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### Appropriating the (Colonial) Icon: BEF's Uncle Bill as a Counternarrative of Exploration

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#### **Abstract:**

This article explores Bernardo Fernández “BEF”’s *Uncle Bill* (2014), a graphic biography of U.S. writer William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) which focuses on Burroughs’s years in Mexico City. It analyzes how BEF intermingles autobiographical details with key events in Burroughs’s biography, such as the killing of his wife, Joan Vollmer, so as to decipher and deconstruct his own admiration for this controversial figure of U.S. counterculture. The article argues that the result is a narrative of exploration which shows parallelisms with traditional travel accounts and appropriates Burroughs as an icon of the Global North. To that end, the article locates *Uncle Bill* within BEF’s comics production and traces the Burroughsian presence in comics; then, drawing from decolonial and postcolonial theory, it portrays BEF’s position as a master narrator of Burroughs’s life and defines the different strategies used in the description of his object of study.

**Keywords:** Bernardo Fernández, William S. Burroughs, travel writing, graphic biography, Mexican comics



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## **Appropriating the (Colonial) Icon: BEF's *Uncle Bill* as a Counternarrative of Exploration**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Undoubtedly, William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) is a postmodern icon in U.S. counterculture and, indisputably, his figure is deeply controversial and contradictory: he was queer; he struggled with drug addiction; and he fatally shot his wife, Joan Vollmer, during a party in Mexico City – serving only thirteen days in jail. Undeniably, all these facts are closely linked to how his readers perceive his literary works. One might say that they obscure his works, although these are largely autobiographical. One might even say that readers are attracted to his works precisely because of his controversial life and dark aura. Such attraction crystalizes in the works of numerous filmmakers and musicians, novelists and poets who have been captivated by Burroughs.<sup>2</sup> Comics authors, as explored in the next section, are no exception. One of Burroughs's biographers, Oliver Harris, points out that his legendary persona precedes his writings after he appeared in several books by his friend Jack Kerouac: "the appearance of his identity had the quality of a fiction, a fantasy projected by others, or a simulation, a copy behind which there was no original" (Harris 2003: 2). One thing is for sure, Mexican author Bernardo Fernández, "BEF" (Mexico City, 1972), was one of these readers who came to be fascinated by Burroughs's mysterious figure and who also projected his own fantasy on him. For it is BEF and his graphic biography *Uncle Bill* (2014) – not Burroughs – that constitute the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an output of the research project PID2023-147494NB-I00 funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the State Investigation Agency, and the FEDER.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, films such as *Queer* (2024), by Luca Guadagnino, set in Mexico, or *Naked Lunch* (1991), by David Cronenberg, both based on eponymous novels by Burroughs, Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), where he had a minor role, or *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), set in the Tangerine scene depicted by Burroughs in some of his writings. As for music, and just to name a few examples, he became friends with Paul McCartney and appeared in the cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967); he inspired The Thin White Duke, one of David Bowie's alter egos, and impacted Patti Smith, who included references to his novel *The Wild Boys* (1971) in her album *Horses* (1975). Kurt Cobain convinced Burroughs to collaborate with him in "The Priest They Called Him" (1993), setting his words to music. See, for more information, Casey Rae's *William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll* (2019). Burroughs's impact on literature is too wide to be summarized here, but I refer the reader to *William S. Burroughs Cutting Up the Century* (2019), edited by Joan Hawkins and Alex Wermer-Colan.

focus of this article.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, my interest here is to analyze how the comics creator presents, interrogates, imagines and appropriates Burroughs. It is BEF's gaze, as a Mexican author describing, deciphering and questioning an U.S. author and global icon, the focus of the present article. To analyze BEF's *Uncle Bill*, I will briefly introduce BEF's comics production and I will trace Burroughs's presence in comics. Secondly I will situate my approach within decolonial theory and travel writing. Then I will focus on BEF's position as a narrator of Burroughs's life and I will define the different strategies used to describe his object of study. Lastly I will draw some conclusions.

### 1. Bernardo Fernández as a cartoonist, William S. Burroughs as a cartoon

Graphic journalist, cartoonist and writer Bernardo Fernández, whose pen name is "BEF", studied graphic design at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. He was connected to underground publications in the capital since his student years, founding and coediting the magazine *Sub* and collaborating with a number of zines including *Número X*, *Hemofilia*, *Felina* and *Tripodología*, magazines such as *Golem* and *Día Siete*, and as an art director of the literary magazine *Complot Internacional* (1997–1999), where he published some of his sci-fi short stories. He also edited the influential Mexican sci-fi comics anthology *Pulpo Comics* (2004) with cartoonists Tony Sandoval and Santiago Casares, a project funded by Fondo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA). His long-format graphic narratives include formal experiments such as *Espiral: un cómic recursivo* (Alfaguara 2010), a metafictional graphic novel with no words; young adult adventures, as in *La calavera de cristal* (2012), scripted by Juan Villoro; graphic humour (*¡Cielos, mi marido!*, 2011); *Matar al candidato*, with F. G. Hagenbeck (2014), based on the political assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, and the autobiographical comic, as in *Habla María* (2020), which tells about his daughter with autism. He has also shown an interest for exploring literary motifs in his comics in the delicate graphic novel *El instante amarillo* (Océano, 2017) which establishes a parallelism with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) through the story of a young girl who suffers bullying.

