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Illiterature:

**Reading Illness and Illegibility in the
Early Works of William Burroughs**

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Abstract

William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* has at various times been described as a difficult, dangerous and disgusting novel. Critics and casual readers alike have been left confused and queasy by a text that refuses categorisation and undermines novelistic and literary conventions. Examining the first four novels of Burroughs's career, this thesis seeks to explain the profound aesthetic evolution that took place after *Junky*, *Queer* and "In Search of Yage", culminating in the impossible text of *Naked Lunch*.

In order to explain the development of *Naked Lunch*'s style and form I create the neologism "Illiterature". Illiterature is a form of writing that describes a sickness and implicitly suggests that illegibility may be both a cure and another form that the disease can take. As such Burroughs's early works anticipate the moral and aesthetic dualism of his later works. These later texts employ the "cut-up method" as a cure for the "word virus". However, Burroughs's early novels of illiterature are far more ambiguous, contradictory and sceptical regarding the prospects of a cure for the pervasive illness of "Control". Instead Burroughs's early works evolve into an attack on the hermeneutic operations of the reader. This is done in order to make the contradictory, obscene and irrational substratum of "reality" apprehensible. The reader, by recognising the interpellated nature of their cognition and the illusory form of agency offered in the modern world, may break free of control and gain authentic freedom.

Informed by material, historical and biographical research, this reading adapts theories from psychoanalysis, literary theory and the social sciences to show how Burroughs's novels were produced in the unique historical and cultural circumstances of post-war America and out of a desire to understand and articulate the rotten core that underlies contemporary "reality". This study untangles the myriad influences and intertextual links that inform the structure and style of Burroughs's early novels.

The addict is examined as an inscrutable "subject of illiterature", while desire is discussed as a potentially destructive, fascistic force. The occult is also shown to have had a profound impact on Burroughs's unique style, form and literary intention. Burroughs's works attempt to alter the cognitive behaviour of the reader and thus step beyond the page into life.

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I dedicate this project to my uncle, Frank Carmody, long passed. You were an addict, subterranean and homicidal maniac, but sometimes I could see the future dancing in your eyes.

List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations used for the purposes of citation throughout this dissertation:

- J* Burroughs, William, and Oliver Harris. *Junky: The Definitive Text of Junk*. London: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.
- Q* Burroughs, William, and Oliver Harris. *Queer: 25th Anniversary Edition*. London: Penguin Books, 2010. Print.
- YL* Burroughs, William, and Allen Ginsberg. *The Yage Letters*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963. Print.
- NL* Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press, 1966. Print.
- I* Burroughs, William. *Interzone*. Penguin: London, 2009. Print.
- LG* Burroughs, William. *The Letters of William S. Burroughs: 1945 to 1959*. 1st ed. London: Picador, 1993. Print.

Introduction

There is in every madman
a misunderstood genius
whose idea
shining in his head
frightened people
and for whom delirium was the only solution
to the strangulation
that life had prepared for him.

Antonin Artaud ("Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society",
Artaud Anthology, 161)

In a letter to Allen Ginsberg dated January 12th 1955, William Burroughs claims that his novel *Naked Lunch* will sketch “the sick soul, sick unto death, of the atomic age” (*L*, 255). Many of Burroughs’s generation grew up in the shadow of the nuclear bomb, but few could claim that they shared the same *alma mater* as the nuclear weapon. As a youth William Burroughs spent some time as a student at an expensive, private ‘ranch’ school in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Burroughs, however, disliked his time there and left in a flurry of embarrassment over his sexuality. Los Alamos would later play host to an even more famous guest: J. Robert Oppenheimer. It was here that Oppenheimer and his colleagues established the Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic bomb. Of this Burroughs stated, “It seemed so right somehow” (qtd. in Miles, 133). In *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno writes, “[no] universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (320). Burroughs, as a student of the atomic age, will come to invent new aesthetic weapons, such as “the cut-up technique”¹, whose function is to re-situate the battleground for geo-political dominance in the consciousness of the individual.

In *The Electronic Revolution* Burroughs suggests that the application of the “cut-up technique” to politics and the mass media has the potential to supersede the power of nuclear weapons (36). By using writing as a means to “change fact” (*Q*, 55), alter consciousness and “make things happen” (*Painting and Guns*, 32), Burroughs will, in 1970, come to realise techniques – for attacking political opponents and creating “fake news”– which, he suggests, have the ability to alter the course of the Cold War (*The Electronic Revolution*, 17). William Burroughs moves from writing texts and creating aesthetic techniques in order to carve out a niche for authentic subjectivity in the modern age, to suggesting guerrilla methods for gaining control over the mass media and redirecting the course of world history. However, the far-reaching cultural relevance of Burroughs’s aesthetic work makes itself present prior to his “cut-up” experiments, appearing in various forms

¹ The “cut-up technique”, used by William Burroughs and a number of his Beat generation peers, primarily involves cutting up one or more printed texts and recombining these textual fragments to form new texts. As Burroughs explains, “[The] cut-up method consists of cutting up pages of text and re-arranging them in montage combinations” (*The Adding Machine*, 61).

throughout his first four novels. Addiction in *Junky*, desire in *Queer*, hallucinogenic intoxication in *The Yage Letters* and writing, more generally, in *Naked Lunch* all have powerful social, political and cultural resonances. For Burroughs the personal and the political are inextricably tied, to the extent that techniques for personal liberation and those for attacking political foes may appear markedly similar. While his work consistently expresses a desire for personal agency and authenticity, there is also an underlying realisation that his being is the primary site of engagement with the impersonal forces he seeks to confront, circumvent and ultimately control.

The Electronic Revolution describes how Burroughs's "cut-up method" can be applied directly in the real world, especially as a means to subvert the mass media and the political and social structures it supports. Burroughs's "cut-up method" was initially deployed by Burroughs to attack the "word-virus", or the hidden linguistic and impersonal forces that he saw imprisoning and degrading the human subject. The techniques detailed in *The Electronic Revolution* are the practical extension of the theory and practice of "the cut-up technique" described and adopted in *Minutes to Go* (1968), *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1967) and *Nova Express* (1964).

However, the target of the "cut-up technique", the "word virus", has its origins in the early novels of Burroughs's career. These works – *Junky*, *Queer*, *The Yage Letters* and *Naked Lunch* – lack the Manichean division of the universe described in the "cut-up" trilogy of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express*². "Such structures of conflict represent the channelling and reduction of the infinite potential of difference into the limited realm of moral dualism" (Lydenberg, 6). Deleuze and Guattari identify how Burroughs's "cut-up method... implies a supplementary dimension to that of the texts under consideration. In this supplementary dimension... unity continues its spiritual labour" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 6). In contrast to the duality and unity of the "cut-up" works, the early novels of William

² In *Nova Express* the division is most clearly described in terms of the conflict between the agents of control, the "Nova Mob", and the agents of liberation, the "Nova Police", but throughout the "cut-up" works, the "cut-up technique" is figured as the antidote to the "word virus" (62, 58).

Burroughs are conflicted and contradictory in their attempts to describe and diagnose the illness that the author is an unwitting host for. I use the term “illiterature” to describe Burroughs’s first four novels and their compromised and frequently inconsistent positions in regards to the maladies they attempt to outline. These novels aim to diagnose an ill-defined and ambiguous socio-cultural illness that takes on many different guises but ultimately aims to control the individual and steal her agency. In response to the multiplicitous forms this disease takes, Burroughs structures his early novels using tropes of illegibility, contradiction and illiteracy, employing an anti-literary aesthetic and an ethos that actively disrupts the reader’s hermeneutic operations.

In Burroughs’s view, traditions of knowledge and literature, later encapsulated in the term “word virus”, lead to stasis and death. Against this, Burroughs in his early works develops an ambivalent form of writing that resists categorisation, moral certainty, as well as critical and analytical interventions in order to reflect the restless and inscrutable nature of an authentic subjectivity that must constantly seek to extricate itself from a disease that appears to afflict all modern citizens. The early novels thus attempt to encourage a post-ideological or non-ideological position that frequently involves attacking consistent moral, political and aesthetic approaches. Burroughs’s form of authenticity sets itself against all extraneous forces, including those of tradition and conservative sensibility, particularly in regards to literary aesthetics. Burroughs thereby places himself outside the literary establishment.

Writing a review of a selection of Burroughs’s work, John Willett suggests that, “If the publishers had deliberately set out to discredit the cause of literary freedom and innovation they could hardly have done it more effectively” (44). Willett’s sentiments are largely those of the literary establishment and Burroughs still remains at the fringes of what is considered literature. In his active opposition to literary standards, Burroughs appears to share the anti-literary and anti-cultural ethos of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences” Rousseau declares the following:

So long as government and law provide for the security and well-being of men in their common life, the arts, literature and the sciences, less despotic though perhaps more powerful, fling garlands of flowers over the chains which weigh them down. They stifle in men's breasts that sense of original liberty, for which they seem to have been born; cause them to love their own slavery, and so make of them what is called a civilised people... the appearance of all the virtues, without being in possession of one of them. (3)

Here we find one of William Burroughs's peculiar tasks; that is to reveal the coercive structures that lie hidden beneath the "garlands of flowers" of arts and culture. In this regard, the descriptions of the various maladies and discontents contained in Burroughs's early novels form part of an attempt to diagnose an all-pervading but inconspicuous illness that infects the entirety of modern culture: what he calls the "Human Virus" (*NL*, 168). Burroughs's work is of a peculiarly strict moral bent, where almost everything appears to be fallen or, to use his medical parlance, infected by the virus. By the same token, Burroughs puts moral demands on himself and others – in relation to seeking out a state of pure agency and self-actualisation devoid of external influence – that are almost impossible to live up to. Burroughs's morality relates to his aesthetic ethos, where instead of obscuring "the chains which weigh" the individual down, Burroughs's writing aims to reveal these mechanisms of control as literal viruses infecting human life at every level. However, revealing the illness involves attacking the chains of signification as well as narrative and epistemic structures. As such the disease cannot be described directly because representation is another one of the forms that it takes.

Burroughs works against the structures of logic and representation throughout his literary career, but while the "cut-up" method provided him with a practical method for challenging conservative modes of thought in his writing, his earlier works often engage with traditional narrative forms, undermining common moral and aesthetic practices using less direct, but no

less effective literary strategies. *Naked Lunch*, in particular, has been identified by critics as an illegible text, with Michael Jarvis describing “its aesthetics of illegibility and misattribution”, and Alex Wermer-Colan mentioning how “*Naked Lunch* resists even on the level of form the reader’s attempts to interpret the text...” (Jarvis, 199, Wermer-Colan 516). This impetus towards illegibility, however, begins in *Junky*, with the inscrutable subjectivity of the addict and the implicit subversion of attempts to theorise addiction, and continues throughout his first four novels culminating in *Naked Lunch*. *Junky* sets in motion one of the central dynamics of Burroughs’s aesthetic project: the simultaneously hermetic and literal qualities of his writing that are stamped across his entire *oeuvre*. Burroughs sums up his plans for illegibility as such: “Oh I will publish but always hold back the essential ingredient. [. . .] Like I give a blue print for an internal combustion engine [but] leave out of my blue print the whole concept of *oil*” (qtd. in Harris, *Secret*, 27).

Although Burroughs’s first novels are more straightforward texts than later works that employ the “cut-up method”, the early works lack the moral and aesthetic consistency of the “cut-up” novels. Timothy Murphy relates how, “for many critics, Burroughs’ use of the cut-up technique... was proof that his writing could no longer be interrogated for objective meaning or structure”³ (Murphy, 10). However, the “cut-up” texts were accompanied by an explicit moral framework: the “cut-up method” was a means to attack the “word-virus” and its correlatives: the “junk virus”, the “reality-film” and the “nova mob” (*Nova Express*, 27, 68). While Burroughs’s first three novels⁴ are akin to traditional narratives and use standard modes of literary expression, they are compromised in terms of their moral status, where Burroughs is both the diagnostician and patient for a disease he does not completely understand. Also, as the texts make use of standard modes of expression and narrative structure they are infected by what Burroughs will later call the “word virus”. Both the author and the literature he is producing

³ Burroughs was aware of this problem and complained that, “if you apply montage method to writing, you are accused of promulgating a cult of unintelligibility” (*The Adding Machine*, 61).

⁴ *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*.

are ill and, due to the liminal status of the author and his work, they often contradict and undermine themselves and each other. These contradictions often become evident in the relationships formed between the early novels and supplementary texts that were added to them later. These textual relations are often parasitic, revealing the disease indirectly as a process or relationship rather than directly as an entity. Burroughs writes in *The Ticket that Exploded*, "You see these criminal controllers occupy human bodies - ghosts? phantoms? Not at all - very definite organisms indeed - True you can't see them - Can you see a virus?" (95). As is suggested here, the pathological aspect of language can only be seen indirectly through its effects. Addiction is the ideal model for this disease as it lacks a discernible, material presence, instead it exists as a set of relationships – between the addict and the drug for instance – and corresponding effects. While language has a material presence – in writing and speech for example – meaning in language is formed out of linguistic relationships and their effects: "A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas" (Saussure, 111). What Burroughs will eventually come to detail is how language functions in a totalizing, viral form. Burroughs's "cut-up" texts, novels and later essayistic writing will explicitly outline how language operates parasitically and promulgates diseases that are in fact effects of the "word virus". For instance, Burroughs advances the theory that "a virus is a very small unit of word and image. I have suggested how such units can be biologically activated to act as communicable virus strains" (*The Electronic Revolution*, 7). Burroughs details how the structure of language, described by Ferdinand de Saussure and Alfred Korzybski, enslaves and dehumanises individual human beings:

Image and word are the instruments of control.... Of course, an instrument can be used without knowledge of its fundamental nature or its origins. To get to the origin we must examine the instruments themselves; that is, the actual nature of word and image.... It is precisely these automatic reactions to words themselves that enable those

who manipulate words to control thought on a mass scale.

(*The Job*, 81-83)

Burroughs's early works both document and engage in the linguistic control that he will later attempt to define and overcome more definitively. Burroughs's early novels describe the effects of what will later be called the "word virus" and their relation to other manifestations of the illness, such as addiction and "Control". Unlike the "cut-up" texts, Burroughs's first four novels almost exclusively articulate the symptoms of the disease rather than describing the disease directly. As such these early works detail the author's growing awareness of the pathological nature of language and its relationship to humankind. While Burroughs does not use the term "word virus" in his early works⁵, the contradictory structures, intertextual relationships and criticism of the pathological nature of culture present in these works suggest that language functions dynamically and parasitically.

Burroughs's engagement with the disease and the possibility of a cure frequently involves working against his writerly instincts. Since he is using a medium that he is ostensibly attacking, Burroughs can often appear unaware and illiterate in terms of what he is producing. When asked to explain the crude and obscure qualities of the writing that would become *Naked Lunch*, William Burroughs tells Jack Kerouac, "Don't ask me, I get these messages from other planets – I'm apparently some kind of agent from another planet but I haven't got my orders clearly decoded yet" (qtd. in Baker, 97). While the earlier realist novels suggested a direct relationship between the author and the text, there is a definitive split between the author and the text in *Naked Lunch*. *Naked Lunch* appears to suggest that the everyday, realist language of the author is infected by what will later be named the "word virus". As such, Burroughs's early works appear to be developing towards the aesthetic ethos of the "word virus" and "cut-up method". As literal and straightforward as many of his early works are, Burroughs often misrepresents, disowns and claims ignorance in regards the production of these texts and their contents.

