and most powerful prohibition of expression: sexual content.”

Russell entitled his piece “Land of the Violent, Home of the Chaste.”

In a kind of preface to *Porn-anti-Porn*, Jaffe draws straight lines to the inherent hypocrisy in our culture — and, as with guns, the dominant role of

big business in the perpetuation and distribution of porn, particularly online. Jaffe points to the business side of porn — the marketing, the cultivation of “consumers,” the development of porn addiction — a twenty-first century strategy of “edginess” reminiscent of Phillip Morris and cigarettes in the 1950s and continuing still in a vastly different cultural climate, and now with vaping.

In “Good Porn,” Jaffe interviews someone who would appear to be a porn company executive who has five answers to one question: “Has porn had a positive impact on sex?” While all five “answers” are telling, the fifth and final one hit a nerve: “Porn grants business people permission to get creative with products and marketing contra the stigma and limitations placed on erotic media from mainstream culture.”

Of course, there is money to be made off the preservation of Puritanism, albeit a Puritanism not even the Puritans would recognize.

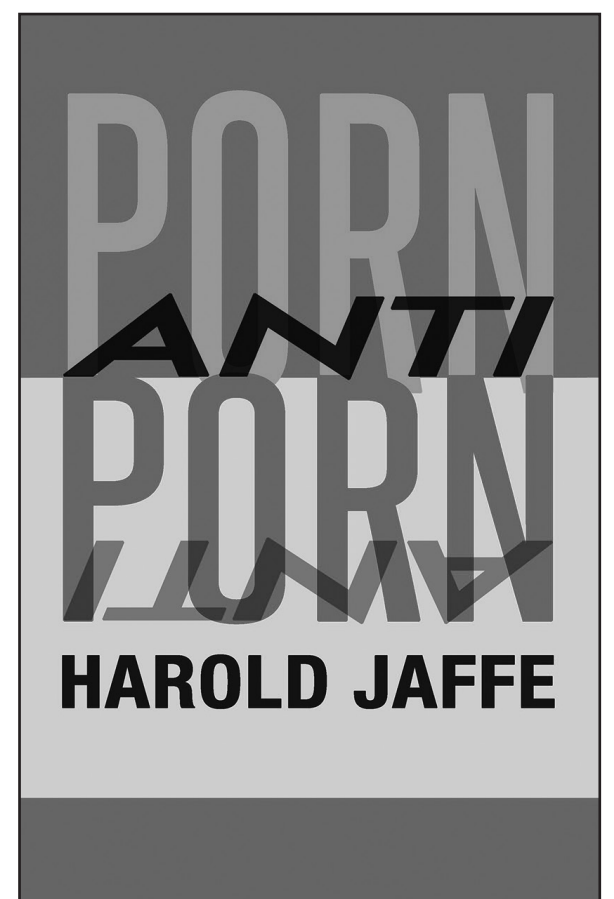
Jaffe has always been a sharp epistemological writer, probing what we know and how (we think) we know it. He continues that track

Jaffe draws straight lines to the inherent hypocrisy in our culture.

here. One text is even called “Epistemology.” Yet in the current book, Jaffe also excavates the global phenomenon of pornography. Weaving throughout the short pieces there emerges a typology of porn; he explores the fetishes and mores of porn in no fewer than seventeen countries and cultures.

Distinct in some ways, homogeneous in other ways, we see that even in our allegedly unique sexual predilections and desires, we're still all the damn same at a certain level — looking to break taboos, to find titillation beyond the daily grind.

Maybe it is because we have become numb, and we have moved from alienated to anesthetized in our collective act of recoiling from a future we



refuse to contemplate. We turn to drugs. The current opioid epidemic is proof of our desperate need to retreat and seek refuge. (Jaffe tackled overdose culture in his 2012 book *OD*.) Porn looks like drugs' twin sister along our societal escape route. So we look there as well.

A seminal piece in *Porn-anti-Porn* is one called “Male on Leash.” It is set in the Fujian Province of China. A woman in stilettos walks a man on a dog leash, leading him around on his hands and knees and issuing commands as to a canine: “Stay,” she orders at a traffic light. The police order her to unleash him. When she does, he continues to crawl and to obey her, just as before.

By contrast, in his preface to the book, Jaffe quotes a statistic that the online vendor Pornhub

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