

The Feminization of the Interzone in Kyger and Di Prima,

**Dr. Amy L. Friedman
Bryn Mawr College**

The Interzone of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* is constructed of depictions of brutish violence, powerful excess, and a narrative vocabulary that delineates passivity and weakness as a type of female victimhood, regardless of the sex of the actors or participants. We are told: "Women are no good, kid," (119). But John McLeod in *Postcolonialism* reminds us pointedly that "those texts which do not mention women at all are interesting for this very reason" (173). So this project is a resituating in terms of gendered perspectives, which I believe also involves us in the project of resituating ourselves as readers. My method, perhaps typical of feminist readers, of dealing with the disturbing juxtapositions and imagery in *Naked Lunch*, in William Burroughs's literary construction of Tangier, his era's "ungoverned" International Zone on the edge of Morocco, is to examine it closely and then consider what makes it "interesting." There are virtually no women, and those extant dwell in stereotype and in the discourses of misogyny. Nonetheless, what happens if we distill Interzone and see if women writers have in fact, rewritten, regendered, redressed the balance, or even feminized, the Interzone in their own works.

Most of us are familiar with the milieu of Burroughs' novel, and would accept its components in the following catalogue: Trafficking, the market of psychic exchange, moochers, dealers, spies, criminals, people on the lam, a dubious climate, a sanctuary of noninterference, a place where fact merges into dream, a place of ruin and decay, a place where people stare at its oddities and then move on.

“Tangier seems to exist on several dimensions” Kathryn Hume has noted, continuing that Burroughs’s “phantasmic geographies are mechanisms for putting landscapes he knows through distorting transformations, in hopes of glimpsing elements of his spirit's true home” (127). Hume further productively explores some of the continuities between the themes of *Interzone* and a later cyberpunk aesthetic; of *Interzone* and personalized psycho-sexual literary articulations; of *Interzone* and later, productive anti-urban manifestoes (Hume 119). My context as I develop this work is that of gendered writing and the ethos of power; I am engaging with certain tropes, techniques and themes, all evident in Burroughs’ work, and I would argue, manifesting in intriguing ways in some of the work of Joanne Kyger and Diane Di Prima:

- The “Interzone” may be a place of entrapment, obscurity;
- The *Interzone*, place, is a, fragmented narrative, of;
- Multiple and parodic voices are at work there;
- At the center is a writer who struggles to protect the “words” from exterior malign forces, while wrestling with the exigencies of an intensely private world and the need to relate it to others;
- There is almost always a criminal underworld;
- Substances are used;
- The rhetoric of psychiatric intervention surfaces;
- More substances are used;

In 1971 Joanne Kyger spent a summer on the isolated Puerto Rican island of Desecheo, recording a poetic diary of her struggles to write, and the complicated social and sexual

transactions amongst her shifting array of bohemian, and mostly male, companions. *Desecheo Notebook* was published later that year. In my reading of her text, Kyger recreates many of the pivotal elements of William S. Burroughs' *Interzone*, the creative and physical realm that maps the text he eventually saw published in 1959 under the name suggested by Jack Kerouac, *Naked Lunch*. Kyger plays with the notion of the outlaw artist, examining proscribed impulses and the routes of freely expressed ideas and creativity. Like Burroughs in *Tangier*, Kyger wrestles with the imposition of a writer's "routine" which will nonetheless allow "the unpredictable" to enter into the writing. In what she terms her *Desecheo*, "maritime zone," I argue that Kyger ultimately translates and feminizes Burroughs's *Tangier* palimpsest of geographical specificity as a landscape that can be creatively reconfigured to reflect both enacted and thwarted desires.

In my previous work on women writers of the Beat Generation, on poets Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel, Anne Waldman, on memoirists Bonnie Bremser, Hettie Jones, Carolyn Cassady, and Joyce Johnson, I have attempted to direct attention to the conditions of their ignored presence rather than to any *de facto* absence. In this paper, I wish to continue this project, in considering a specific example of female agency, examining how a woman writer might work within an overtly masculine trope, but then resituate it in terms of regendered concerns. As an explication of landscape, Burroughs' concept of *Interzone* shapes his narrative in specific, and I would argue, gendered ways. As Kathryn Hume explains, location contributes a constitutive thematic element to Burroughs' work: "Burroughs's desert, jungle, and city all play off against each other, and one cannot discuss what the desert symbolizes for Burroughs without knowing that he links jungle lushness to female powers that dissolve, rot, or absorb the male" (113). At

times the Interzone reflects this apparent fear of the female: “[m]oisture, warmth, rot, disease, and ingestion characterize the settings that...bristle with conventional symbols of female threat” (116).