While his interests in comics are manifold, his writing production includes *noir* titles such as *Tiempo de alacranes* (2009), *Hielo negro* (2011) and *Azul cobalto* (2016), and sci-fi novels and short-story collections, as *Ojos de lagarto* (2009), *Gel azul* (2006) and *Escenarios para el fin del mundo* (2019). His work has received several distinctions and awards in Mexico and Spain. Even when set in a speculative future, Fernández's writings are "a critique of Mexico's

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<sup>3</sup> *Uncle Bill* was published in Mexico in 2014 by Sexto Piso Editores and in 2017 in Spain, by bang. ediciones. All references to the comic belong to the Spanish edition, unless stated otherwise. *Uncle Bill* has not been published in English, so all translations of original quotes from *Uncle Bill* into English in this article are mine.

corporate capitalism and portray a high-tech world bent on exclusion and elitism, with unexpected twists on Anglo-American cultural assumptions" (Brown and Ginway 2012: 9). As an appropriative project, *Uncle Bill* also reflects upon cultural imperialism and U.S. assumptions about Mexico.

Asked about how he chooses the medium for telling his stories, Fernández replies that his choice is quite intuitive, but that *Uncle Bill* was initially conceived as a novel, and then the conjunction of word and image worked better in the storytelling.<sup>4</sup> In the same interview, Fernández tells about his insecurities regarding his own drawing style, since he considers that many other authors of his generation were more talented than himself. Among his influences, he mentions big names of North American comics, such as the Canadian cartoonists Seth and Chester Brown, and the French clear-line master Yves Chaland, whom he unabashedly confesses to have tried to copy over and over.<sup>5</sup> And he acknowledges a background common to "all the Americas, from Canada to Argentina; we all come from the trilogy of Art Spiegelman, Frank Miller and Alan Moore" (Stefkova 2018, my translation). But not all of his influences are authors from the Global North. Among Mexican creators, he refers to the political cartoonist Abel Quezada, and to Germán Butze, a pioneer in the use of clear line who also published sci-fi stories.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding his subject-matter in *Uncle Bill*, I wish to trace the worthwhile presence of William S. Burroughs in comics. Apart from the influence exerted in underground comix authors as relevant as Robert Crumb<sup>7</sup> or S. Clay Wilson,<sup>8</sup> some of his techniques (fold-up and cut-up methods) had an impact on creators as famous as Grant Morrison<sup>9</sup> or Alan Moore. He is the protagonist of *Burroughs* (2015) by Brazilian author João Pinheiro who creates a graphic biography with *noir* airs, appears in a chapter of the graphic biography *The Beats: A Graphic History* (2010) by Harvey Pekar and Ed Piskor, and is one of the main characters in the Image comic book series *Zero* by Ales Kot (2014–2016). He also has a stellar appearance in the first issue of *Hellblazer* (Vertigo, 1988) in the story "Hunger" by writer Jamie Delano and artist John Ridgway, partly set in Tangiers in the 1950s. Even if it is not a comic, the memoir by Malcolm McNeill *Observed While Falling: Bill Burroughs, Ah Pook, and Me* (2012) is worth mentioning as an account of the personal and creative collaboration between Burroughs and artist Malcolm McNeill, first in the comic strip "The Unspeakable Mr. Hart" (1970), published in the British

<sup>4</sup> See Fernández, in Stefkova (2018).

<sup>5</sup> See Stefkova (2018).

<sup>6</sup> See Stefkova (2018).

<sup>7</sup> See Calone (2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Rosenkranz (2015).

<sup>9</sup> See Garlington (2016).

underground magazine *Cyclops*, then in an experimental work defined as a "Word/Image novel" which never saw light but was published as *Ah Pook is Here* in text form in 1979. These projects capture Burroughs's interest in Mayan cosmology, which Joan Vollmer had sparked when they first met<sup>10</sup> as well as with intermedial formats. Alan Moore declared in an interview "I always thought that comics would be a perfect medium for Burroughs" while acknowledging the pioneering collaboration "The Unspeakable Mr. Hart" (Moore, qtd. in Berlatsky 2011: 52–53). He had gone so far as to refer to Burroughs's techniques as a formula "to evade rational analysis" in *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 2019). As is evident, BEF is not the only admirer among cartoonists that Bill Burroughs had.