⁵ Burroughs refers to the concept but does not use the term "word virus" in the letter dated June 21st, 1960 in *The Yage Letters* (60-62). However, this letter was written seven years after the bulk of the novella.

Due to their dynamic, chaotic and contradictory structures, Burroughs's early novels require critical intervention as works of illiterature. I consider this my task as a critic and reader of Burroughs's early works. I will now outline the scope of this particular project.

The Parameters of the Study

This dissertation will examine what are considered to be William Burroughs's first four novels: *Junky* (1953), *Queer* (1985), *The Yage Letters* (co-authored with Allen Ginsberg, 1969) and *Naked Lunch* (1959). As the publication dates indicate, these were neither the first four novels to be published by Burroughs, nor were they published in the order they were written. The structure of my project thus follows the chronological order in which these texts were produced. I do this in an attempt to explain Burroughs's development of what I name illiterature, which is an embryonic form of the ethos and aesthetics that inform the "cut-up" novels. However, Burroughs's early works resist or deny the ethical and aesthetical duality described and performed in the "cut-up" works. Illiterature makes use of tropes of illness and inscrutability to attack traditional modes of knowledge and literature. The chronological ordering of this thesis is also apt to make another point: that the discontinuous relationship between the history of these texts' production and their publication are reflective of the author's anarchic literary style. Burroughs began writing what would become *Junky* in 1950, and his composition of the manuscript of *Queer* started soon after. The material that comprises *The Yage Letters* began production in 1952 and draws mainly from texts that were produced in 1953, when Burroughs travelled to Central and South America. Although the production of *Naked Lunch* apparently began in earnest when Burroughs moved to Tangier in 1954, sections of the "Yage Manuscript"⁶ were appropriated for *Naked Lunch*.

This study follows a more or less chronological structure as it attempts to untangle the development of William Burroughs's illiterature,

⁶ See *The Yage Letters Redux* (50-53), *Naked Lunch* (106-110) and *The Letters of William S. Burroughs: 1945-1959* (171-186, 247-253), all of which outline the genetic connections between *The Yage Letters* and *Naked Lunch*.

from its realist origins in *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*, to the creation of the “anti-novel”, *Naked Lunch* (Harris, *The Secret of Fascination*, 242). That text would become the defining document of Burroughs’s career, his most famous creation and the one that effectively sets the terms of what illiterature is by denying generic classification, novelistic standards, literary decorum and the possibility of it being read in a coherent fashion. Examining Burroughs’s novels as illiterature allows for a critical examination of their contradictory and morally compromised forms. The violence, obscenity and sickness that occupy so much of Burroughs’s works articulate the basic rottenness of colonialism, authoritarianism, exploitation and greed that remain hidden deep within the structures and economies of western civilisation. While western culture presents a veneer of enlightenment and rationality to the world, beneath this exists a simple, rapacious desire for power and enjoyment that contradicts the ethos that exists at the surface of civilization. Burroughs, in his early works, attempts to both embody and represent the hidden cruelty of western culture. Burroughs, in the guise of the protagonist Bill Lee, thus occupies the position of both victim and perpetrator: in *Junky* as drug addict, in *Queer* as “control addict”, in *The Yage Letters* as colonial critic and neo-colonialist and in *Naked Lunch* as author of anti-literature. Burroughs’s novels, up to and including *Naked Lunch*, antagonise “the system not by ironic mimicry of but by over-identification with the ruling ideology” (Wermer-Colan, 514). Burroughs and his protagonist Lee thus occupy a compromised position in order to illustrate our tacit collusion with structures that dominate and limit us.

By attacking the modes of literary expression that abet the production of knowledge, reason and sense, Burroughs aims to reveal what these structures obscure: the “face of evil” or what Slavoj Žižek calls the “*institutional Unconscious* [which] designates the obscene disavowed underside that, precisely as disavowed, sustains the public institution” (*NL*, xxxix, *The Universal Exception*, xviii). At the same time, the illiterature of Burroughs’s early novels is building towards the practical empowerment of the “cut-up technique” which aims to both reveal and democratise the epistemological means of production, so that individuals can begin to

augment their own modes of cognition and see beyond the confines of the “reality film” (*Nova Express* 15). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state, the “real revolutionary practice refers to the level of production. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will” (156).

Robin Lydenberg suggests that Burroughs’s early works, such as *Naked Lunch*, merely describe the illness, while later “cut-up” works formulate a cure (19). However, it is the argument of this thesis that Burroughs’s self-empowering cure is already being formulated in these early texts. Burroughs’s early novels describe the many forms the disease takes while exploring the potential for an authentic subjectivity that is capable of augmenting its own cognition and, by proxy, “reality”. As the Burroughsian subject is intersected by the many forms that the disease takes, this authentic subjectivity is a potential rather than a transcendent absolute. This authenticity is a wished-for subjectivity of the future that Burroughs’s early works are attempting to clear the way for.

This thesis makes use of a variety of methodologies and theoretical approaches. The topic of illiterature crosses over into a variety of disciplines but I have consistently applied a number of specific approaches to all four of the novels under examination. I typically begin each chapter with an historic analysis of the texts and their production. I also examine the novels in light of their intertextual links to other works by Burroughs, his peers and other literary figures. This project aims to be cognisant of the rich history of Burroughs scholarship, while also drawing from biographical and autobiographical sources. I examine each of Burroughs’s first four novels in terms of their historical and cultural relevance, particularly in relation to the topic of addiction. Applying the theory of illiterature enables my reading to work through issues of illegibility and contradiction in Burroughs’s writing as these form a part of Burroughs’s overall literary project that culminates in the discreet aesthetic and moral structure contained in his later works that make use of the “cut-up technique”.

What is illiterature?

Illiterature is a neologism composed of four distinct but interrelated terms: illness, illegibility, illiteracy and anti-literature. Illiterature is a form of writing that describes a sickness and implicitly suggests that illegibility may be a cure. As such the illness is a cultural condition or set of cultural conditions that impinge on the agency of the individual. Illegibility, illiteracy and anti-knowledge can function as stumbling blocks for the illness. Illiterature intersects a number of philosophical subjects and affects the ways in which subjectivity and epistemology are seen to function. It is also heavily informed by the medical, social and psychological phenomenon of addiction. Illiterature thus has resonances beyond literature particularly in relation to addiction, desire and subject formation. The first chapter examines the “subject of illiterature” which is the inscrutable subjectivity of the addict: an identity and mode of being that William Burroughs and his literary alter-ego William Lee actively seek out, cultivate, articulate and criticise in *Junky*. While heroin addiction is maligned throughout Burroughs’s writing, the inscrutable mode of identity of the addict or “subject of illiterature” remains throughout Burroughs’s career and essentially becomes the author’s identity as author-addict and “*El hombre invisible*” (NL, 66).

William Burroughs’s first novel *Junky* is a relatively straightforward first-person realist account of the author’s addiction to heroin. However, in his second novel, *Queer*, Burroughs starts to write a violent, disturbing and chaotic form of prose that he calls the “routine”. In *Queer*, “routines” are short comedic performances which interrupt the main narrative. These “routines” serve a similar function to the inscrutable identity of the addict and primarily aim to confound understanding and obscure the motivations and intentions of the performer. As such they aim to create a kind of blindness or illegibility, like “an octopus [squirting] out ink” (Q, 36). These largely fictional anecdotes are usually produced for the purpose of inducing laughter, fascination, confusion and disgust in those who bear witness to them. With the “routine” form Burroughs finds his voice as an agent of illiterature; that is a form of literature which is not Matthew Arnold’s “sweetness and light” or “the best

that has been thought or said” but the very opposite of these (*Culture and Anarchy*, 7).

The purpose of the “routine” form in *Queer* is to introduce chaos and confusion into what is ostensibly a realist, third person narrative of unrequited love. At the same time, while the superficial purpose of the “routine” is to obscure the intentions of Lee’s speech, these hidden intentions often form a part of the “routine’s” explicit content. *Queer’s* “routines” are thus illiterature in microcosm, as they both partake in and undermine the exploitive structures they describe. “Routines”, as literary performances, suggest that literature and aesthetics are essential components of social and cultural domination. Lee’s “routines” in *Queer* occupy a parasitic relationship in regards to its dominant realist narrative. As such “routines”, and Burroughs’s illiterature more generally, parasitize the overarching illness that dominates western culture. Burroughs thus begins his literary career by undermining the realist forms that he adopts and will later reject outright.

Illiterature must be understood as a moral affront to the liberal humanist ideals of literature and its cognitive and epistemological correlatives. In Burroughs’s early novels, the author adapts and defaces traditional modes of expression and narrative structures in order to reveal how language and literature abet contemporary power structures that necessarily disempower the individual. By revealing literature and aesthetics as means to exploitation, and gesturing towards the chaotic substratum which “reality” is formed out of, Burroughs is moving towards a method of authoring “reality” and offering readers the literary and aesthetic tools to seize the means for producing “truth” and gaining power. In his early novels, Burroughs indirectly and inchoately introduces the idea that language and literature play fundamental roles in the structure and maintenance of socio-cultural power. As such Burroughs does not explicitly reject the aesthetic and linguistic modes power takes. Instead he embraces these in order to reveal their exploitative and destructive ends, demonstrating their negative effects through his literary practice rather than abstract theorisation. Furthermore, “[the] way OUT is the way IN”: language, while being a means for oppression

is also the site where the individual might gain agency and seize power (*NL*, 229).

By engaging with Burroughs's early novels, the reader may come to realise how, "[words]... once uttered, take on a life of their own, bringing woe on anyone who goes near them. They form a zone of paranoid infection" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 138). In Adorno's estimation words become infectious "[in] an all-embracing system [where] conversation becomes ventriloquism" (137). Language in such a society structures it to the point where "conversation becomes ventriloquism" and dissent becomes ungrammatical and therefore unthinkable.

Burroughs's illiterature aims to sabotage this linguistic hegemony and break out of the semantic cocoon of modern society – what Burroughs will later call the "reality film" (*Nova Express*, 15). In order to do this Burroughs gives room in his writing for what Jacques Lacan calls the "Real"⁷, Gilles Deleuze identifies as the rhizomatic⁸ and Carlos Castaneda names "the *nagual*"⁹. The Lacanian Real, as that which cannot be represented directly in language, takes on the magical power of the *nagual* in *The Yage Letters*. Here Burroughs begins to recognise the fluid nature of "reality" and the ability of drugs and language to augment cognition. With this development writing becomes a means to "change fact" (Q, 55) and "make things happen" (Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, 32). This seizing of the means of knowledge production is something that Burroughs will come to offer to his readers as a revolutionary form of self-authoring. Burroughs makes space in his works for

⁷ The Lacanian Real is that which resists symbolisation. "From a Lacanian perspective, the presupposition of psychoanalysis has always been that the symbolic can have an impact upon the real, ciphering and thereby transforming or reducing it.... Language no doubt never completely transforms the real, never drains all of the real into the symbolic order; a residuum is always left" (Fink, 26).

⁸ For Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome contrasts with the "arborescent", tree-like or hierarchical structures of knowledge. "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles....A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 7-25).

⁹ Carlos Castaneda writes of the opposition between the tonal world of knowledge, common sense and everyday life and the *nagual* realm which is magical, chaotic and unknowable (72).

the voices and modes of being silenced and erased by cognitive formations that abet the power structures of modern society. Burroughs's writing ultimately aims to foster new modes of interpretation and cognition. The fluidity of the substratum on which "reality" resides becomes the means for re-imagining what "reality" could be.

While Burroughs will ultimately aim to attack signification, literature and knowledge, "[Language] must be fought by language" (Murphy 57). As such, Burroughs's early novels illustrate his becoming cognisant of the power of language and also of his own intractable status as a subject of language. Burroughs implicitly communicates his own comprised state, whether as an addict in *Junky*, a manipulative lover in *Queer*, a neo-imperial drug tourist in *The Yage Letters* and an author of illiterature in *Naked Lunch*. The moral impetus of Burroughs's work is not to reject the various modes the illness takes but to embrace them, adapt them and degrade them in order to reveal and short-circuit the mechanisms that support them. Even in these early novels, Burroughs is attempting to formulate a literal vaccine, "writing as inoculation", to fight against the "word virus" and its socio-cultural correlatives (*Q*, 128). Burroughs's first four novels, his illiterature, are the embryonic form of this literary inoculation where the boundaries between illness and cure have yet to be clearly defined. While Burroughs consistently uses medical, biological and pharmacological terminology throughout his career, he does not approach the subject matter with "the purity of an unprejudiced gaze" that is associated with the science of medicine (Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 195). Rather he recognises that he is victim of an inscrutable malady for which prejudice is just another symptom.

In his first four novels, Burroughs is attempting to identify and diagnose parasites that have come to occupy his body and mind, and which he had misidentified as himself. In *Junky* the disease is addiction and this becomes the paradigm through which Burroughs analyses and identifies other forms of the illness. In *Queer* what comes to prominence is a "preoccupation with Control and Virus" (*Q*, 135). Here Burroughs uses the "routine" in an attempt to reveal the impulses towards manipulation and

exploitation that are usually sublimated or hidden in society. In *The Yage Letters* Burroughs discloses the viral form of imperialism, a global and historically specific variant of the control virus. *The Yage Letters* also establishes how culturally and ethnically diverse postcolonial nations offer one of the best bulwarks against “Control” which often establishes itself by asserting ideas of racial and cultural purity. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs implicitly suggests that traditional literary, linguistic and epistemic structures are the fundamental forms that the control virus takes. Burroughs’s early novels contain nascent forms of what will be diagnosed as the “word virus”, thus they are a specifically ill form of literature. Burroughs’s early works are not accompanied by the potential cure of the “cut-up method”, rather they generally respond to the disease in terms of a diagnosis, explicitly revealing rather than healing the illness.

Just as literature represents a zone of infection, diseases also adhere to narrative structures. Pathologies follow certain paths: as William Osler says, “to talk of disease is a sort of *Arabian Nights* entertainment” (Sacks, 12) or as Ivy McKenzie puts it:

For what is it that constitutes a ‘disease entity’ or a ‘new disease’? The physician is concerned not, like the naturalist, with a wide range of different organisms theoretically adapted in an average way to an average environment, but with a single organism, the human subject, striving to preserve its identity in adverse circumstances. (12)

It is precisely this concern of the physician that Burroughs takes as his particular task: to preserve the human subject in the face of disease. While diseases form part of a sometimes inscrutable material reality, they frequently follow certain directions that allow for diagnoses and prognoses – themselves kinds of narratives – to occur. Since one cannot see a virus, at least without “an electron microscope” (*Q*, 118), disease reveals itself through its effects on a patient or subject, which amounts to a form of narrative. *Naked Lunch*’s rejection of narrative form is a refusal of the

inhibiting structure of the “word virus” which denies mutability and evolution. For Burroughs, the disease, as “word virus”, does not follow narrative structures but imposes them. There is a relationship between the pathological and the literary: one that Burroughs’s first four novels begin to explore and one that is made explicit in the later “cut-up” novels and texts.