It is appealing in some ways to essay this as a project aligned with contemporary postcolonial feminist discourse, and as a postcolonial scholar I am tempted, finding perhaps in Kyger’s articulations the voice of the subaltern; a restoration of the women who are violently disembodied in Burroughs’ text, or the ones reduced to extreme stereotypes; or the fellahin women who are pushed to the silent margins. But this direction may prompt interpolations which extend beyond an appropriate critical scope. Kyger’s feminized expressions of Interzone do, though, have a bearing on our assessments of the range of Beat writing, and if they reorient anything, it is our own reading strategies, reconstruing and reinforcing the potential of reading itself as one of the sites in the struggle for change.

Joanne Kyger’s *Desecheo Notebook* is a later work, a short but complete poetic rendering of her perceptions of a brief but intense island existence. Though compact, the text reflects concerns that characterize her wider work: artistic communities, the meaning of travel, philosophies of writing, explorations of Buddhist practice. In my reading of Kyger’s *Desecheo Notebook*, she creates a realm of potential creativity in her imaginings of the island landscape. Like Burroughs, her work is multi-voiced, with the poet, “Joanne” emerging towards the end, as “William Seward” emerges in *Naked Lunch*. In both works, there are some parodic voices. And at the center is a writer who struggles to protect the “words” from exterior malign forces, struggling with the exigencies of an acutely private world and the intense need to relate it to others.

Burroughs wrote to Allen Ginsberg in 1954: “If there is no one there to receive it, routine turns back on me and tears me apart” (*Letters*, 27). Kyger too wrestles in *Desecheo* with a struggle for recognition, for audience, and for the agency these might confer, stating: “I am a foul temper. Inside / I have this conversant world, those I am intimate /with I allow to share” (2). She continues: “What goes on in the mind imagination. Writing. / Speech and conversation. / That story” (2). The island realm may be a physical place she is trapped in, or a frontier of mental obscurity, and perhaps forces of chance may deny a future departure: “The piece of paper napkin / actually a yellow paper towel / upon which Peter / has the number and name /of the boat man / our only transportation to the island / is thrown in the waste basket” (3). She announces this place as the “maritime zone” (5), a location that has layers of imagined history, and possibly its own mythology. Kyger’s “maritime zone” never approaches the level of the bizarre that characterizes the climax sections of Burroughs’ text, his sections on “The Market” and “The Parties of Interzone” that comprise a critique of human cruelty overlaying a fraught narrative of acute addiction. But Kyger does approach the surreal, as a history of prior inhabitation seeps through in her readings of the landscape: “at one time were thousands of goats” (5), now in this place, humans vie with talking, spiritual monkeys. The location allows her “to talk in the abstract” (4); “See. I am walking in a dream again” (5).

At times there seems to be a criminal underworld on the island, a seepage of putrefaction and disintegration, a very Burroughs-esque ontology of decay: on the island, “[a]sking ‘why’ is the beginning of rot” (97). A suspect, delinquent youth arrives and then disappears, and someone is “shooting bullets across the narrow passage into the store

house” (7). While Burroughs’s addiction-recovery narrative of getting “clean” is fairly apparent, one can also sense that Kyger seeks a new epoch of clarity and of creativity, expecting of the “maritime zone” interlude a type of cure, or perhaps a rescue.

“Psychotherapy is not the / application of method” she complains, continuing that “[t]he ‘psyche’ is not / a personal but a world existence” (8), expressing as Burroughs does the writer’s focused motivation to reveal the interior world. The rhetoric of psychiatric intervention, one avenue for rescue, is shown to fall short of expectation: “Concepts promise protection / from experience” (8). Instead she falls back on her own routines of creativity, even though they can marginalize her from mainstream experience, or even from the core of social interactions in this “maritime zone”:

I said, OK, I want to have a talk with my unconscious
As I walk up and down the concrete helicopter pad.
This figure will come up that I will communicate with.
Maybe the king of the monkeys. He will come right
Down out of the hills with all his noble group. (10)

As in *Naked Lunch*, episodes are interrupted, discrete, disordered, and the public intrudes on the private in unexpected surges. In bed with her lover/husband, Jack Boyce, another island guest saunters in (11), she recounts visits and conversations with Snyder and Jack Kerouac which apparently occur in dreams, or in imagined time: “I talked with Jack Kerouac / last night” (19). A dream takes her to Gary Snyder’s home and she visits there for a while, with his son Kai and wife Masa. Relations with these non-present men are disconcerting in their suddenness, but each episode concludes harmoniously. However, she is on this island with a group in which men and the needs of men predominate: Jack

Boyce, Philip Whalen, Sam Burr, Tom, Stewart, Peter. Like her stay in Japan and travels in India chronicled in *The Japan and India Journals*, struggling at times to look after a husband and to maintain her home, her writing, and her guests Ginsberg and Orlovsky, she finds her own needs overshadowed by “all these men / I just want a place / for myself” (17).