## 2. Towards decolonization: BEF's counternarrative of exploration

As Walter D. Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers have argued, coloniality is "the invisible and constitutive side of 'modernity'" (Mignolo 2007: 451). Modernity is a construct created by Europe and maintained by the Global North that frames the world into an all-encompassing epistemic network of knowledge. Modernity creates its own margins and impinges on its subalterns "a degree of inferiority" since they are considered " (because of language, religion, history, etc.) somewhat behind (time) in history or, if its present is being considered, marginal (space)" (Mignolo 2007: 474). There is also an additional trap regarding what Mignolo calls the "myth of modernity":

Modernity includes a rational 'concept' of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, a justification for genocidal violence. The postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason of terror; we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth that it conceals. (Mignolo 2007: 454)

BEF became interested in Burroughs before reading any of his works in 1990, when he was 18, after coming across a quote in a music magazine. Here starts what BEF describes as a quest for Burroughs, a search for a "Holy Grail" (BEF 2017: 32). In his fascination for his countercultural status, he accepts the "myth of modernity" and situates the U.S. writer in the margins of such modernity. As Mignolo argues, "[t]he problem with coloniality of knowledge, and of existing within its realm (knowing, sensing and believing), is that it makes us believe in the ontology of what the North Atlantic's 'universal fictions' have convinced us to believe" (Mignolo 2017: 39). As we will see, BEF accepts the 'universal fiction' of counterculture and pays "homage" (BEF 2017: 148) to "Uncle Bill" without questioning the framework of modernity. However, he does question Burroughs's countercultural iconicity in relation to his connection with Mexico and Morocco, thus undermining that status.

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<sup>10</sup> See Morgan (2012: 123).

BEF's position is subversive and appropriative from the outset: a Global South author turning his gaze towards a U.S. author, trying to describe, decipher and question the Northern Other. It is subversive because traditionally the North/the West has described and framed the South/East, as is determined by postcolonial and decolonial theory. In narratives of exploration, the traveler's scrutiny is never innocent since travel texts have always framed non-Western peoples through description, classification and validation according to ethnocentric standards, thus othering them to justify the colonial enterprise.<sup>11</sup> In *Uncle Bill*, BEF embodies the traveler who sets out to discover more about his subject through readings, conversations with experts, his own experience and even a field trip to Morocco. I argue that his graphic biography is a counternarrative of exploration in which BEF appropriates Burroughs through different textual and visual strategies.

### 3. Appropriation strategies in BEF's graphic biography

In postcolonial theory, appropriation is an "act of usurpation in various cultural domains" carried out by the colonized or dominated subject in order to resist political and cultural control (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 15). BEF develops a series of strategies that subvert the tropes of travel writing, and he also appropriates the role of the narrator in such accounts. In traditional travel writing, the author imagines and envisions the Other before meeting them, even before setting foot in the destination. As Edward Said confirmed in *Orientalism* (1978), one of the founding texts of postcolonial theory, the creation of knowledge about non-Western cultures which was studied at the metropolis was a central part of the colonial enterprise.<sup>12</sup> BEF, embodying the masterful narrator of Burroughs's life, becomes fascinated even before reading his works, when he learns about Burroughs coining the term "heavy metal" in 1990 (2017: 28–29). A heavy metal fan himself, BEF wanted to read something written by this "enlightened" figure and started a search that, in pre-Internet times and with a limited public library system, was full of contingencies. As Hind has noticed, the graphic biography reveals little about the admired writer, but relies on the admirer's quest: "young fictionalized Bef hunts obsessively and patiently for Burroughs's texts" (2019: 57). But perhaps one should not expect insight from *Uncle Bill* if "Burroughs himself was not insightful regarding Mexico, as Bef notes" (Hind 2019: 57). BEF turned to a professor, to the university library and to local booksellers looking for Burroughs's books unsuccessfully. This is the first of a series of disappointments that he

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<sup>11</sup> See Pratt (2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Said (2004: 126–127).

encounters during his quest. Such contingencies are also frequent in travel narratives when reality does not meet the narrator's expectations.<sup>13</sup>

BEF structures his graphic biography in six chapters devoted to Burroughs's life. He mostly focuses on the period between 1944 (when he met his future wife, Joan Vollmer) and 1952 (when he left Mexico after killing Joan in 1951). Chapter 5, "Postcards From the Edge" (in English in the original), deploys a different drawing and layout style to tell episodes of Burroughs's and Joan's life in Mexico and South America. It alternates between Lucien Carr's and Allen Ginsberg's visit to Mexico and their trip with Joan, and snapshots of Burroughs's simultaneous escapade with this lover Lewis Marker in search of ayahuasca. BEF uses full-page panels with captions in italics below, thus imitating the style, layout and humorous tone of Peter Arno (1904–1968), a cartoonist from *The New Yorker* who was active between the late 1920s and 1950s. Appropriating the style of a U.S. cartoonist to describe Joan and Bill's escapades as a series of separate postcards is a way of highlighting not only the foreign presence of Vollmer and Burroughs in Mexico but also the dysfunctional and edgy life of the couple. In addition, it is a way of detaching himself as a narrator from the ayahuasca episode of Burroughs's life, which took place outside of Mexico (Fig. 1). If Arno satirized the New York elite, in this chapter BEF mocks Joan and Bill's sexual affairs and wild goose chases, thus othering them while mimicking a "foreign" style.



Fig. 1. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 162–163 (left), and one of Arno's pages for *The New Yorker* (right), taken from *Peter Arno*, New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> See Augé (2006: 11–13).