The Manichean moral and aesthetic economy of Burroughs’s “cut-up” novels, summed up by the division between the “word virus” and the “cut-up method”, identifies positively with anarchic forces that challenge structure at every level, most fundamentally at the level of semantics and narrative structure. The primary aim of the “cut-up method” is to reveal the totalising agenda of the “word virus” that normally remains hidden in the artificial naturalness of everyday language and the hierarchical structures it supports. Burroughs wishes to describe the destructive self-interest of the “word virus” whose only aim is to replicate and disseminate itself across space and time.

Prior to the theoretical and moral binaries introduced in the “cut-up” texts, Burroughs’s first four novels aimed to excavate the impersonal illnesses that often appear inherent to being human. *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, for instance, attempt to reveal the primal energy that underlies and energises all human activity including pleasure and desire. This primal force is frequently augmented by cultural forces, becoming what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “microfascism” where “desire desires its own repression” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). Microfascism can be regarded as viral in nature as desire is used to negate itself just as the virus reproduces through colonising the cells of its host.

The links between desire and “microfascism” will be discussed further in Chapter Two in relation to Burroughs’s second novel *Queer*, which takes a jaundiced view of sexual, interpersonal desire. The introduction to *Queer* introduces the idea of writing as a form of inoculation where it is suggested that, “as soon as something is written, it loses the power of surprise, just as a virus loses its advantage when a weakened virus has created alerted antibodies” (*Q*, 128). The obscene and violent content of *Queer’s* and *Naked Lunch’s* “routines” are weakened forms of the microfascist virus. By pathologizing impersonal, universal forces, Burroughs is attempting to

introduce the potential for autonomy and authenticity into what appears to be a pathologically determined world.

However, in Burroughs's early works it becomes apparent that the illness and the cure are often indistinguishable, just as the will of the individual is often indivisible from the impersonal, universal will that Schopenhauer¹⁰ describes. Burroughs appears to recognise the contingent, self-interested nature of his being as it exists within a Schopenhauerian system of universal will that is beyond universal concepts of good or evil: "Something is good or evil according to your needs and the nature of your organism. What opposes or tries to annihilate any person or species is seen by that person or species as being evil. I think it's naive to predicate any absolutes there; it only has reference to the conditions of life of a given organism or species or society" (*The Job*, 75). Regardless of this caveat, Burroughs's role can be defined as "an addict turned diagnostician, a victim of sickness now devoted to the analysis of diseases" (Tanner, 110).

Burroughs, however, does not just want to analyse diseases, he wants to cure them. He attempts this in the "cut-up" novels but there is evidence of this desire for a cure throughout Burroughs's early works. These early novels describe the confusion that can take place in regards to diseases and cures and how what has been recognised as a cure can devolve into a disease and also how what is regarded as a disease can mutate into a potential cure. While the "cut-up" texts are more difficult texts to read, their moral and aesthetic scheme is more obvious to the reader. The earlier novels of illiterature are decidedly less conclusive and take a more explorative and less obviously didactic approach to the problem of the illness. *Junky* and *Queer* explicitly describe a direct engagement with forces – addiction and "Control" respectively – that Burroughs definitively pathologies. By some perverse

¹⁰ "Every individual, every human apparition and its course of life, is only one more short dream of the endless spirit of nature, of the persistent will-to-live, is only one more fleeting form, playfully sketched by it on its infinite page, space and time; it is allowed to exist for a short while that is infinitesimal compared with these, and is then effaced, to make new room. Yet, and here is to be found the serious side of life, each of these fleeting forms, these empty fancies, must be paid for by the whole will-to-live in all its intensity with many deep sorrows, and finally with a bitter death, long feared and finally made manifest" (*The World as Will and Representation*, 322).

instinct, Burroughs pursues sickness as a means to health and this contradiction underlies the confusion, ambiguity and illegibility of his first four novels.

Friedrich Nietzsche questioned the opposition of sickness and health and sees sickness as a means towards liberation and individuation: "I have traversed many kinds of health, and keep traversing them ... And as for sickness: are we not almost tempted to ask whether we could get along without it? Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit." (*The Gay Science*, 36). Similarly, Burroughs states that, "Desperation is the raw material of drastic change. Only those who can leave behind everything they have ever believed in can hope to escape" (*The Western Lands*, 116). While one must abandon one's beliefs, some experience of the sickness is necessary as a means towards liberation. Similarly, an individual must learn to oppose the universal will, often embodied in the form of diseases, in order to form her own identity. This identity is always under negotiation and in danger of being subsumed by the universal will. Burroughs remains fundamentally an individualist surrounded on all sides by what he regards as destructive, impersonal, extraneous forces. Burroughs's illiterature implicitly describes the potential for becoming an authentic subject in the face of such impossible odds.

The negotiation that takes place between sickness and health in Burroughs's writing is akin to Derrida's deconstruction of the *pharmakon*, where he considers writing as both poison and cure:

Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws.... writing, the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray... In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indetermination, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation permitted the rendering of the same word [*pharmakon*] by "remedy," "recipe," "poison," "drug," "philter," etc. (*Dissemination*, 70-71)

With writing being regarded as a *pharmakon*, it bears responsibility for the disseminating, indeterminate qualities of language. The “indetermination” that the concept of the *pharmakon* introduces is evident in the proliferation of writing on drugs. As Derrida explains, “[there] is not any *single* world of drugs” rather the various worlds of drug writers represent the disseminating quality of drugs as a concept (“Rhetoric”, 27). While addiction appears to fix the addict within a predictable and repetitive mode of being, the concept of the drug or *pharmakon*, as that which is both “remedy” and “poison” for instance, calls into question the logocentric power of language to fix concepts within a well-defined semantic matrix: “To conflate such differences in a homogeneous series would be delirious, indeed narcoticizing” (Derrida, “Rhetoric” 27). In *Junky*, Burroughs claims “[junk] is a cellular equation that teaches the user facts of general validity” (12). However, these facts are couched in a language that is open to slippage as it disseminates: “Not only do words change meanings but meanings vary locally at the same time. A final glossary, therefore, cannot be made of words whose intentions are fugitive” (J, 133). *Junky*, as an attempted exposé of the world of contemporary heroin addiction, is apt to describe the semantic dissemination inherent to the concept of drugs and drugs cultures. Burroughs’s illiterature begins in a world of drugs and the semantic dissemination that informs the concepts of the drug and *pharmakon* is implicitly present throughout Burroughs’s early writing.

While its many meanings signify both “overdetermination” and “indetermination”, the *pharmakon* also reveals the insalubrious nature of writing as both act and profession: “Is writing seemly? Does the writer cut a respectable figure? Is it proper to write? Is it done? Of course not” (*Dissemination*, 74). The unseemliness of the writer primarily relates to his ability to negotiate with and undermine the overdetermined structures of language, allowing room for subversion within the realms of language and literature. This literary and semantic negotiation, between control and liberation, is the primary focus of Burroughs’s writing and allows the author to have a contradictory view of writing, as both disease and cure. However, language’s dual aspects, of overdetermination and indetermination, requires

consistent engagement. As such Burroughs's works of illiterature do not only describe a disease, but also the perpetual struggle with the overdetermination and indetermination inherent to language. Burroughs distrusts the symbolic order or chain of signification because of its overdetermination. Instead Burroughs's works evolve towards the cut-up works which explicitly celebrate the indeterminate and disseminating aspects of language as a means to freedom and health. Burroughs happily resides in Derrida's categorisation of the author as an unseemly, disreputable figure who introduces indetermination into the realms of an often overdetermined language and a correspondingly inflexible world.

While Burroughs explicitly opposes illnesses as such, there is a certain admiration and respect that the author has for their destructive powers. Similarly, while Burroughs derides addiction and "Control" he is inextricably attracted to these forces. Although Burroughs's later "cut-up" works have been criticised as being simply impossible to read, they strangely lack the moral and aesthetic confusion of his early novels. Burroughs's complicity in all that he opposes in his early works makes them compelling and critically powerful texts where the author insists that one must engage with the unseemly, the dangerous, the poisonous and the pathological in order to carve out an authentic niche for oneself in the world: that being consistently in danger of being subsumed by the forces one opposes, and being constantly aware of that danger, is the only path to authenticity.

The unseemly in Burroughs's work not only reveals the sickness inherent to writing and authorship, but the condition of the entire human edifice. The fantasmatic and colourful content of *Queer*, for instance, is not a postmodern celebration of the mundanity of everyday life, but a revelation of the spectacular monstrosity of "microfascism" that underlies "reality". While Burroughs's later works, such as *The Wild Boys* (1971) and *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), suggest that the creation of anarchist utopias open up the possibility for the subject's emancipation, it would appear that in his early novels the subject's predicament is that of an individual at war with the external world. However, the early works often appear conflicted in regards to the subject's relationship with the world around him. In these novels Lee

seems caught between a fear of being invaded by malevolent external forces and the desire for complete assimilation. As he says to his lover in *Queer*, “What I mean is Allerton we are all parts of a tremendous whole. No use fighting it” (*Q*, 51). The confusion over Lee’s position, as both outsider and insider, is symptomatic of the parasitic ontology that Burroughs is attempting to describe and it does not find a social solution until later works, such as *Cities of the Red Night*, which describes the anarchist utopia of Libertatia established by the Pirate Captain James Mission (9-12). While *Queer* engages with the potential for intersubjective unity, it ultimately results in failure and despair. However, this failure is largely down to the unreasonable demands Lee makes of his lover and the controlling and manipulative strategies that the protagonist adopts. Entering into the realm of the Other, while it is something that Burroughs apparently fears, is also something that he engages in, especially in terms of his attempts to leave space for the reader in his early works of illiterature.

While the inscrutable subjectivity of the addict may prove to be an emancipatory dead end, illiterature opens up a space for the subject: as misreading is inevitable, misrecognition becomes the very possibility for interpretative freedom. Any reading is necessarily *ad hoc*, provisional and unfinished, as is any model of subjectivity: Burroughs suggests as much when he states that what we call consciousness is just a “scanning process” (*The Electronic Revolution*, 22). Our cognitive abilities and inabilities enable individual interpretations which inform our individual thoughts and actions. As such, subjectivity begins with (mis)cognition. Illiterature thus offers an ethical model of reading as it fundamentally accepts misreading as inevitable and the means through which the subject enters the world. This is articulated negatively in Burroughs’s work, through tropes of failure, trauma, misrecognition and contradiction. Lacking the moral and aesthetic binaries of the later “cut-up” works, Burroughs’s illiterature introduces the reader to epistemological and moral impasses which implicitly suggest that the augmentation of the reader’s mode of cognition is the only line of escape. In the realm of illiterature, where misreading is inevitable, reading, and by proxy cognition, become fluid modes of not only self-fashioning but a means

of reinventing “reality”. It is the failure of cognition and reading that allow the subject to enter into and augment the world, for if the subject could see and read perfectly, she would cease to be human and become a machine.

This failure is comparable to Jacques Lacan’s conception of desire: “Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation. If being were only what it is, there wouldn’t even be room to talk about it. Being comes into existence as an exact function of this lack” (*Ego*, 223-224). Similarly, meaning, in its “relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being – [is] always deferred” (Derrida, *Positions*, 28). The reader pursues meaning in relation to the text but the fulfilment of this desire is explicitly deferred by an illegible text. The lack inherent to textuality and desire constitutes the reader, as a subject whose being is lack. A reader reads literature “for nothing nameable” and each reading results in “nothing nameable”: rather each reading is both an instantiation of the potential for interpretation and subjectivity¹¹ and “the symbolic order’s always-withheld promise of ‘pure’ pleasure” (Jarvis, 187). Any reading must cut off the text’s infinite lines of dissemination. Reading requires that one be illiterate to the other potential readings otherwise reading would be impossible (De Man, 245). I would claim that reading is not impossible once we accept that all readings are necessarily misreadings. My desire to read is to constitute myself, my subjectivity in the text: my reading. To say that reading is impossible would be to say that subjectivity is impossible, when it is the inevitability of misreading that allows for the agency of the subject. Misreading also grounds itself in the ethical acceptance that the Other remains Other. My misreading allows for the agency of the Other as well as myself. The ethical aim of illiterature is to reveal that the

¹¹ As Foucault suggests, writing is similarly constituted by lack: “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (Martin, 9).

subject, as reader – or more accurately ‘misreader’ – is always a subject in process formed out of a myriad of other potential subjectivities, other potential readings. Misreading is not an impediment but the potential for difference. “*Naked Lunch* demands Silence from The Reader” in order to give room to the misreader, allowing for otherness to enter the world (*NL*, 224).

Reading literature always has the potential to be a radical act. As Lacan outlines, “[the] reason we go to poetry is not for wisdom, but for the dismantling of wisdom” (qtd. in Carson, 49). Burroughs’s view of language is ambiguous like that of Lacan. Jacques Lacan believes that we cannot leave the chain of signification and that we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the linguistic father (*Ego*, 89). Only literature has the potential to undo the determinism inherent to language. Burroughs’s early novels, as texts of illiterature, along with his “cut-up” texts, explicitly challenge reading as a process, allowing a chaotic or unknowable aspect of the subject to enter into the textual equation. The reader thus encounters himself not as a subject of language *per se*, but of its other, misreading. Authentic subjectivity results from escaping the determinism of the symbolic order through misreading. As Burroughs writes, “[universal] literacy with a concomitant control of word and image is now the instrument of control” (*The Job*, 103).

According to Lacan, “[the] Real is what resists symbolization absolutely” (qtd. in Roberts, 70). On the one hand, the Real is akin to the Kantian noumenal which, like an accident, disease or natural disaster, disrupts symbolic “reality”. At the same time, the Real is a disruption that takes place within the symbolic order, occurring when the symbolic order is overcome by that which it cannot cipher or contain. Bruce Fink writes that the “symbolic order itself gives rise to a ‘second-order’ real” that is constituted as a residue of the “first order Real” (27). The contradictions present in Burroughs’s early novels, along with their epistemological and moral impasses, are symbolic residues of the first order Real and often relate to specific traumas in Burroughs’s life, which are discussed further in chapters One and Two. However, Burroughs introduces an illegible, symbolic Real into his writing as a means towards freedom and authentic subjectivity. As Michael Jarvis writes of Burroughs and *Naked Lunch*, “the sophistication

of this social criticism (despite its aesthetics of illegibility and misattribution) gives the lie to that common critique [of Burroughs and *Naked Lunch*]: ‘Arty type. . . . No Principles. . . .’” (199). Through making both his social criticism and his person illegible, Burroughs allows the symbolic “Real” to become part of his work in an attempt to both represent, engage with but also to escape from the first order “Real” of trauma and sickness. Peter Brooks, in *Troubling Confessions*, details how, in psychoanalysis, there is a recognition “that the speech-act of confession is a dubious guide to the truth, which must be sought in the resistance to such speech... the true confession may lie most of all in the resistance to confession” (117). In his early works of illiterature, Burroughs does not encounter or engage with his traumas directly rather he takes a circuitous and ambivalent approach to discontents and “mistakes too monstrous for remorse / To tamper or to dally with” (Burroughs qtd. in Levi Stevens, 134). As Burroughs cannot represent or encounter his traumas directly he becomes an inscrutable subject of illiterature.

