‘RELAXED INTO INTRICATE THICKET’:
RONALD JOHNSON’S GREEN POETICS

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In broad terms, this essay has two agendas. First, it is a response to a plea I heard at an academic conference on Ronald Johnson, the first-ever to be dedicated to his work,1 from the scholar and editor Ed Foster, publisher of Johnson’s Selected Poems,2 (and I paraphrase): ‘But Johnson was a gay poet! Where’s a queer reading of his poetry?’ Secondly, this essay is part of a larger project investigating a poetics of landscape that is kinetic and transformational, where landscape and the natural world are not so much the stable, passive (often feminized) ground on which the dynamic interplay of the forces of history and politics can be enacted, but a generative entity in their own right, not so much a destination for ahistorical escapism as a powerful matrix for metaphors of change.

Unlike his near-contemporaries in the US, Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg, Johnson does not generally address sexuality or sexual politics directly in his writing. Born in Ashland, Kansas in 1935, he spent a few years at the University of Kansas, and then took a BA at Columbia in the 1950s, where he associated with the Black Mountain poets, and after some years in Appalachia and in Britain (the period of composition of The Book of the Green Man), he moved to San Francisco. He moved back to Kansas a short while before his death in 1998. The Book of the Green Man,3 the book-length series of

poems that is the subject of this essay, took its origin from long walks taken during visits to Britain in the 1960s with his then companion, the poet and publisher Jonathan Williams, and was written in Georgia after his return. But although a certain vagabondish tradition informs it, it has no Whitmanesque (or even Wordsworthian) apostrophes to fellow travellers, and Williams as subject matter is as absent as twentieth-century Britain itself. Nor does the travelled-through landscape function as experiential trigger for insight, meditation and revelation, as one might expect, given such a project. Rich though its generic mix is (a combination of travelogue, seasonal poem and chrestomathy), personal lyric is not one of the ingredients. In other words, this text is fairly resistant to thematic, biographical, and expressive readings of gayness.

4 A brief but informative tribute by Williams covering this period of Johnson’s life and listing his literary associates and connections during this period is now available on-line on the Jargon Society site: http://jargonbooks.com/rjobit.html.
6 See the discussion of Stockinger’s spatial tropes for the homotext, below.
7 The Wordsworths (both William and Dorothy) are presences within the text, and the book is dedicated ‘For Jonathan & for Dorothy / who made it possible’ (v). Given Johnson’s fondness for puns, the reference to Dorothy probably refers both to Dorothy Wordsworth and the Dorothy of the Wizard of Oz (see the discussion of the Americanness of the book, below).
8 M.H. Abrams’ characterization of the Romantic lyric can be a benchmark here: ‘[it] presents a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent …. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation’ (‘Structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric’, quoted in Thomas Yingling, Hart Crane and the Homosexual Lyric: New Thresholds, New Anatomies, Chicago, 1990, 105). As Yingling comments, this applies equally well to much lyrical poetry beyond the Romantic tradition, throughout the twentieth century, including a good deal of work not directly related to the natural world.
9 In an interview with Peter O’Leary, Johnson says ‘When I wrote The Book of the Green Man, I’d always had the idea in mind that I was doing a long seasonal English poem (Chicago Review, XLII/1 [1996], 39).