BEF adds separate chapters entitled "Bill & Me: Una historia de amor" ("Bill and Me, A Love Story"), in which he represents himself and his quest looking for his most renowned novel, *Naked Lunch* (1959). In these interludes, the fictionalized BEF meets Mexican experts on Burroughs and his works, retraces Burroughs's footsteps in Tangier, Morocco, and finally he looks for possible and improbable connections between Burroughs and his grandfather. Of course, there is irony in the title, "A Love Story", since he adds that Burroughs is "a man for whom I have developed a love-hate literary relationship" (148). *Uncle Bill* is not the portrayal of a fan who blindly praises the figure he is describing. As one of the few academic reviews written about this graphic biography underlines, the reader can notice the healthy distance between narrator and character so as not to fabricate an apology of one of the most renowned icons of pop culture.<sup>14</sup> Narrators distancing themselves from their object are also a frequent move in writings of exploration, in which the indigenous inhabitants become "bodyscapes" for the contemplation of the traveler, thus limiting their interactions (Pratt 2007: 64). Such a distant love-hate relationship (and the graphic biography in itself) is the result of a negotiation between BEF's admiration for the writer and his abhorrence of the man who killed his wife. As a matter of fact, Joan's death plays a central role in BEF's narrative: it appears at the beginning and end of *Uncle Bill* as well as in four other moments in the story, always in ellipsis, as well as in the cover. As a matter of fact, it haunts the narrative through different examples of foreshadowing, such as ";BANG!" onomatopoeia or references to Burroughs's shooting skills. The last example in Fig. 2, in which the onomatopoeia occupies the center of an empty full-page panel, not only represents the atrocity of Vollmer's death, but also how that death has obliterated the possibility of approaching Burroughs without Vollmer's death overshadowing his figure. For Prout,

[r]endering the scene of Vollmer's death in comic form allows Bef to evaluate it from several angles and also emphasizes the gap between the opacity of the actual circumstances that led up to the fatal shooting and its mythologization. (2019: 94)

Also, the fact that Vollmer's body does not appear after the shooting contrasts with the abundant photos in Mexican newspapers and magazines such as *La Prensa* or *Magazine de Policía* which covered the event in 1951. As a matter of fact, photos of the corpse are much more numerous than photos of Joan alive.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Martínez-Gómez (2017: 131).

<sup>15</sup> See Bennet (2022).