Heroin addiction becomes a means to escape traumas that Burroughs is incapable of bringing into the symbolic realm and thus junk becomes an agent of repression. This is discussed further in Chapter One. While drug use represents an encounter with the material Real, and intoxication is often described in terms of the sublime, in addiction drugs become a means to escape an encounter with the Real of trauma. The addict wishes for her trauma and thus herself to remain inscrutable, yet addiction remains as a residue of the traumatic Real. Addiction can be regarded as an instantiation of the second order real. The addict is doomed to repetitively circle around the trauma that constitutes their addiction. “The ‘first’ real, that of trauma and fixation, returns in a sense in the form of a center of gravity around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle, without ever being able to hit it. It gives rise to impossibilities within the chain itself (a given word cannot appear randomly, but only after certain other words) and creates a sort of lump that the chain is forced to skirt” (Fink, 28). Addiction however, rejects the symbolic order because of its inability to parse the traumatic Real and Burroughs’s early novels are literary representations of the failure of the symbolic order in regards to the Real. Burroughs’s early works represent an

indirect encounter with the Real as a continuous, repetitive process, rather than a direct encounter with the disease or trauma. The Real is indirectly represented by absence, contradiction, illegibility, sickness and the occult in Burroughs's works. The Real cannot be bent by the logic and causalities of the symbolic realm, since there is no division between "presence and absence" in the Real (Fink, 16), rather when encountering the Real, one "must give up the attempts to explain, to seek any answer in terms of cause and effect and prediction, leave behind the entire structure of pragmatic, result seeking, use seeking, question asking Western thought" ("Yage Article", *The Yage Letters Redux*, 95-96). Engaging with the Real can be downright dangerous but it can also allow the person to break free of the chains of signification. The existence of the Real as the inconsistent substratum on which reality precariously resides, suggests that reality is not fixed but malleable and open to artistic intervention. Engaging with what cannot be said and cannot be known and recognising that unknowable aspect of the self as one's true self is the act of becoming a subject of illiterature.

The risk is that in categorizing oneself as a subject of illiterature one identifies too readily with the "desire for nothing nameable" and that which "resists symbolisation absolutely". The subject of illiterature is a process, not a destination and this procedure becomes particularly hazardous when it is applied to non-textual enjoyment, particularly drug use. Burroughs desires to create anarchy and views chaos, like the "cut-up", as the image of, and potential for subjective freedom and agency: the antidote to control. As will be demonstrated in Chapter One, the addict, while ostensibly partaking of the enjoyment of drugs, is most accurately a subject of illiterature. Drug use is a short-cut to, or chimera of, this becoming. Rather, the subject who is seeking authentic agency should partake of reading and writing, not drugs or other artificial forms of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari suggest it is far better to read drug literature rather than take drugs (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 285). No matter whether the subject of illiterature consumes drugs or texts, it results in the same cogito of illiterature: where I cannot read, and cannot be read, that is where I truly am. I will now move on to discuss illiterature as a form of anti-knowledge.

Illiterature and Anti-Knowledge

"I tell you when I leave the Wise Man I don't even feel like a human.
He converting my live orgones into dead bullshit." (*NL*, 59)

The power of illiterature, with its antagonism of the reader, its blind alleys and failed, atrophied readings appears to stand against Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge/power. Epistemic power demands the creation and maintenance of complex discursive systems. Burroughs's illiterature involves the wrestling of power away from the very discursive and epistemic structures that Foucault outlines:

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth.
(*Power/Knowledge*, 133)

Illiterature incorporates a different kind of power, one that both undermines the symbolic structure of knowledge/power and also forges a form of power which persists in being unreadable and unknowable. This subversive impetus towards anti-knowledge opposes regimes of "truth" and stands against the oft unspoken coercive power of "truth", where structures of societal control appear as self-evident, rational and real. Burroughs's illiterature goes further still, suggesting that there is power available through the unknowable, the occult and the illegible that both opposes and abets knowledge/power. *Junky* incorporates both the drive towards knowledge, as a quasi-anthropological study of the culture and lifestyle that surrounds heroin addiction, and the illiterary drive towards inscrutability, as Lee, the protagonist and addict, seeks to escape the gaze of knowledge/power. The impetus towards anti-knowledge inherent to narcotics addiction, as exemplified in *Junky* where the addict is a subject moving away from self-knowledge, outlines how this power is not only formidable but also desirable and not only liberating but also limiting and self-destructive. While

Burroughs's early works attempt to seize illegibility towards their own ends, they also obliquely outline how regimes of "truth" use erasure and illegibility to support their symbolic structures. As such Burroughs's early novels suggest that knowledge/power incorporates modes that appear antithetical to it, erasing, silencing or obscuring that which threatens its structures and formations.

Addiction, in a similar manner to knowledge/power, attempts to erase trauma, yet addiction is doomed to repeat, in another form, the trauma it obscures. Addiction, as an instantiation of the second order or symbolic Real, represents the trauma that the addict cannot speak of while also being an agent of its silencing and erasure. What addiction is then is an agent of illegibility that still maintains traces of the original trauma. As a critical study of illiterature, this thesis will examine Burroughs's personal traumas, particularly in regards to *Junky* and *Queer*, which are elided and made illegible. These works of illiterature have yet to discover their traumatic centres of gravity, instead they orbit around trauma, examining its symptoms. Burroughs's compromised epistemic desires, as detailed in *Junky* – where he is both seeking knowledge of addiction and escaping self-knowledge through addiction – remain throughout his early novels. This dialectic movement, between knowledge and anti-knowledge, becomes paradigmatic in terms of Burroughs's illiterature and its forms of cultural criticism. Burroughs may appear to be adopting explicitly subversive positions, as an addict, performer of routines and drug tourist, but the radical critical component of these works resides in how they draw lines of comparison between these subversive identities and dominant ideological forces. However, while Burroughs's early works of illiterature appear to be heavily imbricated with the symbolic structures they oppose, they remain as explorative attempts to escape political and cultural domination.

Heroin addiction is explicitly maligned throughout Burroughs's writing, but drugs remain as potential agents of liberation, both as substances and as objects of thought. While heroin and addiction come to be associated with the imprisoning symbolic structures of the "word virus" in the later "cut-up" novels, the powerful hallucinogen "yage" is regarded by Burroughs in his

early works as a means to both break out of the regime of “truth” and its corresponding “reality”. For Burroughs, addiction and the symbolic order repress individuals and maintain the status quo, while hallucinogenic intoxication and writing become tools for dismantling knowledge/power.

Derrida deconstructs the concept of “drugs” and suggests there is a division between drugs and knowledge in an interview published as “The Rhetoric of Drugs”:

As soon as one utters the word ‘drugs’, even before any ‘addiction’, a prescriptive or normative ‘diction’ is already at work, whether one likes it or not. This ‘concept’ will never be a purely theoretical or theorisable concept. And if there is never a theorem for drugs, there can never be a scientific competence for them either, one attestable as such and which would not be essentially overdetermined by ethico-political norms. (20)

In Derrida’s schema one can see how the illegible power of drugs can only be subsumed within a system of knowledge/power through ethico-political coercion. If drugs cannot be theorized they automatically represent a problem for both power and knowledge: an epistemological impasse which makes sense of drugs prohibition as a political phenomenon. Drugs represent a dangerous potential for the subject who may, through maximising this potential, become capable of stopping the wheel of cognitive determinism and imagining a different future. Burroughs’s dismissal of realism in *Naked Lunch* is the realization of this imaginative power to “change fact” (Q, 55) and “make things happen” (Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, 32).

The untheorizable and ineffable quality of drugs also makes them seductive and this resonates with another of Derrida’s observations: “If a speech could be purely present, unveiled naked, offered up in person in its truth, without detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone” (*Dissemination*, 71). The seductive power of drugs is derived from their enigmatic status and ability to

make the user other to himself. This is a positive form of self-alienation that allows individuals to step outside of their prescribed destinies towards a proscribed authenticity. Yet drugs can only take a person so far and addiction is one possible consequence of persisting too diligently on this path. The addict would happily seize the enigmatic power of drugs for himself and exhaust “within himself all poisons, and preserve their quintessences” (Rimbaud, 307): That is to say that the addict desires to embody the illegible power of drugs. As much as addiction is a desire for the inexpressible, the day-to-day reality of substance abuse is all too self-evidently repetitive, limited and bleak.

While drugs and addiction are central topics in Burroughs’s early novels, the later “cut-up” novels suggest that the “cut-up method” and writing more generally are a means towards moving beyond drugs. The compromised status of drugs in Burroughs’s early works is reflective of drugs being both agents of liberation and repression. Drugs, as material representations of the biological Real, are beyond good and evil and can be regarded as a nascent means towards cognitive freedom. However, there is an inherent danger in drugs as they do not represent a direct point of escape, rather drugs implicitly reveal to their user the eminently narcotic state of modern subjectivity and the intoxicated nature of “reality”. In *Junky* the rise of addict subcultures in urban America coincides with the Post-War economic boom and a concomitant expansion of consumer culture. Lee in *Junky* is, akin to Benjamin’s *flâneur*, negotiating the rapidly escalating flows of capitalism:

The crowd is... the latest narcotic for those abandoned. The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers. (Benjamin,

Charles Baudelaire, 54–5)

However, the addict, Lee, does not find compensation by playing *flâneur* in a crowd which has abandoned him, he finds his solace in actual narcotics. What drugs represent, as a form of “profane illumination”, is a means to recognise “the intoxication of the commodity” and the culture which surges around it. Commodity culture takes on a religious fervour accompanied by a narcotizing transfixion, yet its products are not actual narcotics. It is commodity culture that is eminently narcotic. Such a critical awakening, “resides in the profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which, hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 227). Burroughs’s early works draw attention to the narcotizing and intoxicating aspects of the modern ideological order, yet the author remains firmly installed in the systems of power he is attempting to undermine. However, throughout his career Burroughs never abandons the possibility of escape.

In *Junky* the implicit power of a cognitive freedom that exists outside of the merciless social, political and biological reality of addiction is hinted at by Lee’s movement away from the culture of junk which had colonised his being. In the introduction to *Queer*, writing is seen as a means to inoculate against hostile external forces. In *The Yage Letters* the powerful hallucinogen “yage” and the occult are suggested as ways of escaping deterministic forces. Meanwhile, the “cut-up” works are accompanied by a moral, theoretical and aesthetic framework that attempts to isolate and dissect the “word virus”. However, while Burroughs’s early works of illiterature attack epistemic, literary, political and ethical structures they differ to the “cut-up” texts as they retain and identify with many of the tropes and structures of the ideological order that they are implicitly attacking. By identifying the contradictory, intoxicating, obscene and arbitrary aspects of the dominant cultural order, these works of illiterature clear the way for the isolation of the “word virus” and the world building potential of the “cut-up technique”.

Review of Criticism

This project makes particular reference to the six book length academic studies of William Burroughs's work. Jennie Skerl's *William S. Burroughs* (1985) provides an assessment of many of Burroughs's novels, from *Junky* (1953) up to and including *The Cities of The Red Night* (1981). Skerl's text offers valuable insight into Burroughs's work with little recourse to literary theory or the work of other scholars. Skerl's argument builds from suggesting that Burroughs began as a hipster novelist – akin to Norman Mailer's "White Negro" (7-8) – became an avant-garde and pop art writer with *Naked Lunch* (44-45) and finally developed into a "retroactive utopian" (88) in his later, post "cut-up" novels. Skerl also discusses Burroughs's public persona, "the Burroughs legend" (vi), as a kind of fictional performance, though her work sometimes falls under the spell of Burroughs's cult of personality¹². However, given that at the time this study was published there was a dearth of book-length academic appraisals of Burroughs's work, Skerl is to be praised for giving patient and considered scholarly attention to the author.

Robin Lydenberg's *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (1987), counterbalances the lack of literary theory in Skerl's study with an extensive theoretical analysis of Burroughs's mid-career novels – from *Naked Lunch* (1959), up to and including *Nova Express* (1964). In this study Lydenberg discusses the theories of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida, suggesting that Burroughs's fiction effectively anticipates some of the innovations of post-structuralism and deconstruction. The second half of Lydenberg's work examines certain tropes in Burroughs's novels, such as "The Parasite" and "Digestion", as ways for understanding the radical theory and practice at play in his work. Lydenberg's study is an impressively complex work that draws important theoretical connections between Burroughs and contemporary literary and cultural criticism. However, Lydenberg's reading of *Naked Lunch* borders on the dogmatic as it asserts that the novel is a profoundly literal work that resists all forms of cultural and moral co-option. While I agree with

¹² For instance, Skerl discusses *Naked Lunch's* "factual, autobiographical sections", many of which have been shown to be fictionalised (44). This is discussed further in Chapter Four.

Lydenberg's assessment of *Naked Lunch* as a wilfully contradictory work, I attempt to examine other facets of its antagonistic form and content, in particular its pervasive criticism of modern forms of social organisation. I also examine how the novel attacks its own style and form as a transgressive, avant-garde work and indeed how it critiques transgression in general. While Lydenberg's study is necessary and innovative, it sometimes ignores the deeper complexities at work in *Naked Lunch*. That text, along with Burroughs's first three novels, actively resist the kinds of theoretical and aesthetic structures that Lydenberg identifies in the later "cut-up" texts and associates with the conceptual frameworks employed by modern literary theorists. While Lydenberg's work is certainly useful and theoretically insightful in regards to the "cut-up technique" and Burroughs's mid-career novels, its thesis often bases itself on simplifying or eliding conceptual and aesthetic issues raised by *Naked Lunch* and Burroughs's earlier works which do not allow that text and by proxy Burroughs to fit so readily within postmodern and poststructural theoretical frameworks. Burroughs's early works of illiterature present moral, theoretical and aesthetic problems that resist the kind of theoretical analysis provided in *Word Cultures*.

Timothy S. Murphy's *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997) also utilises literary and cultural theory to assess Burroughs's novels. Unlike Lydenberg, Murphy synthesises a form of criticism, "Amodernism", which combines the cultural analysis of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno with the literary, cultural and psychoanalytic theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Murphy distinguishes himself from what he refers to as Lydenberg's "reductive gestures of postmodernization" (73) by rejecting "the postmodern abandonment of critique in the face of the procession of simulacra" (29). Opposing postmodernism and modernism, "[amodernism] reveals the unresolvable antagonism between subjectivities and capital that capital has turned to its advantage through the dialectic, and this antagonism is capable of generating a new socius that dissolves the abstraction of labor into the singular power of new, amodern collectivities.... This is also the purpose of amodernism: to further the production of subject-groups that can extend the

differences that already fissure the capitalist socius into irreparable cracks” (32-45). According to Murphy, “Burroughs’s work, including *Naked Lunch*, constitutes an exacting critique both of the social organization of late capital and of the logic of representation or textuality that abets it” (74). As compelling as Murphy’s work is, he is guilty, like Lydenberg, of attempting to fit Burroughs within theoretical paradigms, often of a Marxist bent, that the author seems to have anticipated and purposefully resists. While I agree with Murphy on a number of points, mainly in regards to Burroughs’s implicit criticism of systems of modern capitalism, I disagree that Burroughs rejects modernist mythic form. I also set out in Chapter Four to criticise Murphy’s reading of schizophrenia in Burroughs’s work and how he aligns it with the theories of Deleuze and Guattari.

