

Burroughs Unbound: William S. Burroughs and the Performance of Writing

Edited by S. E. Gontarski
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This exciting collection breaks new ground for Burroughs scholarship through its emphasis on the variety and multimodal nature of his creative work. Unlike previous scholarship on Burroughs focused on his published textual works, this innovative collection, with essays on Burroughs's engagement with a wide variety of media, his importance as a theorist, and his influence as a performer, aptly embodies its title: *Burroughs Unbound*. Editor S.E. Gontarski, writer, director, filmmaker, and Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of Literature at Florida State University, explains in the preface the need for Burroughs to be read "unbound," released from the restrictions of analyses that concentrate primarily on his well-known published writing while ignoring his abundant work in different media and the performative, rhizomatic qualities of his art. According to Gontarski, "Burroughs was as much a media and performance artist as he was a traditional literary figure," and the archive (or "word hoard," as Burroughs called drafts of his early writing) was essential for his performances (1). For this reason, the concept of the archive is also crucial for this collection. Gontarski gives a valuable description of Burroughs's archives in the U.S. and illustrates their volatile history through a poignant account of the "Vaduz" archive, Burroughs's complete archive up to 1973, now part of the New York Public Library. Gontarski recounts how the Vaduz archive almost became part of Florida State University through the efforts of Francois Bucher, medievalist and art historian, friend and supporter of Burroughs, an impressive example of an "unbound" scholar to whom Gontarski dedicates his book. In order to encourage academic "unbinding," the collection is divided into three parts, Theory, Texts and Performance, and includes previously unknown primary documents from the Florida State University archive.

The first section, Theory, illuminates Burroughs's legacy as a radical theorist through his prescient anticipation of contemporary theorists and his work on paranoia and contingency. In "Weaponized Aesthetic and Dystopian Modernism," Gontarski situates Burroughs's work with different media in the context of European avant-garde artists and commercial literary markets. He discusses how a critique of power and control informs Burroughs' aesthetics and reminds us that, already in the 1960s, Burroughs theorized the disappearance of the author and the emergence of a posthuman world. Gontarski compares Burroughs's strategies of resistance to the writing of Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault in order to confirm his relevance for contemporary theorists.

Nathan Moore uses Burroughs's exploration of paranoia and contingency as a jumping-off point for a discussion that moves from existential paranoia to political paranoia in "Pay It All Back: Paranoid Writing/Writing Paranoia." Moore

emphasizes the “lesson of biopolitics: today, politics is directly concerned with the existential fragility of our being... This means that we must turn our paranoia to good use” (80). He goes on to show the increasing importance of Burroughs’s work toward this effort. As Burroughs’s experiments with chance reveal, “Through the condition of contingency a creative capacity is continuously open” (84). This is a powerful incitement for “unbound” reading when “clearly there are only seconds to go” (rather than minutes) for discovering new ways to think about contingency and new ways to live before impending global catastrophe (83).

Burroughs’s collaborative graphic novel can enable new ways of reading, according to Ash Connell-Gonzalez in “The Tension of Possibility: Reading Closure in *Ah Pook is Here* through the Multiframe.” Graphic narrative reading practices allow the spatial to become the temporal, according to Connell-Gonzalez. This mode of reading offers a new type of narrative tension, “text as possibility vs. text as presented,” which Connell-Gonzalez explores through a compelling analysis of the collaboration between Burroughs and visual artist Malcolm McNeill on the graphic novel *Ah Pook is Here*, along with McNeill’s account of this collaboration in his book *Observed While Falling: Bill Burroughs, Ah Pook, and Me* (Fantagraphics 2012).

Allen Hibbard discusses how Burroughs’s commitment to fluidity in his art contributes to his anti-authoritarian philosophy in “Fluidity and Fixity in William S. Burroughs’ Writing: The Text Will Not Hold.” Hibbard looks at how modes of production and presentation influence the fluidity of Burroughs’s writing, questions how unstable texts can affect practices, politics, and ideological perspectives, examines values informing writing designed to be fluid, and links Burroughs’s insistence on instability to “an anti-authoritarian philosophy designed to liberate the reader” (106).

The second section, Texts, amplifies the work of “Burroughs unbound” by addressing texts that are not well known, including Burroughs’s scrapbooks and multimodal collages. In one of the most important essays for the collection and its goal of liberating Burroughs from restrictive scholarship, “Making *Dead Fingers Talk*,” Oliver Harris shows why Burroughs’s neglected work is crucial for his cut-up project by substituting a network model of constantly shifting interconnectedness for a linear model of literary history. Harris shows how the composition of *Dead Fingers Talk* (Calder 1963) was a much more complex and active process than just cutting and pasting. *Dead Fingers Talk* brought three different texts together and involved three distinct techniques of textual production. As Harris explains, it’s a book of selections and of methods (131). This larger creative context, selecting and rearranging material for *Dead Fingers Talk*, led Burroughs to revise the original edition of *The Soft Machine* (Olympia 1961) and the manuscript of *Nova Express* (Grove 1964). *Dead Fingers Talk* is a remix, allowing us to read texts that no longer exist and reread texts that did not yet exist at the time it was written. Even at the level of punctuation, Burroughs’s revision of dots and dashes is as much a part of the viral remix as any rearrangement of content. *Dead Fingers Talk* was truly experimental—Burroughs knew what he was doing, but the nature of his methods

ensured that the results could not be predicted. With the cut-up method, meaningful patterns are constantly discovered retrospectively and contingently. Revising the same material across three different works simultaneously destabilizes the identity and integrity of any one text, which, as Harris explains, creates serious challenges when editing these books. Harris includes an important appendix of all source texts for *Dead Fingers Talk*.