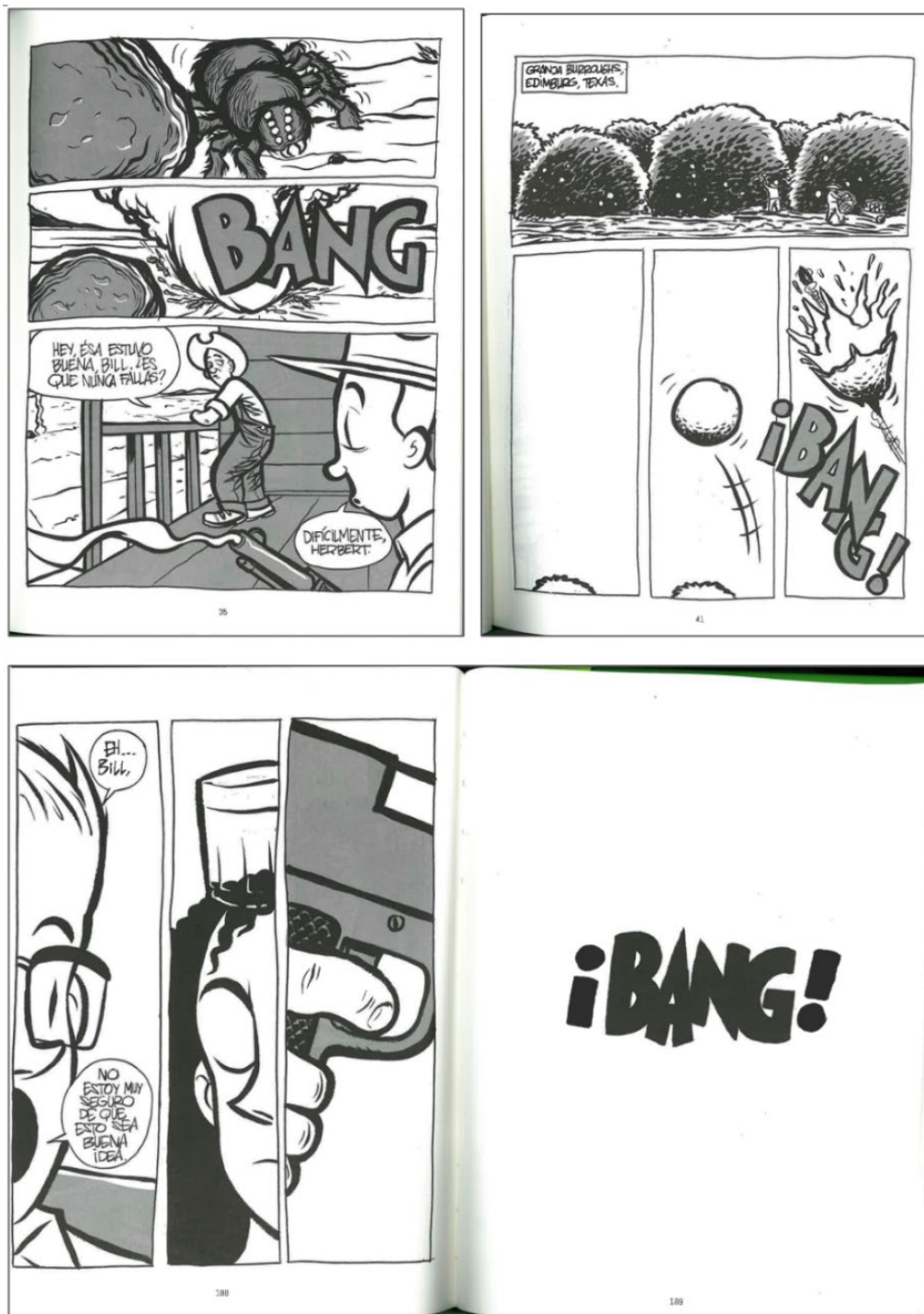


Fig. 2. "¡BANG!" onomatopoeia in different moments of the story, pp. 35, 41, 188–189.

Through "Bill & Me" sections, we see how BEF becomes an expert on Burroughs by embodying the experienced traveler who, before his exploration, extensively reads about his subject. Postcolonial criticism reminds us of the key role played by travel narratives in the colonial enterprise as a self-referential body of knowledge that described, classified and validated the Other in order to justify Western superiority and the colonial project.<sup>16</sup> BEF

<sup>16</sup> See Said (2004: 43, 205).

acquires knowledge on his subject through different bibliographical sources such as Burroughs's letters, the biographies written by Oliver Harris (*William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, 2003) and Ted Morgan (*Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, 1988), and James Grauerholz's paper "The Death of Joan Vollmer: What Really Happened?" (2002), although he does not always quote them directly. For instance, the sentence that closes the comic is taken from the introduction to the novel *Queer*, one of the few cases in which Burroughs referred to Joan's death directly: "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death" (Burroughs 1985: xxii). For critic Ryan Prout, this closure summarizes the whole graphic biography, but at the same time it is its driving force, "*Uncle Bill* explores this appalling conclusion and the circumstances leading up to the event that provoked it, in such a way that it forms the bases for an epistemological querying of Burroughs's biography" (2019: 92). On the other hand, BEF quotes and represents Mexican critic Jorge García Robles, the author of *La Bala Perdida* (1995), an essay about Burroughs's years in Mexico. By doing so, he introduces a Mexican voice as *autorictas* rather than highlighting more quotations of U.S. experts.

From the outset, it seems evident that BEF's initial interest in Burroughs becomes an interest in Burroughs and Mexico. But as Mexican poet and critic David Huerta states, "Burroughs passed through Mexico like any other gringo tourist, without any interest for Mexican culture" (BEF 2017: 67). Reading about him, BEF would confirm this view: Burroughs was in Mexico City because he had been arrested in Louisiana for heroin possession and other important charges. To avoid prosecution, he crossed the Mexican border in 1949 following his lawyer's advice. He wrote fragments of his novel *Queer* in Mexico City and enrolled in Mexico City College to study anthropology although he did not attend many lectures. He was more interested in the *laissez-faire* atmosphere, the easy access to drugs, male prostitution and the affordable cost of living. As one of his biographers summarized it: "In Mexico, the frontier values [Burroughs] so admired were still in force" (Morgan 2012: 461). Of course, Burroughs's approach to Mexico was based on privilege: for a US citizen the cost of living was very cheap and he was unmolested by police after hiring Bernabé Jurado, a shady lawyer who, coincidentally, was a friend of BEF's grandfather.<sup>17</sup> As Burroughs's letters demonstrate, he never engaged in cross-cultural dialogue, much like in Tangier in the following years, but rather emphasized his privileged position as a U.S. national: "the cops recognize you as their superior and would never venture to stop or question a well-dressed upper-class character like myself.

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<sup>17</sup> See BEF (2017: 216, 230).

[Y]ou can buy a pistol permit or a Nar[cotics] permit or almost anything else you want for a very modest fee" (Harris 1993: 79).

As soon as BEF acknowledges how little Mexican culture mattered to Burroughs, the narrator in *Uncle Bill* opts for a different strategy. If Mexico did not appear in Burroughs's writings, if by all accounts Burroughs dismissed cross-cultural interaction, if he exerted a colonial privilege, why not Mexicanize Burroughs in his own version? That is why BEF proceeds to infuse his counternarrative of exploration with elements taken from Mexican culture, thus asserting his own role as a master narrator of the story. For example, when he recounts how Burroughs met Joan at a party in 1944, they chat and have sex to the sound of the lyrics of "Cómo fue", a bolero popularized by Cuban singer Benny Moré in the late fifties and later by Mexican crooner José José in the 1980s (BEF 2017: 14). BEF also introduces the characteristic whistling of knife-grinders who announce their trade on the streets of the capital, as a bad omen when he is about to shoot Joan at the party (2017: 174).