Jamie Russell’s *Queer Burroughs* (2001) offers a reading of Burroughs’s work regarding the author’s identity as a masculine, and at times effeminophobic, gay author (6). Russell’s study attempts to redress the balance in Burroughsian criticism which has all too often ignored Burroughs’s homosexual identity. Russell compares and contrasts his reading of Burroughs’s novels with the history of homosexuality and gay political activism in twentieth-century America. While my reading is of a different order from Russell’s, I agree with most of his analysis of *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*. In particular I accept his astute observation that the schizophrenic elements in these novels, far from marking moments of aesthetic and psychological liberation, are in fact symptoms of an individual suffering under the conditions of cultural and political oppression (Russell, 2). While I accept the importance of Russell’s work, I suggest, in Chapter Two, that he is sometimes too keen to read Burroughs purely in terms of his queer identity.

Oliver Harris’s *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (2003) is an impressively rigorous work which attempts to undermine popular readings of Burroughs’s first four novels by revealing the often hidden material and genetic histories of these texts. One of Harris’s key contributions to Burroughsian scholarship relates to his discovery of the epistolary origins of novels like *Naked Lunch* and *Queer*. Harris rejects the “junk paradigm”

(*Secret* 37), a theory outlined by Burroughs in the introduction to *Naked Lunch* which suggests that the relationship between the junk pusher and the addict is the model that best exemplifies how hierarchical relationships function in the modern world. The relationship between the junk pusher and addict is paradigmatic of all hierarchical social relationships which are based on the “total need” of the oppressed (*NL* xxxix). Harris claims the attention given to the “junk paradigm” has resulted in the proliferation of stilted and derivative interpretations of Burroughs’s early works. Harris demands that we read Burroughs’s novels, not in terms of the author, but cognisant of their material history. Harris’s work is not only a piece of invaluable archival research; he also offers deeply insightful readings of the novels in terms of their genetic history. Oliver Harris is widely recognised as the world’s leading Burroughs scholar and has edited and provided introductions for many of the latest editions of Burroughs’s works including: *Junky: The Definitive Text of Junk*, *Queer: 25th Anniversary edition* and *The Yage Letters Redux*. While Harris’s work is of unprecedented value in the field of Burroughsian criticism, his dismissal of the importance of Burroughs’s introductions to *Queer* and *Naked Lunch* denies their dynamic function in regards to the meaning of those novels. Harris’s thesis – that, despite all of his material research, the enigma of Burroughs is still a source of fascination (244-245) – is broadly similar to my theory of illiterature, but I believe I take the enigmatic features of Burroughs’s work further and analyse them in terms of Burroughs’s later work, suggesting that they undermine the aesthetic and moral binarities that structure the “cut-up” works.

Chad Weidner’s *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* is an innovative eco-critical reading of Burroughs’s work. Weidner offers a refreshingly positive spin on Burroughs’s writing, suggesting that novels like *Naked Lunch* are works that engage in a kind of dark ecological critique of modern ways of life. While my work does not engage directly with eco-criticism, I make reference to Weidner’s recognition that Burroughs engages in “biopiracy” in *The Yage Letters* (114).

David Punter’s *Rapture: Literature, Addiction, Secrecy* is not a book-length study of Burroughs’s work, instead it offers an analysis of ‘rapture’:

the process whereby the identities of the addict and the reader, amongst others, become entangled in their activities. Punter furnishes the field of Burroughs studies with some interesting pieces of comparative analysis in regards to Burroughs's writing on addiction. Timothy Melley's "A Terminal Case: William Burroughs and the Logic of Addiction" (2002) is another important work that I discuss throughout this study. While I do not agree with Melley's contention that Burroughs is, to his determinant, unwilling to jettison liberal humanist conceptions of subjectivity and engage with postmodernism more fully, the connections Melley draws with the wider world of addiction studies are critically important.

Alex Wermer-Colan's "Implicating the Confessor: The Autobiographical Ploy in William S. Burroughs's Early Work", discusses how Burroughs implicates his readers in the moral quandaries his ostensibly autobiographical novels present but refuse to resolve (516). Wermer-Colan outlines how Burroughs overidentifies with the obscene and excessive forms power often takes, creating a moral impasse for his readers (514). Wermer-Colan's insights have proven profoundly useful in regards to elucidating the concept of illiterature and its relationship with the reader. Michael Jarvis's "'All in the Day's Work': Cold War Doctoring and its Discontents in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*" illustrates the relationship between drugs, mental illness and "macrocosmic sociopolitical" concerns in *Naked Lunch* (184). Jarvis's reading has been particularly useful in regards to the discussion of the relationship between the medical and the political in *Naked Lunch*, including the social consequences of this correlation.

This study also refers to a number of books of collected essays such as *William S. Burroughs At the Front: Critical Reception, 1959-1989* (1991), *Naked Lunch@50: Anniversary Essays* (2009) and *Retaking the Universe: William Burroughs in the Age of Globalisation* (2004). I also refer to two non-academic accounts of Burroughs's work: Matthew Levi Stevens's interpretation of Burroughs's interest in the occult, *The Magical Universe of William S. Burroughs* (2014) and David S. Willis's *Scientologist!: William S. Burroughs and the Weird Cult* (2013), which documents Burroughs's involvement with and ultimate rejection of the religion founded by L. Ron

Hubbard. This project also makes extensive reference to Barry Miles's *Call Me Burroughs* (2014), which has replaced Ted Morgan's *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1988) as the definitive biography of William Burroughs. I draw on a number of important biographical details that Miles brings to light throughout this study.

This project makes use of a number of texts which discuss drugs through the various lenses of literary and cultural theory: these include Avital Ronnell's *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (1992), David Lenson's *On Drugs* (1995) and Dave Boothroyd's *Culture on Drugs: Narco-Cultural Studies of High Modernity* (2006). This study also refers to works on the relationship between drugs and literature such as Sadie Plant's *Writing on Drugs* (1999) and Marcus Boon's *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (2002). Both of these works situate Burroughs in the milieu of drugs writing and insist on his centrality within the genre. These studies provide insight into the intertextual relationships that take place between Burroughs, his peers, predecessors and literary progeny. Other works on the history and culture of drugs and addiction that brought some circumspection to my study of the topic include Richard Davenport-Hines's *The Pursuit of Oblivion* (2001) and David T. Courtwright's *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (2001).

Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this study, "The Subject of Illiterature", examines William Burroughs's debut novel, *Junky* as a document of illiterature. This chapter focuses in particular on the figure of the junky as a subject of illiterature. The subject of illiterature is a person who actively refuses to be known and understood and this becomes their identity. *Junky* thus functions dynamically as a work of literature that attempts to describe and examine heroin addiction as a subject, while also having its addicted protagonist adopt the inscrutable identity of the subject of illiterature. As Alex Wermer-Colan notes, "[while] only inaugurating the later texts' more elaborate resistances to standard hermeneutic operations, *Junky* still frustrates the reader's attempts to achieve... normative order" (502). *Junky* thus inaugurates an

epistemological economy that is paradigmatic in terms of Burroughs's early works of illiterature.

Firstly, this chapter looks at the history of the novel's publication. It then analyses addiction in terms of the Lacanian death drive and its connections with wider social, cultural and epistemic concerns and uses these connections as a means to explain *Junky's* form of cultural criticism. Next the chapter examines *Junky* as a form of amateur anthropology which offers an assessment of drug addiction in post-war urban America. The chapter then moves on to analyse and contrast Burroughs's early writing in relation to that of his friend and fellow Beat author Jack Kerouac. Their co-authored novel *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* – written in 1945 but only published in 2008 – is assessed in order to compare the differences and similarities that exist between the two authors, particular in relation to the gaps and omissions that exist in Burroughs's early writings. Subsequently, the chapter examines the subjectivity of the addict in regards to Slavoj Žižek's theory of subjectivity. While the addict appears to be an empty subject, akin to the form of subjectivity described by Žižek, he is also subject to modes of cognitive behaviour and past traumas. The chapter assesses the importance of cognitive behaviour and trauma in regards to addiction, *Junky* and Burroughs's life. The chapter also explores sociological theories of addiction before examining the social world of "junk" described in *Junky* and how it functions to imprison the addict in the world of addiction. The chapter concludes with an examination of Burroughs and Lee in exile from both the conservative culture of post-war America and its concomitant world of junk.

Junky inaugurates the explorative, sceptical and amoral tenets that are present throughout Burroughs's early works of illiterature. While *Junky* provides insights about heroin addiction and the lifestyle of the addict, much remains hidden by addiction, despite the novel's factual approach. Theories of addiction are suggested in the text but the structure of the culture of addiction and the traumas that underlie it present themselves in an unexamined, random state. Further to this, the information offered in *Junky* is subject to change over time and in different cultural spaces, as any

knowledge of addiction is “subject to rapid changes... words change meanings [and] meanings vary locally at the same time” (*J*, 181). The direct insights that *Junky* offers on addiction is provisional and *ad hoc*, while the addict’s enigmatic subjectivity creates a barrier for readers seeking knowledge on addiction. However, junk knowledge is obliquely suggested by *Junky*’s privations, whereby power is established through erasure. This becomes a prominent feature in Burroughs’s early works of illiterature where he seeks to “change fact” (*Q*, 55). Further to this, *Junky*, with its hidden traumas and socio-cultural field work, offers readers compelling insights into the subject of addiction and its critical ramifications. *Junky* thus establishes a dynamic epistemological economy that is archetypal in terms of Burroughs’s early works of illiterature, wherein Burroughs and his protagonist Lee can be seen to be pursuing knowledge and denying its possibility.

The second chapter, “The Romantic Other,” offers a reading of *Queer* as a text of illiterature. This chapter examines how Burroughs’s desire for the romantic Other helped his illiterature to evolve into a wider ranging form of cultural critique. The chapter begins by offering a history of the novel and its place within Burroughs’s oeuvre. It then examines the Burroughsian “routine” – a form of grotesque comedic performance – which is a prominent feature in *Queer* and throughout *The Yage Letters* and *Naked Lunch*. The chapter evaluates the novel as a document of queer literature, paying particular attention to Jamie Russell’s reading of the text. While acknowledging this reading, the chapter examines how the queerness of the novel coalesces with other features from Burroughs’s life and work, making *Queer* queerer than queer. The novel is examined as a document that describes the psychological disintegration that occurs when an addict withdraws from narcotics. The chapter assesses Oliver Harris’s reading of desire in *Queer* and the superiority of this interpretation compared to those that adhere to the “junk paradigm”. Following this, the chapter discusses desire in *Queer* in regards to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of “desiring production”, “the body without organs” and “microfascism”.

The chapter also analyses Burroughs's relationship with his ancestors and discusses the potential genetic origins of Lee's violent, fascistic "routines". The chapter reveals how Lee's overt fascism is a blunt critical tool that attempts to excavate the violent undercurrents that underlie and invigorate everyday life. The chapter also offers an extended psychoanalytic reading of the final scene of the novel: the "Skip Tracer" dream sequence. This reading details how the dream's latent content points to a deeper trauma that *Queer* hides in plain sight. Finally, this chapter examines how the pain of the romantic failure that Lee experiences in *Queer* leads him to see writing as a means to capture the otherness of desire and the desire of the Other.

While, in contrast to *Junky*, Lee in *Queer* is a more subjective and reflective protagonist, he is also loquacious, miserable and near-schizophrenic. His "routines" refuse understanding and control to both Lee and the reader and, as such he remains a subject of illiterature. As with the author's other works of illiterature, *Queer* lacks a stabilising thesis. Instead the text problematizes issues regarding sexual desire and individual agency, adopting the "routine" to overtly detail the controlling aspects of desire.

Queer's introduction appears to suggest that the author is illiterate in regards to the relationship between desire and "Control" and its centrality within the novel. Lee and Burroughs persist as active members of the world they are critiquing in *Queer*, so much so that they can be seen to be unaware of their own complicity. However, *Queer* is the first instance in Burroughs's novels where Lee becomes an artist, via his performance of "routines", which are both a means of gaining and undermining power. As such Lee's "routines" are paradigmatic in terms of the ambivalent position Burroughs assumes throughout his early works of illiterature. Like *Junky*, *Queer* contains traces of an illegible trauma that is central to the subject matter of the novel and reveals why Burroughs began to see writing as a potential cure for his personal malaise: "writing as inoculation" (*Q*, 128).

Chapter Three, "The Illiterature of the Postcolony," offers an assessment of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's epistolary novella, *The Yage Letters*, as amateur pharmacopoeia and postcolonial travel guide. *The Yage Letters* essentially offers a schema of Burroughs's early career. The

text engages with epistolary writing, drug writing, the “routine” form, travel writing, the “cut-up method” and his occult form of authorial intention: writing to “change fact” (*Q*, 55) and “make things happen” (Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, 32). This chapter firstly offers a history of *The Yage Letters* and then examines how the text functions as a guide to Burroughs’s literary method. The chapter identifies the importance of *The Yage Letters* and the South American postcolony in regards to Burroughs’s literary development, in particular his creation of “Interzone”, the “composite city” which is the geographical and gravitational centre of *Naked Lunch*. The chapter reveals how *The Yage Letters* implicitly describes the development of Burroughs’s interest in the occult and its relevance to his writing, in particular to the “cut-up method”. In turn it evaluates the potential of “yage” as a drug that helped the author move beyond drugs to create a new form of writing. Finally, the chapter discusses the philosophical import of the letter dated June 21st, 1960 and offers a reading of the final section – the “cut-up” text “I AM DYING, MEESTER” – as a synecdoche of the novella.

The Yage Letters, like *Junky*, is a work of quasi-anthropology which offers little by way of direct theoretical insight in regards to the cultures it describes. Instead the text contrasts metropolitan and postcolonial cultures and suggests that a continuity exists between earlier, colonial modes of cognition and domination and those of American neo-imperialism. *The Yage Letters* and *Junky* both focus on the importance of socio-cultural dynamics and historical traumas in the worlds they describe, while neither of these texts meticulously recount the intoxicating effects of “junk” and “yage”. Lee compulsively sends letters in *The Yage Letters*, but he is strictly a receiver for the culture of South America.

While junk knowledge in *Junky* revealed how power masks the traumatic or undesirable, *The Yage Letters* implicitly outlines how realism and modern modes of subjectivity cover over and disregard the ideological structure of “reality”. *The Yage Letters* seeks to explicitly disclose the violence of certain modes of knowledge that are inherent to imperialism and modernity. Lee is frequently nasty and violent in his descriptions of Latin America, but he is also contradictory and ambiguous in his depiction of the

colonial Other. As such Lee explicitly adopts and implicitly undermines colonial stereotypes. *The Yage Letters* upsets approaches that would seek to place the postcolonial Other within systems of knowledge. In *The Yage Letters* writing becomes a means to exorcise or inoculate against the western gaze and its subjective and epistemological correlatives. The complex structure of *The Yage Letters* functions to disrupt and reinflect realism, yet the connection with realism, a defining feature of Burroughs's early works of illiterature, continues here in order to challenge its cultural domination. "I AM DYING MEEESTER?" offers a "cut-up" reading of the previous novel that implicitly outlines the arbitrary, ad-hoc and provisional aspects of reading. As such reading or misreading becomes a means to reimagine "reality". *The Yage Letters* details the evolution of Burroughs's desire to create a form of literature that will "change fact" and "make things happen". Burroughs is moving beyond drugs in *The Yage Letters*, towards a literature that will become an approximation of the drugs experience. As such, Burroughs imagines a literature in *The Yage Letters* that, like "yage", is capable of augmenting consciousness and "reality".