In “Whale Dreck: The Lost Footnotes of the Olympia Press *Naked Lunch*,” Jed Birmingham identifies the significance a first-person letter by Burroughs, published in *The British Journal of Addiction* in 1957, which was broken into several footnotes for the Olympia Press edition of *Naked Lunch* (1959). These footnotes were not included in the Grove Press (1962) and The Restored Text (2001) editions. Birmingham speculates about what Burroughs was trying to say through his footnotes and what has been lost in subsequent editions and demonstrates the importance of the form and content of these notes. He provides an appendix showing the changes in each edition, along with images of the periodicals Burroughs referenced in the Olympia Press “Yage footnote.”

Both Nick Sturm and Tomas Stompor address Burroughs’s *TIME*, an important but little known textual and visual cut-up pamphlet published in 1961 by Ted Berrigan’s C press. In “‘There Are No Typographical Errors in This Edition’: Burroughs’ Textual Infection of the New York School,” Sturm discusses Burroughs’s influence on Berrigan’s cut-ups and analyzes the “deep aesthetic reciprocity” between Burroughs’s techniques and the experimental compositions of the New York School writers who met and collaborated with him in 1964-1965 during his visit to New York City (230). Stompor, in “‘I Spent Months in the Morgue’: William S. Burroughs’ Appropriation of Time Magazine,” sees the pamphlet *TIME* as a taxonomy for cut-up formats (260). He argues that these formats are not just literary devices; they offer an interactive framework that encourages reader participation and self-experimentation and invites a practice of social exchange, like the exchangeable frames we see in viral memes today.

In “Digitizing the Word Hoard: Remediating Countercultural Archives after the American Century,” Alex Wemer-Colan speculates on the nature of a future Burroughs archive that would involve emerging digital technologies (287). Since Burroughs wrote for the future, Wemer-Colan claims, his “word hoard” should be appreciated for its political potential rather than as just “a set of materials originating from a circumscribed time period” (281). Wemer-Colan addresses Burroughs’s queering of the feminist practice of scrapbooking and presents an intriguing vision of the future Burroughs counterculture digital archive, with an online interactive platform for visitors to create their own cut-ups, which would not just document but inspire active interventions in a “Burroughsian” model of the digital humanities (289). Wemer-Colan argues for the importance of adapting Burroughs’s archival materials, including his under-examined practice of multimodal collaging of political journalism and personal history, for a new media ecosystem.

The third section, Performance, addresses a crucial aspect of Burroughs's art and influence. This last group of essays and the recently published *William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll* by Casey Rae (U of Texas P 2019) begin the challenging work of "unbinding" Burroughs's work with performance and his influence on music and sound artists, so that scholarship on these subjects supersedes biographical or linear models of literary history but reflects the exciting theoretical engagement we find in the best criticism of Burroughs's written work. John M. Bennett in "Performance in the Work of William S. Burroughs" suggests we think of the act or process of writing as a performance to better appreciate Burroughs's works such as *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* (Ohio State UP 2018). Barry Faulk, in "Burroughs, Bowie, and the Reshaping of the Counterculture: William S. Burroughs Meets 'Ziggy Stardust,'" analyzes the Burroughs-David Bowie interview that appeared in early 1974 in *Rolling Stone*. Faulk focuses on the context of Burroughs's interest in the 1970s on the nature of revolution and its reversal of hierarchies, rather than on any particular content for revolution. Faulk goes on to show how the interview was a turning point in Bowie's musical career. Blake Strickland, in "All the News Not Fit to Print," discusses Burroughs's relation with alternative presses, his participation in the Schizo-Culture Symposium and Nova Convention, and his collaboration with musicians such as Laurie Anderson. These essays begin the important work of bringing theory and performance together in appraisals of Burroughs as performer and influence and lay the foundation for future exploration. For example, I would love to read more theoretical essays on Burroughs's work with cut-ups and Genesis P-Orridge's Pandrogeny Project, or on Bauhaus and Burroughs, or on Burroughs's work as a sound artist.

Important contributions to *Burroughs Unbound* are the helpful appendices, including excerpts from Burroughs's lectures on his theory of the virus given at the City College of New York, May 3-8, 1974, published here for the first time. I was especially impressed by the helpful introduction to the lectures by Wermer-Colan, who offers a lively overview of scholarship on the virus as organism and metaphor in relation to Burroughs's virological theories (358-59).

It is encouraging to witness the renaissance in Burroughs studies, including Oliver Harris's groundbreaking work on textual and genetic criticism for Burroughs's published works, the excellent collection *William S. Burroughs: Cutting Up the Century*, edited by Joan Hawkins and Alex Wermer-Colan (Indiana UP 2019), and now this collection, which undoubtedly will lead to more work on Burroughs as a performer.

— Katharine Streip, Concordia University

of writings about the wilderness of North America from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.

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Simon Warner is Visiting Research Fellow in Popular Music Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. His research over more than two decades has considered the relationship between the Beat Generation writers and popular music of various forms. The interaction between this literary community and rock, jazz and other genres has been investigated in a number of published works including *Text and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture* (2013) and *Kerouac on Record: A Literary Soundtrack* (2018), co-edited with Jim Sampas. Warner has also produced a series of live celebrations commemorating Beat anniversaries with music: *Howl for Now* (2005), *Still Howling* (2015), *Kerouac on Screen* (2019) and *Kerouac Lives!* (2022). Additionally, he is Founding Editor of the website *Rock and the Beat Generation*, launched in 2021.

John Whalen-Bridge is Associate Professor of English at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Political Fiction and the American Self* (1998) and *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Rhetoric, and Self-Immolation* (Palgrave, 2015), which applies Kenneth Burke's rhetorical hermeneutics to Tibetan forms of protest. "Buddhism and the Beats" appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to*

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