BEF's strategy of mexicanizing the narrative is also a way of filling in the gaps that any biographer is bound to find upon writing about someone's life. By alternating panels that represent him while drawing and asking "Who are you, Bill? What are you doing in my country?" (2017: 122) with his own recreations of Bill and Joan in Mexico, BEF blurs the boundaries between past and present, narrator and subject, fact and fiction. In chapter 4, entitled "Under the Volcano", after the homonymous novel by Malcolm Lowry (1947) that popularized Mexico among the U.S. beatniks and bohemians in the 1950s and 1960s, BEF introduces nine pages without text and full of non-sequitur transitions between panels where he presents different images of Mexican cultural icons and places in the late 1940s and 1950s, a moment in which Mexico was undergoing a process of modernization and a cultural boom (Fig. 3). One can identify great artists of the time, such as Diego Rivera overshadowing Frida Kahlo,<sup>18</sup> fellow muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros<sup>19</sup> and José Clemente Orozco,<sup>20</sup> the architect Luis Barragán posing on the stairs of his house,<sup>21</sup> "Casa Barragán" (1947), an icon of Mexican architecture in a remediation of his most famous photograph, or the composer Agustín Lara.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See BEF (2017: 126), left top panel.

<sup>19</sup> See BEF (2017: 132), left top panel.

<sup>20</sup> See BEF (2017: 133), right top panel.

<sup>21</sup> See BEF (2017: 129), left top panel.

<sup>22</sup> See BEF (2017: 126), right top panel.



Fig. 3. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 126–127. Panels including Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Agustín Lara, Tin Tan, Pedro Infante and Irma Dorantes, and Rodolfo Gaona.

Furthermore, emblems of the Mexican show business can be distinguished, such as actors and comedians Tin Tan<sup>23</sup> and Cantinflas<sup>24</sup>, actresses María Félix<sup>25</sup> and Dolores del Río,<sup>26</sup> U.S.-Mexican dancer and actress Tongolele,<sup>27</sup> possibly Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, exiled in Mexico,<sup>28</sup> and the couple made by Pedro Infante and Irma Dorantes,<sup>29</sup> who was 14 when they met in the film *Los tres huastecos* (1948). BEF also represents the boxer Raúl "the Mouse" Macías<sup>30</sup> and bullfighter Rodolfo Gaona.<sup>31</sup> There are other figures related to journalism, public radio or public life, such as president Miguel Alemán Valdés,<sup>32</sup> interspaced with vistas of Mexico City: the Monument to the Revolution,<sup>33</sup> Reforma Avenue and the column with the Angel of Independence<sup>34</sup> and the Multifamiliar Alemán complex, designed by Mario Pani (Fig. 4).<sup>35</sup> These urban and human icons of Mexican modernity in the 1950s coexist with snapshots of idle men in the street<sup>36</sup> and graphic replicas of famous images by Mexican photographer

<sup>23</sup> See BEF (2017: 126), left bottom panel.

<sup>24</sup> See BEF (2017: 131), left bottom panel.

<sup>25</sup> See BEF (2017: 131), right bottom panel.

<sup>26</sup> See BEF (2017: 132), right top panel.

<sup>27</sup> See BEF (2017: 129), bottom panel. Except for Tongolele's image, which is identified by Prout in his article in *IJOCA* (2019: 102), I am indebted to Damián Vera for helping me to single them out.

<sup>28</sup> See BEF (2017: 130), top panel.

<sup>29</sup> See BEF (2017: 127), left top panel.

<sup>30</sup> See BEF (2017: 129), top right panel.

<sup>31</sup> See BEF (2017: 127), bottom panel.

<sup>32</sup> See BEF (2017: 125), top panel.

<sup>33</sup> See BEF (2017: 134), top panel.

<sup>34</sup> See BEF (2017: 133), left panel.

<sup>35</sup> See BEF (2017: 128), top panel.

<sup>36</sup> See BEF (2017: 128), bottom panel.

Nacho López, such as the humble cabaret *Salón Bombay* and its working-class audience,<sup>37</sup> and a group of anonymous men staring at a woman in a dress (Fig. 5).<sup>38</sup>



Fig. 4. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 128–129. Panels showing Multifamiliar Alemán complex, recreation of photo by Nacho López, Raúl “the Mouse” Macías, Luis Barragán after one of his most famous photographs, Tongolele.



Fig. 5. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 130–131. Panels showing *Salón Variedades Bombay* after a photo by Nacho López, Cantinflas and María Félix.

<sup>37</sup> See BEF (2017: 130), bottom panel.

<sup>38</sup> See BEF (2017: 128), bottom panel.

This mosaic of images and places evokes a combination of modernity and poverty, high and popular culture, sexism but also promise. These are all sides of Mexico that Burroughs failed to acknowledge and that BEF, in his nostalgic approach to such icons, highlights for the reader. The irony is evident in the page that follows the series, with a close frame of Burroughs's eyes soon after arriving to the city with his family in 1949, exclaiming: "so this is Mexico City... Where is the beach?" (2017: 135; Fig. 6). BEF is suggesting that even if Burroughs was a witness to Mexico in a golden period, he simply did not care for engaging with that cultural ecosystem. He nevertheless includes the silent images to highlight such irony: Burroughs was seeing Mexico but his gaze was superficial because he failed to acknowledge its beauty, its cultural richness and its complexity. The readership needs to decodify the images if they are unfamiliar with Mexican culture, to investigate these faces and places. Otherwise, readers, especially non-Mexicans, would remain as willingly ignorant as Burroughs himself. However, in his nostalgic and patriotic evocation, BEF also erases central aspects of Mexican culture and society such as references to the indigenous population, aspects that have been overlooked by Burroughs but also his own narrative, as Prout has guessed: "'Under the Volcano' section [...] satirizes the limited knowledge that visitors from the U.S. had of the country, if arguably does less to query the idealized view that Mexicans themselves have of Mexico in the 1950s, one that depends on some images, and not others, becoming iconic of the decade" (Prout 2019: 104).