The final chapter of this study, "An Impossible Novel", argues that Burroughs's early writings culminate in the defining text of illiterature: *Naked Lunch*. Firstly, the chapter examines the wide variety of criticism of the novel in order to distinguish this reading from previous assessments. The chapter discusses how *Naked Lunch* presents a profound challenge to both casual and scholarly readers and argues that Burroughs's introduction installs addiction as the organising rubric that in turn becomes the mythic form of the novel. In doing this, Burroughs forces the reader to adopt the cognitive behaviour of the addict whereby everything in the inscrutable world of the text is read in terms of addiction.

Offering an extensive reading of the section of *Naked Lunch* that has received the most critical attention, the "talking asshole routine", the chapter firstly provides a summary of other readings of the "routine" before offering an original assessment of it in relation to the psychology of disgust and its connection with morality and political conservatism. The chapter examines how disgust functions as a superegoic force in the symbolic order regulating

society by ostracising political Others. The chapter examines how the co-option of potentially liberating forces by the dominant social order is explicitly carried out throughout the text, revealing that transgression functions to reinforce the status quo. The chapter offers an extended reading of the opening section of *Naked Lunch*, demonstrating how the text not only attempts to defy the interpretations of the reader, but also authorial control. The chapter closes by outlining how *Naked Lunch's* antagonism of the reading process and rejection of various modes of transgression invite the reader to formulate their own bespoke response to the moral problems that the text presents.

Rather than celebrating transgression, *Naked Lunch* reveals how it can support the political and cultural status quo. *Naked Lunch* explores the contradictory aspects of subversion and, as Burroughs's foremost document of illiterature, demonstrates that control is always incomplete and under negotiation, while transgression is always in danger of being co-opted by the political dominant. *Naked Lunch* overidentifies with the obscene, excessive aspects of ideology in order to reveal the contradictory dialectic that lies at its centre.

As Burroughs's pre-eminent text of illiterature, *Naked Lunch* presents extreme challenges to its readership. *Naked Lunch's* material history discloses that misreading was central to the text's production. Further to this, the structural difficulties Burroughs encountered while writing and editing the text remain as defining features and function to challenge the hermeneutic desires of its readership. While the text's introduction appears to demand a particular kind of reading, this is undermined by the text of the novel. In *Naked Lunch's* introduction addiction is presented as the sickness under examination, yet the text has many complex and far-ranging insights on the political, aesthetic and social conditions that afflict modern human beings. Lee in *Naked Lunch* is often distrustful of those who are explicitly subversive agents and he frequently reveals how these agents function to support the political and symbolic order.

Naked Lunch anticipates the "word virus" described in later "cut-up" works as it is consistently critical of language and identity which both

functions to speak for and ultimately usurp the individual subject. While many of *Naked Lunch*'s characters appear as compromised subjects, the novel implicitly supports Burroughs's belief in the prospect of subjective freedom. *Naked Lunch* details the various challenges to subjective agency and presents them as hermeneutic problems. However, through observing the determinism inherent to the symbolic order collapsing under the weight of its internal contradictions, the reader may evade control and form a subjectivity of the future.

The overall structure of this study moves from examining the subjectivity of illiterature in Chapter One, desire and "Control" as illiterature in Chapter Two, on to illiterature as the postcolonial, hallucinogenic and supernatural Other in Chapter Three, and finally detailing the text becoming illiterature in Chapter Four. While I will refer to *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters* as texts of illiterature, they are ultimately nascent forms of what it will become. *Naked Lunch* embodies illiterature as an impossible text that reflects an ever-evolving, inscrutable world.

Chapter One:

The Subject of Illiterature: William Burroughs's *Junky*

I can do nothing with opium, which is the most abominable illusion, the most formidable invention of nothingness that has ever fertilized human sensibilities. But I can do nothing unless I take into myself at moments this culture of nothingness.

—Antonin Artaud (qtd. in Boon, 17)

In absolute incommunicableness it stood apart, a thought, a system of thought which as yet had no symbol in spoken language.

—Fitz Hugh Ludlow (*The Hasheesh Eater: Being Passages from the Life of a Pythagorean*, 136)

I always dream of a pen that would be a syringe.

—Jacques Derrida (Bennington and Derrida, 10)

He looked at me with his pale blue eyes that seemed to have no depth at all.

—William Burroughs (*J*, 41)

Introduction

This reading of William Burroughs's *Junky* assesses the novel as a text of illiterature, in particular its representation of the empty subjectivity of illiterature embodied in the figure of the junky. This chapter firstly analyses the history of the text. *Junky* was originally published as a cheap paperback, as part of a "Two Books in One" edition, alongside *Narcotic Agent*, a memoir by police officer Maurice Helbrant. This publication helped establish the dialectic between addict and agent that is a recurring trope in Burroughs's career and which helps outline the determinism that exists in the world of junk. This determinism plays out in *Junky* as Lee, an apparently inaccessible subject, appears akin to a classically tragic hero determined by unseen forces. Addiction is shown to function like the death drive and is used to erase, rather than reveal, the causes of addiction. *Junky* obliquely outlines a form of junk knowledge that details the connection between addiction, erasure and power. The epistemological economy of junk knowledge is evident in *Junky* as the novel hides as much as it reveals, despite its literal, factual and objective style.

Burroughs's early writing is compared with that of his contemporary, Jack Kerouac, and *Junky's* quasi-anthropological style is highlighted as a distinct feature. *Junky* presents some theories of addiction but ultimately must be regarded as an anti-theoretical text that ignores or elides the social and personal causes of addiction. Instead the reader is left to determine the structures and processes of addiction that *Junky* presents in a raw, unexamined state. Narcotics and their properties, despite being a central topic of *Junky*, are rarely described in detail, suggesting that their effects are entirely negative and function only to cancel out pain. The reader is thus occluded from experiencing the joy of junk. The primary function of junk can be regarded as the erasure of subjective content, and *Junky's* blank subjectivity is compared to Žižek's theory that subjectivity is a kind of nothing that allows for potential change to occur in the order of things. However, the addict's ostensibly empty subjectivity is shown to contain traumatic content that narcotics only temporarily erase. Despite this erasure,

the addict is still beholden to modes of cognitive behaviour formed out of traumatic experience. *Junky* reveals traces of a trauma resulting from childhood abuse that Burroughs apparently suffered, which is recounted indirectly in other works. In *Junky*, addiction, despite being defined in such negative tones, also hints towards junk knowledge as a means to alter cognition, which becomes a central feature in Burroughs's early novels. Despite the extreme challenges that addiction presents to subjective agency in *Junky*, the novel implicitly suggests the possibility of escape, but only through understanding the socio-cultural and economic reality of junk. The addict, as the empty subject of illiterature, is revealed to be the product of arbitrary and impersonal forces. In *Junky* these forces are evident in drugs prohibition, drug slang, addict-agents, the medical establishment and the performativity of addicts. As shown later in *Junky*, when Lee tries to leave the world and the lifestyle of drug addiction behind, his personality and entire being disintegrates because he is departing the society in which his mode of cognition was forged. The reader of *Junky* becomes embroiled in the world of junk realism and its concomitant mode of cognition. *Junky's* repetitive narrative is only interrupted by the schizophrenic collapse occasioned by withdrawal. The novel outlines how the addict must abandon junk realism and its entire cultural code, which Lee does when he leaves for Mexico at the end of the novel.

Junky installs the explorative and morally ambiguous tenets that inform Burroughs's early works of illiterature. While *Junky* explicitly offers up facts about heroin addiction and the culture and lifestyle of the addict, much remains occluded by addiction, despite, and perhaps because of, *Junky's* factual and realist approach. A thesis of addiction is hinted at but never directly given, instead the structure of the culture of addiction and the personal traumas that underlie it present themselves in a raw, disjointed and unexamined state. The truth of addiction offered by *Junky* instead exists at the level of the social, cultural, linguistic and personal relationships it describes and their corresponding effects, which are likely to change over time and in different locales and situations. As *Junky* suggests, any knowledge

of addiction is “subject to rapid changes... words change meanings [and] meanings vary locally at the same time” (*J*, 181). The knowledge that *Junky* offers on addiction is often provisional and *ad hoc*, while the addict’s wilfully inscrutable subjectivity creates a profound impasse for those who would seek to understand addiction. However, junk knowledge is implicitly suggested by *Junky*’s profound absences, whereby power is established through erasure. This becomes a prominent feature in Burroughs’s early works of illiterature where he seeks to “change fact” (*Q*, 55) and “make things happen” (Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, 32). Furthermore, *Junky*, with its hidden traumas and socio-cultural field work, offers readers insight into the subject of addiction and its critical ramifications. *Junky* thus sets in place a dynamic epistemological economy that is prototypical in terms of Burroughs’s early works of illiterature, wherein Burroughs and his protagonist Lee can be seen to be pursuing knowledge and denying its possibility.

This chapter on *Junky* mainly references the book-length studies of Burroughs written by Jennie Skerl (1985), Timothy S. Murphy (1997) and Oliver Harris (2003). *Junky* is rarely written about in isolation from *Naked Lunch* so it will be necessary to refer to criticism that provides a broad assessment of Burroughs’s writing on addiction such as that provided by David Punter in *Rapture: Literature, Addiction, Secrecy* (2009). It will be established that *Junky* is a work of illiterature, which defines the junky as a subject of illiterature, and this argument will be situated in relation to those offered by Jennie Skerl and Oliver Harris. Skerl regards Burroughs’s first novel and his own addiction as a quest towards a unique artistic vision. For Skerl, *Junky* represents an important step towards the unique aesthetic that Burroughs will establish in *Naked Lunch* (*William S. Burroughs*, 20-30). Harris, however, believes that *Junky* is not a “*Künstlerroman*” (53) but an anti-literary anomaly in Burroughs’s *oeuvre*; one that Burroughs will explicitly disown later (*Secret*, 47-77). My argument insists on the genetic importance of *Junky* in regards to Burroughs’s evolution as an author of illiterature, but it rejects the transcendental, visionary aspects of *Junky* that Skerl outlines. It

is the very lack of *Junky* – in its aesthetics, as well as subjective and moral content – that marks it as a nascent form of illiterature and embryonic of what Burroughs will produce later.

A History of “Junk”

*Junkie*¹³, published by Ace Books in 1953 under the pseudonym “William Lee”, began William Seward Burroughs’s career as a published author. Recounting Burroughs’s life as a drug addict, petty thief and drug dealer, *Junky* establishes the author’s credentials as “A Master Addict to Dangerous Drugs” (*NL*, 239). Inspired by the publication of Jack Kerouac’s first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), and encouraged by Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs began writing his first novel, originally titled “Junk”, in earnest in Mexico City in 1950. The title was later changed from “Junk” to *Junkie* because Ace Books felt that the original title might give the impression that the book was junk (Harris, “Introduction”, *Junky* xii). Burroughs was indifferent towards getting the text published and the novel only arrived at publication by chance: Allen Ginsberg was a patient at Hoboken psychiatric hospital at the same time as Carl Solomon, the nephew of Aaron A. Wyn, owner of Ace Books. At Ginsberg’s suggestion, Solomon convinced his uncle to publish *Junkie* (Morgan, 66). Burroughs’s lack of conviction towards his writing and the corresponding lack of interest from publishers suggest the production of a novel that is reluctantly literature.

Ace Books published pulp novels that were ignored by critics and libraries alike. *Junkie* was originally sold as part of a 35¢ “Two Books in One” edition, accompanied by *Narcotic Agent*, a memoir of undercover police officer Maurice Helbrant. The intended effect of these two texts is that they would dialectically provide each other with balance: that the *Narcotic Agent* would police the *Junkie*. Ace were nervous about publishing *Junkie*, especially

¹³ Originally titled *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, its working title was “Junk”. In 1977 Penguin republished it as *Junky: Originally Published as Junkie Under the Pen Name of William Lee*.

given its ironic subtitle, *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, which sets the tone for the novel. Ace included a publisher's note that set out to ensure that the novel was a warning rather than an invitation to do drugs: "There has never been a criminal confession better calculated to discourage imitation by thrill-hungry teen-agers. This is the unadulterated, unglamorous, unthrilling life of the drug addict" (*J*, 150).

That Burroughs's first published novel arrives already in custody is illustrative of its marginal status. What we are reading is a criminal, peripheral text because the story of a drug addict must exist at the border of what is moral and healthy. The title and content of *Junky* mark it as a minor work, while its cheap and sensationalist packaging assure its junk status. That it was originally sold as part of a "Two Books in One" edition suggests that it cannot stand up on its own, that it is not truly a novel. Like the junky who, through his addiction, disassociates from conservative society, *Junky* establishes itself through its difference from what is considered literary. *Junky* not only alienates itself from the totality of post-war American national, social and political values, but tacitly works to undermine these: in this sense it is a rhizomatic text that describes a rhizomatic culture: a periphery that denies the possibility of a cultural totality. As such, *Junky* appears to share the sentiments of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari when they describe how they "no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date... [they] believe only in totalities that are peripheral" (*Anti-Oedipus* 42). *Junky* and junky alike form part of these "totalities that are peripheral".

Junky occupies a marginal position but its subject matter and cultural influence extend far beyond the fringes of society. In cultural terms, both *Junky* and junkies are expendable, but in modernity, expendability becomes ubiquitous. Junk, in its many forms is both the material and ideological legacy of late capitalism. As Slavoj Žižek states, "I already am eating from the trash can all the time. The name of this trash can is ideology. The material force of ideology makes me not see what I am effectively eating" (Žižek and Fiennes). The junk addict too, while effectively blind to his participation in the

sociopolitical economy, consumes junk as it makes him not see what he is effectively eating: his own complicity in a world he is ostensibly rejecting. While *Junky* is an explicitly marginal text, describing the marginal subculture of heroin addiction, it implicitly draws parallels between mainstream American culture and its addicted counterpart. *Junky* traces the development of subjectivity and literature as they become junk in modernity and the ideology of trash is also part of the fabric of its material history. While *Junky* is considered a minor work, in regards to both Burroughs's career and American literature more generally, it traces, both in its content and format, the growing centrality of disposability in American and global culture. While Burroughs can be seen to attack conservative literary standards, he often engages in a critique of popular culture and a still nascent postmodernity. Burroughs and his illiterature occupy an external or liminal state in between popular and conservative concepts of literature.

The disposable pulp form of *Junky's* original publication situates Burroughs as an author at odds with the literary establishment but perfectly at home in the popular vernacular. Jennie Skerl writes that, "given Burroughs' interest in popular culture, the original form of publication must have appealed to his ironic sense of humour" (21). In keeping with the status of his publisher, "Burroughs made his alter ego... un-literary" (Harris, "Introduction", *Junky*, xvi). Fittingly, Lee lacks the sensibility of standard literary protagonists. *Junky* is written in the first person but the narrator seems all but devoid of affect and identity: "The persona impresses the reader as a nameless cipher because his name is rarely used and because of his lack of subjectivity. The 'I' never gives any detailed account of his inner life, which we usually expect from a first-person narrator" (Skerl, 29). Burroughs initially chose to use the *nom de plume* "William Lee" for the initial publication of *Junkie* and thus the text inaugurates the author as a faceless confessor, fitting given his later identification as "*El hombre invisible*" (*NL*, 66). By using a pseudonym, Burroughs is disassociating himself from being the novel's author. Addiction is an apt subject for a book that is ostensibly authorless, given that it is a condition that occludes the authority and

autonomy of the individual suffering it. Instead, as is so often the case with Burroughs's early novels, the authority is provided by a supplementary text that was published with it. The inclusion of Maurice Helbrant's *Narcotic Agent* in Ace Book's publication of *Junkie* was intended to reign in the excesses and moral ambiguities of Burroughs's novel, but the unwitting outcome may have been to undermine the authority of the narcotic agent.