Her recognition of, and reflections on, the powerful “feminine spirit” is in direct struggle with the masculinities of the “maritime zone” atmosphere. The “zone” is evolving as predominantly a masculine time zone, characterized by conflict, competition, and discord, where “the animals can’t live together / peacefully” (19-20) and where fish are impaled and left to die in a bucket, “rammed through with a spear / and still lays dying /... /...I sing /OM Sri Maitreya /...for the soul / of a dying fish / stick a knife in its brain / now it is meat, fish meat” (18). In an atmosphere of stark gender discord, her writing starts to chronicle mood swings and self-prescribed antidotes. Dreams torture her, visions worm their way into her days, and she fights with the need to escape and the need to maintain a writer’s routine. The diurnal begins to entrap her, yet domestic habit is also her only escape.

I know I do not suffer more than anyone
in the whole world
but this morning I had to have first thing
2 cigarettes, half a joint,
a poached egg and corned beef hash, 1 piece toast,
2 cups tea
Jung, Williams, shells, stones,

2 slugs rum, depression, rest of joint,
cigarettes, 7 Up, and it's only 10 o'clock

Because I want to write a poem

Because I want something to come out of me. (20)

A week or so later (in the indistinct timeframe of the “zone”), a flood invades their village and washes her companion’s rucksack out to sea: lost thesis, lost notebooks, lost words, and worst, “the last of [her] cigarettes” (24). The tone deepens, and exhibits flashes of despair and paranoia: “I strongly sense I will not leave this Island alive” (24). It becomes important to assert the minutiae of survival: “I am still alive / smelling of the ocean” (27). There is a fragmented narrative throughout about mysterious underworld activities, possible crimes and infractions, centering on figures of island mythology, and disappearing statuary. In a nod to the noir tone of crime fiction, when a missing piece of the statue finally surfaces, she writes that “[a]ll that stood accused / of head theft / are now innocent” (26).

The island stay comes to an end. Like Burroughs returning via the hard-fought cure at the close of *Naked Lunch*, to life, to sobriety, to a reacquired mental equilibrium, Kyger’s departure has a sense of protracted and arduous return, leaving a type of “wilderness” where “words” struggled to flourish, relying on “spirit guides” who drift “further away” as she is moves back “into crammed people land” (28).

Reading Kyger’s feminized Interzone back into Burroughs’ text opens it up in some surprising ways because Kyger’s feminization has imprinted a sense of the tensions that govern a need for domestic space and an awareness of the entrapments of the habitual and the mundane. To adapt Edward Said’s phrase in *Culture and Imperialism*, in

both texts habit has bred “an appalling pathology of power” (230). Kyger’s power struggle is inherently gendered, in its inscription of a fairly traditional hetero-power imbalance, as opposed to Burroughs’ inscriptions of pan- and multiple-sexualities, but the model of a malignancy of routine no less applies. For Kyger, there is an entrapment of domestic routine versus its reassuring regularities, while for Burroughs the antidote to the drug habit is a restoration via language that increasingly reflects the domestic. In the continuing excesses of addiction, filth escalates; Burroughs recounts: “[I] look down at my filthy trousers, haven’t been changed in months . . . The days glide by strung on a syringe with a long thread of blood” (56). The Homeric refrain continues, not of the wine-dark “sea” but of “the junk-sick morning” (166); we know from this narrative clue that the return home of the damaged warrior is imminent. The final resurrection from the throes of addiction is indeed such a homecoming, in terms of language that reflects the goal of getting and staying “clean.”

Kyger and Burroughs overlap in exploring imaginative geographies in terms wherein gendered roles can access and assume new powers, but such ascendance is hard-fought. The conflicted Interzone state is somehow productive and fruitful, even as it represents entrapments and episodes of public urban chaos and bizarre domestic intimacies. In the Interzone, the writer struggles for empowerment and productivity. While Burroughs eschews the feminine even while struggling to “get clean,” Kyger ultimately asserts the powers of feminine spirits and impulses, willingly reclaiming the feminine domestic as a saving power over masculine forces, for as Brian Massumi has noted, “power is the domestication of force” (qtd. In Hume 115).