Fig. 6. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 134–135. "So this is Mexico City... Where is the beach?"

It is also noticeable how BEF and Burroughs, narrator and subject, begin to share the same spaces on the pages. If, at the beginning, Burroughs occupied most of the narration and BEF was limited to the space of the interludes entitled "Bill & Me", both narrative threads coalesce as the story advances; for instance, "Bill & Me (part 3)" alternates panels with images of BEF and his friends visiting Morocco "following Bill's footsteps" in 2000 (BEF 2017: 107) with other panels of Burroughs travelling to Mexico and crossing the border in 1949. BEF establishes an imaginary parallelism by implying that they might have felt the same strangeness. "We have arrived to another planet" BEF exclaims, gaping at a Sprite ad in Arabic (2017: 108). And, perhaps in a paradoxical lapsus, BEF proves to be as ignorant of Morocco as Burroughs was of Mexico: "I look for your traces in Tangier, but it seems that the Saharan dunes deleted your footsteps" (2017: 121; Fig. 7). I will just remind the reader that the distance between this northern Moroccan town and Western Sahara is roughly 900 miles, but the exotism of Morocco is frequently emphasized by references to the desert in Orientalist depictions,<sup>39</sup> as the desert is the perfect site to reenact the exotic fantasy of stepping into the vast unknown.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 7. *Uncle Bill*, p. 121 (detail)

By trying to identify with Burroughs, BEF's status as masterful narrator is undermined. Unlike traditional travel narrators, he leaves questions without any answers, he does not offer certainties about his subject and he even tries to empathize with him through his own failure to engage with Moroccan culture as a tourist. The juxtaposition of BEF's account of Morocco, together with Burroughs's arrival in Mexico, blends past and present and even different

<sup>39</sup> The reductionist association between Tangier and the Sahara is not new to comics. Set in the late 1940s, Curt Swan and John's Fischetti's "Manhunters around the World: The Sleuths of No Man's Land!", a short series included in the comic book *Star Spangled Comics* (DC Comics, 1951), recreated the reputation of Tangier as a paradise of exception and situates the climax in a camel market next to the desert where the villain smuggles money in the fake hump of a dromedary.

<sup>40</sup> See Minca and Borghi (2016: 37).

moments in Burroughs's timeline, years after killing Joan. For instance, BEF wonders if Joan would feel so out of place in Mexico as Deyanira, his friend, felt in Morocco.<sup>41</sup> The parallelism is problematic because, even if BEF is determined to establish the comparison and highlight sexism in Morocco and Mexico, their eras and contexts are so different that no gender comparison is possible. Also, BEF seems to imply that his biggest difference with Burroughs in Morocco is based on privilege: he is perceived as "half Indian, half moor" by locals, not a *gringo* as his friend Pepe Rojo, who attracts attention wherever he goes (2017: 111). BEF cannot fully identify with Burroughs even in a locale where both had been foreigners, since he is not perceived as a privileged individual but "someone from the Third World" (2017: 110). In addition, as a tourist, BEF presents Moroccans as "cultureless beings", mostly guides, waiters and receptionists, or simply background figures who decorate his account, a feature of traditional travel writings (Pratt 2007: 53).