In arriving with Helbrant's *Narcotic Agent* a dialogue was initiated between criminal and cop that would persist throughout Burroughs's publishing career, coalescing in the figure of Lee, the addict/agent in *Naked Lunch*. Helbrant's novel harmonises with *Junky* in providing evidence of the compromised and contradictory ethics of enforcement that *Junky* frequently articulates: "I had to be tough. I had to wade in muck and fight for my successes, sometimes for my life. I lied, cheated, double-crossed. I was a spy. But as a spy I played within the rules" (Helbrant, 49). Ace Books forced the worlds of *Junky* and *Narcotic Agent* together in order to reinforce their moral position, mirroring the effects and motivations of the Harrison Act of 1915 which criminalized opiate addiction in the United States. This particular Ace publication was written by an addict and a narcotic agent and the dialectical ethos that informs this is reflective of the wider cultural dynamics of drugs prohibition. Burroughs will later use the figure of the addict-agent to outline the contradictions of laws such as the Harrison Act, as the addict-agent's hybrid identity illustrates how drugs prohibition sustains itself through its inevitable failure. As Murphy writes, "[the] addict-agent ... does not represent the transcending of the contradictions of post-war American society; he is rather the internalization, the preservation, and the extension of a conflict which cannot be resolved dialectically" (*Wising up the Marks*, 56-57). With the Harrison Act, the destinies of addicts and agents became intertwined. As will be shown later in this chapter, the criminalisation of addiction did not diminish the culture of addiction but rather reinforced and complicated the psychology and lifestyle of drug addicts.

The criminalisation of drug addiction also had other unfortunate outcomes, as can be observed in cases such as that of Burroughs's uncle,

Horace Burroughs, who was addicted to narcotics and committed suicide, “finding his condition suddenly criminalized” (Harris, “Introduction”, *Junky* xxii). Burroughs’s initial disavowal of his authorship of *Junky* through the adoption of a *nom de plume* is apt given the genetic history of addiction in his family. While Burroughs may be the author of *Junky*, it seems his destiny was authored by his ancestry. *Junky* as such is implicitly writing about a life being written and determined by genetics, addiction and other impersonal forces, and is therefore seminal in terms of the impetus towards authentic agency that informs the ethos of so many of Burroughs’s works.

Heroin addiction throughout Burroughs’s novels registers as both a metaphor for the deterministic forces that sap an individual’s agency while also being, literally, one of the author’s genetic predispositions. For Burroughs, writing is a means of escaping a destiny where his only option is to “write [his] way out” (*Q*, 135). Jennie Skerl claims that Burroughs chose the hipster-addict lifestyle described in *Junky* in order “to find the roots of the unconditioned self and to make a new self free from social controls” (7). Examining Burroughs’s past reveals that his opiate addiction is not necessarily something he chose or cultivated as part of creating a radical persona. In regards to his uncle Horace, Burroughs seems to be following a course that was determined by his DNA. Burroughs’s addiction speaks of fate, or in *Junky*’s criminal argot “‘Fey’ [which] means not only white, but fated or demoniac” (181). While Burroughs may have been questing after the authenticity and the “special vision of reality” (Skerl, 22) offered by addiction, he also appears to be raking over the junk of the past and pushing it into the future. If Burroughs is a modern visionary, it suggests a powerful determinism that appears to be written into, or accentuated by the world of junk.

While the description of heroin addiction provided in *Junky* offers the reader a form of dark and gritty excitement largely absent in the risk averse, mainstream culture of 1950s America, it also presents a lifestyle that is rooted in an unending routine that robs addicts of their autonomy. The tragic fate of addicts is contained in an ideological contradiction, whereby they can

maintain they are free and perhaps even visionary, having deprived themselves of any autonomy they might have had previously. The addict's being is not emblematic of authenticity or liberation, rather it becomes, in *Junky*, an aesthetic object and source of inscrutable fascination, that is to say a subject of illiterature.

***Junky's* Tragic Secret**

Both *Junky* and *Narcotic Agent* are firmly rooted within the genre of the first-person confessional crime novel, offering readers a window on the gritty, urban world of contemporary drug use. The class politics of this particular Ace Books publication suggest that these novels, including their lurid artwork¹⁴, offer white, middle-class readers an insight into the lives and minds of the modern, drugged *lumpenproletariat*: "Here are the facts" (*J*, 15). *Junky* is a noble attempt at describing contemporary addiction, where life is stripped of all meaning bar an unending appetite for junk, while also portraying the egotism that so often surrounds the culture of drug use. Marcus Boon's *The Road of Excess* speaks of the conceited attitude that surrounds the use of opiates:

This sense of superiority, arrogance if you take it seriously, has been a part of opiate culture from the distinguished Greek scholar De Quincey to the self-identified Harvard graduate Ann Marlowe — and takes the form of class snobbery, inverted snobbery, nationalism, or aesthetic hauteur, depending on the individual. (57)

Burroughs and his alter-ego Lee, at one time or another, suffer from all of the above vices. In regards to *Junky*, these negative personality traits are often excused by critics, who use terms such as "hardboiled" and "ironic" when describing the narrative. Some critics may even be hoodwinked by the protagonist's hubris: "Furthermore, drug addiction becomes more than an act of rebellion, it promises vision" (Skerl, 23). But this alleged quest towards vision is fraught with danger and destruction. To quote Charles Baudelaire,

¹⁴ See figures 1 and 2.

“Alas! Man’s vices, however horrifying they seem, contain proof (if only in their infinite varieties) of his taste for the infinite; only, it’s a taste which often goes astray” (qtd. in Boon, 46). The hubris of the addict marks him as a classically tragic hero, one who is arrogant and self-aggrandising but who also warrants our attention and sympathy. Burroughs’s *haute bourgeois* background and composite identity as gentleman junky further highlight the tragic trajectory that forms part of his literary identity.

The fascination that addiction presents as a subject is due to the myriad contradictions and ambiguities it offers, many of which *Junky* deals in. In his addiction, Lee is guided by a psychopathic intent that is grounded in an explicit ethical compromise. The subtitle of the Ace edition, *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, sums up this conflict while this bind defines Burroughs as both an addict and critic of addiction. Yet, the “curiously detached ‘I’ of the novel avoids any psychological description or analysis of motivation” (Skerl, 22). “*Junky’s* absence of psychological depth typical of confessional literature frustrated readers and critics alike” (Wermer-Colan, 505). Burroughs, or more accurately William Lee, despite his hubris, ultimately offers little by way of explanation for his addiction, instead it remains an intractable, biological fact of life. Like a classically tragic figure, Lee is at the mercy of a myriad of powerful yet arbitrary determinants, on which he appears to have little purchase.

Much of *Junkie’s* insight into addiction is offered extratextually, by the “Preface” or “Prologue”¹⁵. While in the “Prologue” there is some suggestion of psychological predilection and a simple biological explanation for Burroughs’s addiction, these insights lack coherence and critical insight¹⁶.

¹⁵ When it came to be published as *Junky* by Penguin Books in 1977, the order of the chapters changed, some 3850 words were added and the “Preface” became the “Prologue”. In addition, the author’s name changed from William Lee to William Burroughs (Harris, *Secret*, 250).

¹⁶ “The question is frequently asked: Why does a man become a drug addict? The answer is that he usually does not intend to become an addict. You don’t wake up one morning and decide to be a drug addict. It takes at least three months’ shooting twice a day to get any habit at all. And you don’t really know what junk sickness is until you have had several habits. It took me almost six months to get my first habit, and then the withdrawal symptoms were mild. I think it no exaggeration to say it takes about a year and several hundred injections to make an addict.

“To this end, the flatness of the narrative and the emphasis on the literal and objective at the expense of the figural and the subjective creates a depthless and inaccessible psyche that frustrates the autobiographical reader coming in the wake of Freud” (Wermer-Colan, 504). The motivations behind the heroin addict’s penchant for “God’s own medicine” remain as inscrutable as those of the Almighty (Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 107). Lee claims that, “You see things different when you return from junk”, yet *Junky’s* insight into addiction is not provided directly, rather readers are left to distil their own knowledge of addiction (*J*, 127). The secret of addiction persists – in keeping with the title of Oliver Harris’s study of the author, *The Secret of Fascination* – in a novel that frequently frustrates attempts to understand addiction. “The secret—of the Invisible Man, of the Enemy Within, and of a textual politics that bears the stamp of power—this secret has an absolutely literal existence” (Harris, 42). Burroughs declares in the prologue to *Junky*, “There is no key, no secret someone else has that he can give you” yet there is a secret knowledge that addiction indirectly points towards (*J*, xli).

Addiction and the Death Drive

Addiction is not an experience but a state of being: “Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life” (*J*, 64). Timothy Melley writes that junk “is something like a person in Burroughs’s work ... as if junk were an injection of humanity itself” (43). Addiction as “a way of life” makes understanding it difficult as it is grounded in subjective experience. Addiction and the addict remain inseparable and indecipherable, adopting contradictory, disruptive patterns of living. The addict is a modern subject hooked on the death drive and, as such, remains enigmatic: “The Dead and The Junky don't care.... They are

The questions, of course, could be asked: Why did you ever try narcotics? Why did you continue using it long enough to become an addict? You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in the other direction. Junk wins by default. I tried it as a matter of curiosity. I drifted along taking shots when I could score. I ended up hooked. Most addicts I have talked to report a similar experience. They did not start using drugs for any reason they can remember. They just drifted along until they got hooked. If you have never been addicted, you can have no clear idea what it means to need junk with the addict’s special need. You don’t decide to be an addict. One morning you wake up sick and you’re an addict” (*J*, xl).

Inscrutable" (*NL*, 231).

Žižek states that, "The Freudian death drive... [is] the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things" (*The Parallax View*, 62). This excessive, passionate surplus enjoyment that Žižek relates to the death drive transforms into *jouissance*, "where enjoyment is experienced as suffering" (Lacan, *Écrits*, 844). For Žižek, the death drive is marked as a drive that appears to be immortal: "it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain" (*The Parallax View*, 62). The "guilt and pain" associated with the death drive is concomitant with "the strange drive to enjoy life in excess". In *Junky* the addict seems emblematic of enjoyment as suffering and also, paradoxically, appears driven to extinguish desire and suffering. These contradictory aspects of the death drive come to the fore in *Junky*. The addict appears dead, yet is locked into a repetitive "undead" cycle of living, caught between excess enjoyment and "guilt and pain".

In *Junky*, the addict appears to be enchained to the death drive, under erasure and insensible to his internal life and the society that surrounds him. "Junk... protects and cushions the body like a warm blanket while death grows to maturity inside. When a junkie is really loaded with junk he looks dead" (334). Junk appears to function in the same manner as "microfascism", a form of "desire [that] desires its own repression", but more accurately, addiction operates as a drive that represses other manifestations of desire (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). For Lacan this desire for the repression or death of desire is always already a part of desire and all drives: "every drive is virtually a death drive" and as such seeks its own extinction, but in turn, the impossibility of fulfilling or killing desire leads to a pattern of repetition which is characteristic of the death drive (*Écrits*, 844). The addict merely accentuates the inorganic and repetitive procedures of the death drive, "the constitutive discord between drive and body: drive as eternal – 'undead', disrupts the instinctual rhythm...[f]or that reason, drive as such is death

drive” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 72). Addiction as such is an explicit form of the death drive because it repetitively seeks to extinguish desire as it appears in other forms, as other drives. The addict not only “looks dead”, but is cut off from life, both within and without: “I have learned the cellular stoicism that junk teaches the user. I have seen a cell full of junkies silent and immobile” (*J*, xli). Addiction, in its compulsive repetition and demand for the erasure of all other drives, is both a slow suicide and a form of living death: “With narcotics, revolt turns in on itself in an act of negation that sends it toward the death-drive, the zero state, a life spent sharing cheap hotel rooms with Nietzsche’s weird guest, nihilism” (Boon, 73). However, this addictive drive towards “the zero state... nihilism” forges a knowledge of anti-knowledge, that is a knowledge of the processes of the death drive and its relation to the symbolic order.

Addiction aligns with the Lacanian death drive in its compulsion to repeat, to extinguish desire and to pursue enjoyment excessively to the point of suffering. Lacan states that “the death drive is only the mask of the symbolic order” (*Ego*, 326). The death drive marks the movement from the “libidinal order, which includes the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego”, into the symbolic order (326). As such the death drive is marked by being “dumb” as it precedes the symbolic order, “that is to say in so far as it hasn't been realised” (326). The absence of a self-knowing protagonist in *Junky* speaks to the addict being “dumb” or outside of the symbolic order.

However, addiction does not so much mask the symbolic order, rather it reveals the symbolic order’s compulsion towards masking the traumatic real using phantasy: “The place of the real [...] stretches from the trauma to the phantasy” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental*, 60). Phantasy protects the real and the real supports phantasy (41). Similarly, while addiction functions to temporarily erase trauma, it protects that trauma by masking it. Addiction masks trauma just as phantasy does, thus addiction explicitly reveals how the symbolic order, using phantasy, functions to elide or cover over the traumatic real. The ability to see how the traumatic real is masked by addiction and the

symbolic order is junk knowledge: that is a kind of secret knowledge that reveals how the symbolic order and the systems of power it supports are dependent on masking the undesirable and traumatic real. David Punter views junk knowledge as revolutionary:

What is at stake in Burroughs is an attempt to persuade the reader of an endless *proliferation* (of a rhizomatic sort of course) which flourishes in secret; yet, once we know the key, the addict's key to all mysteries, reveals itself as omnipresent, as the code handed down by all secret societies, as the substrate on which all organisations have built themselves, as the presumed necessity on which they attempt to project themselves into the future. (50)

The ability of the symbolic order to cover over and protect the traumatic real is the secret of all power: of power as secret. In *Junky*, "this secret has an absolutely literal existence" and "this secret" (the traumatic real) reveals itself in fragments, contradictions and moments of illegibility (Harris, 42). Societal domination organises itself in the same way as addiction: occluding the traumatic real which includes silencing those who do not fit within the symbolic order. As described in *Naked Lunch*, tyrannical "control addicts" cover over the traumatic real of their addictive tendencies using the symbolic order: "The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct" (21). The traumatic real or "naked need" is hidden by the symbolic order. Society and the symbolic order insist that this secret – where the traumatic real is hidden – remain hidden, but instead the addict explicitly performs the elision of the traumatic real. The secret of junk's power is the secret of power in general: erasure. Addict's use substances and patterns of behaviour to occlude the traumatic real, while power uses the symbolic order.