As I revisit Burroughs’s imagined construction of Tangier, with its scenes of

public urban chaos and bizarre domestic intimacies, I begin to see connections to the work of other women writers of the Beat Generation: ways that Lenore Kandel's incendiary *Love Book*, her text of "holy erotica," essays counterpoint to some Interzone tropes of inequality and exploitation. But mainly I am drawn to Diane di Prima, pondering her deliberate misleading of the reader through depictions of imagined versus real erotic encounters in Greenwich Village bohemia in *Memoir of a Beatnik*, or considering the events in "The Holidays at Millbrook – 1966," an explicit narrative of the vexed politic of the domestic. In this text, Di Prima labors to produce an extensive Thanksgiving feast for Timothy and Rosemary Leary's Millbrook, New York household of visitors, comprising Di Prima's partner and children, a Nepalese temple dancer, Allen Ginsberg and entourage, 28 members of an Ashram temporarily camping on the second floor, and the Canadian reporter who has accidentally consumed a large quantity of acid-laced sherry and is hurtling and howling through the night—a bizarre cornucopia which has di Prima referring to "handling any and all drug crises" and "this powder keg at Millbrook" in the same sentence (347 in *Charters, Portable*). It's definitely a mix of the bizarre, the domestic and the pharmacological.

But it is probably *Loba* that strikes the most Interzone chords, and here I realize I am attempting to rewrite the blurb on the Penguin edition, to wit: "*Loba* is a visionary epic quest for the reintegration of the feminine, hailed by many when it first appeared in 1978 as the great female counterpart to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*." I am now suggesting that it might be read instead as the great female counterpart to *Naked Lunch*. The simultaneously disarming and disturbing registers and tropes are arguably present: "I dip my hand in you and eat your flesh," we are told at the arrival of the *Loba* (5). Sex and

death, the tortures of the domestic, a miasmic notion of city, a fragmented and imagistic narrative, and the sense of a writer's voice emerging from all this with the courage to command a new style, with the most powerful drive to speak the unspoken: "End commonality of rage / to be born / in uniqueness" (148). Eventually there are strophes revealing peace with the mother, peace with the daughter, and most importantly, peace with the woman as writer: "There is a woman whose poems are bread & meat / hyacinth / nightmare / crepe paper / I close a window, she is not reflected in it / but I see her silhouette against the glass (267).

As readers, then, perhaps the import of all this is the striving towards and potential rewards of reading that allows us to confront our inhibitions about difficult, fragmented, even repellent texts, to see them as fertile ground for reclamation, and to follow through to find these active reclamations: those texts which challenge conventions and which write possibility into existence, those texts which answer the silent and absent women in Burroughs with Di Prima's assertion in *Loba* of "her voice / she writes / whatever suits her" and "she moves / where she pleases" (267).

Select Bibliography

Burroughs, William S. *Letters to Allen Ginsberg, 1953-57*. Ed. Ron Padgett and Anne Waldman.

New York: Full Court, 1982.

_____. *Naked Lunch*. 1959. Restored text ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles. New York:

2001Grove.

Charters, Ann. ed. *The Portable 60s Reader*. New York: Penguin, 2002.

Di Prima, Diane. "The Holidays at Millbrook – 1966." in Ann Charters, ed. *The Portable 60s Reader*. New York: Penguin, 2002. 343-350.

_____. *Loba*. New York: Penguin: 1998.

Hume, Kathryn. "William S. Burroughs's Phantasmic Geography." *Contemporary Literature*, 40.1 (1999): 111-35.

Kandel, Lenore. *The Love Book*. Stolen Paper Review, San Francisco, 1966.

Kyger, Joanne. *Desecheo Notebook*. Berkeley: Arif Press, 1971.

_____. *The Japan and India Journals 1960-64*. Bolinas, CA: Tombouctou, 1981.
Republished as *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals 1960-64*.
Berkeley: N. Atlantic Books, 2000.

Loewinsohn, Ron. "'Gentle Reader, I Fain Would Spare You This, But My Pen Hath Its Will Like the Ancient Mariner': Narrator(s) and Audience in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*." *Contemporary Literature* 39 (Winter 1998): 560-85.

Said, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage, 1994.

Skерl, Jennie. *William S. Burroughs*. Boston: Twayne, 1985.