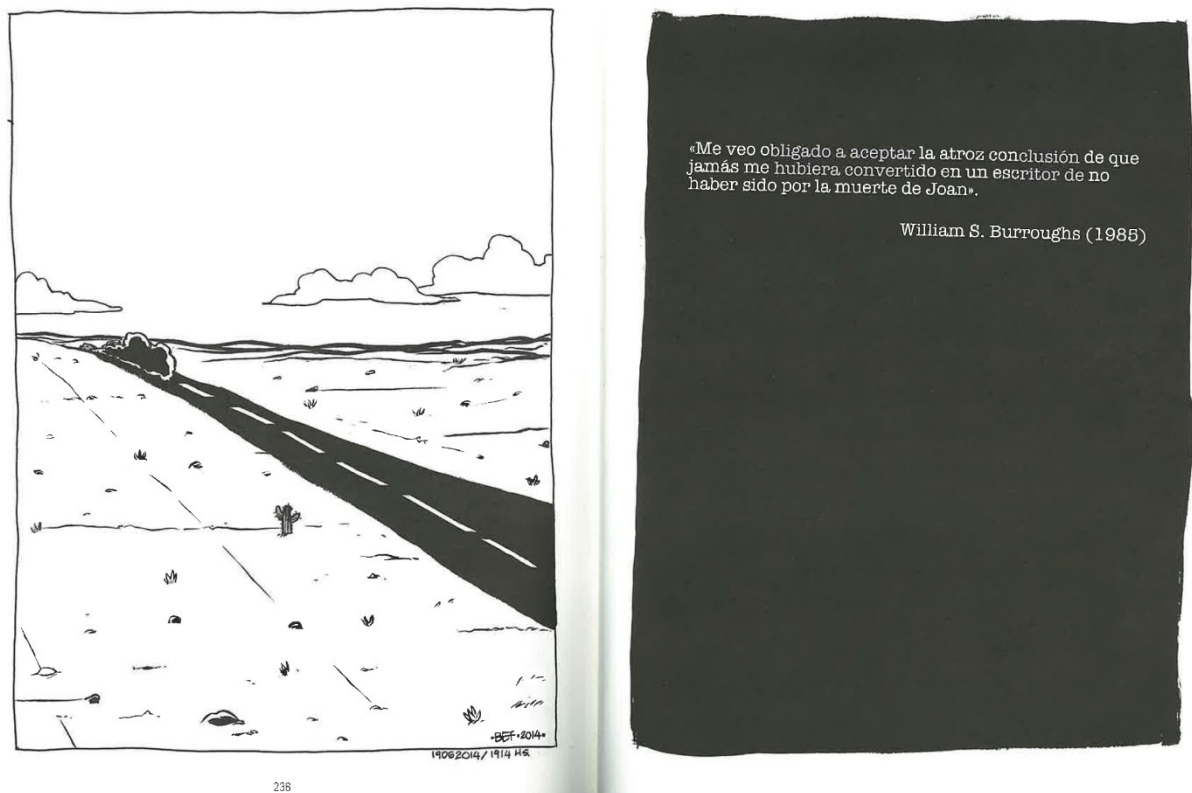


Fig. 8. *Uncle Bill*, pp. 236–237. Epilogue.

Privilege is also implicit in BEF's epilogue (Fig. 8): in one of the last panels, a full page shows Burroughs after crossing the U.S. border, leaving Mexico for good after Joan's death (2017: 236). In a visual metaphor of privilege, the road seems open and empty, the welcoming path for an American expat who returns to the safety of home. In addition, the image might evoke the

<sup>41</sup> See BEF (2017: 123).

new path that awaited him as an author, since he had yet to write his masterwork *Naked Lunch* (1959). The only direct quote by Burroughs accompanies the full-page panel in the last page: "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death" (2017: 237) as he wrote in the introduction to *Queer* in 1985. The only certainty that BEF offers is this: without a doubt, Burroughs's path to writing was opened thanks to Joan's death, whether accidental or not, and as a privileged subject he was able to evade justice. And this has also haunted his literary persona, as the book covers suggest, by presenting an older version of Burroughs facing his earlier crime with a gun in his hand and an intact glass and a pool of blood at his feet (Fig. 9). In the Mexican version, Burroughs appears with his eyes closed and exhibits a peaceful expression, but on the Spanish cover his eyes are open and his face bears a startled look. Burroughs's participation in Vollmer's death and his stance towards the event which mythologized him as a countercultural icon remain a mystery from beginning to end in BEF's narrative.



Fig. 9. Mexican cover (Sexto Piso, 2014) and Spanish cover (bang. ediciones, 2017).

#### 4. Conclusions

BEF's efforts to mexicanize Burroughs help him to bridge the distance between them and also to blur the lines between biography and autobiography that the author favors in the comic. This distance between narrator and narrated subject is visually overcome in the last part of the comic, where BEF and Burroughs coexist in the same panels. It is situated in an atemporal space, not

the 1950s nor the present, in Plaza Río de Janeiro, in Colonia Roma, the neighborhood where Burroughs used to live in Mexico City. Instead of alternating panels occupied by him and Burroughs as in previous chapters, this time BEF represents himself as part of the story. He achieves this by interrogating the U.S. writer directly, offering his own theories about Joan's death and Burroughs's two-week stay in jail, from where he was released on bail after Bernabé Jurado, Burroughs's lawyer, allegedly bribed the judge. He also asks Burroughs if he had ever met his grandfather, bullfighting critic "Macharnudo", a good friend of Jurado's, who also traveled to Tangier when Burroughs was there (1953-1959). *Uncle Bill* leaves all these theories without confirmation. Although Burroughs is sitting next to Bernardo on a bench, he remains silent, as oblivious to his theories as he had ignored Mexican culture. Also, he keeps his eyes closed, unwilling to look at him. Once again, BEF's interest in Burroughs mirrors the latter's indifference towards Mexico, who has refused to see it as he has refused to look at BEF and at Joan on the Mexican cover. As a conversation, it is disappointing because it is one-sided. But it is a fitting end for a counternarrative of exploration: the subject cannot be deciphered, there are no certainties that the masterful narrator wants to support, but only doubts. Far from being a failure, the travel has been fruitful since BEF manages to decipher and dismantle his own fascination with the author, to pinpoint Burroughs's privileged position and his indifference towards Mexican culture and to question his status as a countercultural figure. However, BEF does not liberate himself from Western categories of thought since he moves within the parameters established by the myth of modernity and Orientalist stereotypes about Morocco. But his Mexicanized portrait of Burroughs appropriates the author completely and starts a process of emancipation and "delinking" from Western standards, reimagining him from a Mexican perspective.

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