The Flesh Speaks

The narcotics addict, who covers over the traumatic real using “junk”, fosters an image of the subject, not as some abstract philosophical cogito, but as something that is materially determined. Addiction occludes the addict’s agency, giving room for deterministic, material agents to express themselves: “[under] the influence of opiates, the flesh itself, as opposed to the mind begins to speak” (Boon, 58). Oliver Harris suggests that, “[Nothing] Burroughsian is abstract... That is why his work can be so potent and so extraordinary, stamped with a strictly literal, overpoweringly *visceral* force: whether it compels or repels, attracts or disgusts, when Burroughs’s writing is Burroughsian, it bears the stamp of power and achieves ... ‘immediate proximity’” (Harris, *Secret*, 37). The effect of this “*visceral* force” in *Junky* is that Lee and Burroughs alike resist grounding the self in a transcendent subjectivity. While addicts may be searching for the autonomy of a transcendent subjectivity, what they often find are hidden, deterministic forces that deny freedom as such. While *Junky* is a realist text mired in contradictions and ambivalence, it also indirectly and inchoately points towards deterministic forces that are frequently arbitrary and material in form. The addict is not a transcendent subject, rather he adopts the identity of an inscrutable but materially determined subject. As such, the addict is a subject that gestures towards the traumatic real which is elided by phantasy, the symbolic order and, less successfully, by addiction itself.

In the prologue to *Junky* it is evident that the addict attempts to resist all forms of representation and by doing so he occupies an anti-identity: “You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction. Junk wins by default” (*J*, 62). This is a warning against fetishizing the detached ambivalence *Junky* frequently deals in. While Lee explicitly maligns the clandestine subjectivity of the addict, by expressing that subjectivity in a hardboiled, detached and ironic manner, he marks it out as a transgressive, modern and hip mode of being. *Junky* is already dealing in the same ethical and aesthetic contradictions that will become the author’s stock-in-trade. This dichotomy develops from the hardboiled, cynical style of

Junky into the kaleidoscopic violence and transgressive humour of *Naked Lunch*. However, it is important to identify that Burroughs is frequently amplifying what are prevailing but hidden cultural forces: determining factors which Burroughs cannot divorce himself entirely from. As Harris states, “Burroughs reproduces the ideological and affective power of the seductive image world, and how clearly his words insinuate themselves through critical and cultural reproduction. But to recognize this is still not enough... complicity in all he opposes is the very *condition* of Burroughs’ work, its *material ground* as well as its material effect” (*Secret*, 31). While this complicity is apparent in *Junky*’s ironic subtitle, *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, it is also part of the novel’s epistemological economy; *Junky* hides as much as it reveals.

Junky is at once generous in regards to articulating the lived reality of addiction but ambivalent in regards to its causes. Despite presenting a detailed description of the lived experience of being an addict. *Junky* does not offer a discernible theory or thesis of addiction, nor direct insight into the psychological and personal circumstances that might underlie the protagonist’s addiction. In Burroughs’s writing, Robin Lydenberg suggests, “the part never merely “stands for” the whole... but displaces and devours it” (40). Just as the part eats the whole, in *Junky* reality ravages knowledge and the literal devours the literary. As Mary McCarthy writes, “The literalness of Burroughs is the opposite of literature” (5). The primary casualties of *Junky*’s literalness are “the figural and the subjective” (Wermer-Colan, 504). In *Junky*, Lee’s articulate performance only hints towards “A Man Within” (*NL*, 14). Lee, the protagonist, is an inscrutable and an apparently non-subjective subject. This cocktail of dense realism and ambiguity supplies much of *Junky*’s enigmatic charm and establishes Burroughs as author-addict and invisible man.

Burroughs was aware of *Junky*’s non-literary status: “*Junky* was published in 1953 as an original paperback, and there were no reviews at the time. After all, the book was presented as an ‘inside look’ at the world of a drug addict, with no literary pretensions” (“Space Age”, 265). What Samuel

Beckett says of Burroughs's craft is apt for describing *Junky's* austere minimalism: "Well he's a writer" (Beckett, qtd. by Burroughs in Gertz, "When Ginsberg And Burroughs Met Samuel Beckett"). The author of *Junky* stands apart from both the literary forbears he mentions in *Junky's* "Prologue"¹⁷ and his contemporaries in his wish to remain factual and objective yet inscrutable and hidden. Burroughs is an author of anti-literary writing and *Junky* bears witness to the origins of this artistic identity.

Harvard Ties and Junk Bonds

Junky began William Burroughs's career as a published writer by adopting the first-person narrative style of Jack Kerouac to voice a particular topic and aesthetic: modern, urban addiction. Burroughs ventured into literature at an even earlier juncture with the recently published *And the Hippos Were Boiled Alive in Their Tanks* (2008), a novel co-written with Jack Kerouac which recounts the events surrounding the killing of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr. While both Kerouac and Burroughs use a similar style of narration in that text, their unique voices are made plain. Kerouac's idiolect is warm and gregarious; Burroughs's suggests the cold, isolated pragmatism of an inner-city drug deal. Kerouac sums up the ambiance of the novel and its production when stating, "both of us had a lot to say, but there was no room to say it in, we were so tense and close" (233). Burroughs's character, Will Dennison, appears characteristically alienated from the world: "I began to get a feeling familiar to me ... of being the only sane man in a nut-house. It doesn't make you feel superior but depressed and scared, because there is nobody you can contact" (137). At the end of the novel, Kerouac, as Mike Ryko, becomes – out of empathy for Lucien's Philip Tourian – embroiled in the crime itself, so much so that Kerouac was arrested on suspicion of being an accessory after the fact in the killing of David Kammerer¹⁸. Meanwhile Burroughs's character, Will Dennison, offers shrewd advice to Tourian: "Get a good

¹⁷ "Oscar Wilde, Anatole France, Baudelaire, even Gide" (*J*, xii).

¹⁸ Kerouac's experience of being in custody is recounted in detail in his novel *Vanity of Duluo* (1968).

lawyer, you'll be out in two years" (213).

The marked divergence between Kerouac's and Burroughs's styles and personalities in *Hippos* became more apparent as their careers developed. Burroughs spoke of this:

I said that he had an influence in encouraging me to write, not an influence on what I wrote. [...] So far as our style of work and content, we couldn't be more opposite. He always said that the first draft was the best. I said, 'Well, that may work for you, Jack, but it doesn't work for me.' I'm used to writing and rewriting things at least three times. It's just a completely different way of working.

(qtd. in Skerl, "Interview with William Burroughs")

While Kerouac found his optimal form and tone in *On the Road*, and easily drew subject matter from his own life, Burroughs struggled with his writing almost as much as he struggled with addiction: "I am discouraged about my writing"¹⁹ (*Letters to Ginsberg*, 76). While Kerouac attempts to present his experience in a raw and unmediated literary format, Burroughs is compelled towards knowledge and understanding, even if that compulsion leads to failure, confusion and discouragement.

Lacking Kerouac's open and conversational literary style, Burroughs's early fiction is instead informed by a profound absence where, in the case of *Junky*, the subject of addiction is marked by being simultaneously under and over-determined. Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield describe the epistemological impasse of addiction, stating that it "explains both too much and too little; but we seemingly cannot do without it" (15). This epistemological economy informs all of Burroughs's early works in different ways and marks out the addict as a thoroughly modern mode of subjectivity, despite addiction's resistance to theorisation. Burroughs's first novel, *Junky*, employs certain techniques to mark the addict as a subject that actively resists analytical enquiry. *Junky* renders the subject of addiction as the

¹⁹ December 6th, 1954.

subject of illiterature and thus creates a literature of absence and anti-knowledge.

Burroughs's cold, objective narrative style is not only a product of his pragmatic personality and his experience as a drug addict, it also develops out of his time as a postgraduate Anthropology student at Harvard University: "*Junky* mimics the ethnographic field report, detailing the territories and habits of various urban American subcultures and documenting their emergence or decline in the immediate post-war era. Its attention to hipster idiom and criminal argot makes it a study of underworld linguistics" (Harris, "Introduction", *Junky*, x). While *Junky* is indebted to Kerouac's habit of writing from personal experience, it differs in scope and method from anything Kerouac ever wrote. In the extended form of *Junky*, including its "Prologue", there is an attempt, not only to describe heroin addiction but explain it. In so doing Burroughs provides an academic rationale for his writing: he is trying to find a thesis for addiction. In this sense *Junky* is both an autobiographical novel and a first-person anthropological study of the culture of contemporary heroin addiction. That the novel is frequently used as a primary text in research regarding heroin addiction in post-war, urban America is testament to its cultural importance (Boon, 75). The factual basis of *Junky* in tandem with its quest for a theory of addiction makes it almost academic; it is the failure of its theory that makes it illiterature.

This failure is fundamental to illiterature's alchemy and Burroughs's ability to turn theoretical disappointment into artistic success. Oliver Harris declares, "[it] is a major difficulty to deal with a writer so radically contemporary who seems so perversely, and unfashionably, ante – if not antitheoretical" (38). However, while Harris is astute in his reading of Burroughs's pervasive anti-theoretical praxis, the antitheoretical bent of *Junky* sketches its own kind of theory. While post-Cartesian thought often focuses on the self-knowing subject, later theories – from the Freudian unconscious to Marx's ideology – insist that the self remains Other to itself. As Lacan outlines, "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.

I am not whenever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 166). Through identifying with this alienated, unconscious self, the addict makes himself enigmatic, capricious and self-alienated, so much so that many literary figures who became addicts, such as Jean Cocteau²⁰ and Thomas De Quincey²¹, cannot seem to explain their addiction. Burroughs talks in similar terms as Lacan in *The Western Lands*: "How long does it take a man to learn that he does not, cannot want what he 'wants'?" (257). Similarly, for Slavoj Žižek, "freedom means not only that I am not fully determined by my surroundings but also that I am not fully determined by myself" (*Indivisible*, 71). An unconscious motivation behind addiction is evident in *Junky's* "Prologue":

Most addicts I have talked to report a similar experience. They did not start using drugs for any reason they can remember. They just drifted along until they got hooked. If you have never been addicted, you can have no clear idea what it means to need junk with the addict's special need. You don't decide to be an addict. One morning you wake up sick and you're an addict. (xl)

What is implicit here is that the cause of addiction will not present itself directly to the addict or the reader of *Junky*. Rather the addict and reader of *Junky* reside in a naively literal, narcotised dream world that demands and simultaneously resists analysis. Burroughs adopts forms of ambiguity and literalness in *Junky* to illustrate the illegibility of addiction. Similarly, a complete knowledge of the self is unobtainable but in Burroughs's work this epistemological problem becomes a stylistic feature. While Burroughs seems to share Žižek and Lacan's sentiments regarding the inauthenticity of the

²⁰ "It is not I who become addicted, it is my body" (*Opium: The Diary of a Cure*, 73).

²¹ "If in this world there is one misery having no relief, it is the pressure on the heart from the Incommunicable. And if another Sphinx should arise to propose another enigma to man-saying, what burden is that which only is insupportable by human fortitude? I should answer at once: It is the burden of the Incommunicable" (*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, 114).

conscious self, he also identifies the unconscious as the well-spring of the unknowable traumas and discontents that appear to guide his life course. Burroughs does not relinquish the quest to understand and conquer addiction, and it can be suggested that his early novels represent different aesthetic methods which attempt to conceptualise addiction, or at least the compulsion towards addiction, in different ways.

Junky is a failed anthropological study that mutates from hard-boiled pulp fiction to retroactively become, with the critical recognition of *Naked Lunch*, literary fiction. “Read always in retrospect, the typically flat, terse narrative of *Junkie* has long appeared solid straight rock beside the treacherous whirlpool of *Naked Lunch*” (Harris *Secret* 49). Various critics suggest that there is a chasm of difference between *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*. Summing up these attitudes, Harris suggests that “what is queer about *Junkie* is its ‘straightness’ – its ‘uncharacteristically traditional’²² form, its un-Burroughsian ‘simplicity’” (50). While Burroughs’s first novel is markedly different from *Naked Lunch*, it still embodies some of the discomfiting power of that text. Where *Naked Lunch* is much more thoroughgoing, playful and complex in its dismissal of both standard novelistic form and the possibility of a knowledge of addiction, *Junky* still engages with the possibility that addiction can be encompassed in a first-person, realist text.

While *Junky*’s ‘Prologue’ begins with Burroughs outlining his early biography, suggesting a psychological or subjective cause of addiction, this is later replaced by a biological explanation: that junk is, in and of itself addictive: “I drifted along taking shots when I could score. I ended up hooked” (xl). This explanation is frustrating because it is simply self-evident, but also because it jars with the text. *Junky* describes a world so full of emptiness and suffering that it requires the balm of narcotics to make it tolerable for its inhabitants. This seems to be a point that Burroughs misses in his explicit examination of junk. *Junky* fails to directly recognise that addiction is not simply a disease, but a symptom. Like an old-fashioned prohibitionist

²² Tanner (111).

Burroughs appears to believe that addiction is the biological cause of social deprivation and trauma, yet social deprivation and trauma are the primary causes of addiction. Bruce K. Alexander outlines how addiction largely results from social and cultural traumas and a concomitant dislocation:

History shows that addiction can be rare in a society for many centuries, but can become nearly universal when circumstances change – for example, when a cohesive tribal culture is crushed or an advanced civilization collapses. Of course, this historical perspective does not deny that differences in vulnerability are built into each individual's genes, individual experience, and personal character, but it removes individual differences from the foreground of attention, because societal determinants are so much more powerful. Addiction is much more a social problem than an individual disorder. (2)

Burroughs only hints at the social causes of addiction when he writes, "You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction. Junk wins by default" (11). While this suggests that addiction is a form of cognitive behaviour, rather than simply a physical disease for instance, it only vaguely indicates that psychological dislocation is a root cause of addiction. With this discrepancy it becomes clear that Burroughs's text is unable to directly engage with important determining factors regarding addiction. The literary potential of *Junky* is founded upon it being a theoretical failure that can become, through critical intervention, theoretical insight. Finding the social, anthropological or psychological causes of addiction requires reflection and intervention on the part of the reader.

Desolation Angels

While Burroughs in *Junky* suggests that heroin is simply a biologically addictive substance – that heroin addiction results from consuming heroin – he also effectively illustrates the barren, violent and impoverished world of

the addict. Heroin accelerates the process by which, “[after] a while you could get used to anything” (Camus, *The Stranger*, 41). Freud universalises this theme in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Life, as we find it, is too hard for us ... In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures ... There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensible to it. (30)

The grim existence described in *Junky* heightens Freud’s analysis. Although *Junky* and *Naked Lunch* describe violent acts, the aesthetics and context of these are markedly different. Unlike the grotesque, kaleidoscopic and phantasmagoric scenes of *Naked Lunch*, the world of *Junky* is a profoundly sombre and colourless space, yet it is still full of intense pain and anger. This dark reality is recounted throughout the novel but particular passages stand out, such as the following:

We all had a few drinks and Jack began telling a story.

“My partner was going through the joint. The guy was sleeping, and I was standing over him with a three-foot length of pipe. I found in the bathroom. The pipe had a faucet on the end of it, see? All of a sudden he comes up and jumps straight out of bed, running. I let him have it with the faucet end, and he goes on running right out into the other room, the blood spurting out of his head ten feet every time his heart beat.” He made a pumping motion with his hand. “You could see the brain there and the blood coming out of it.” Jack began to laugh uncontrollably. “My girl was waiting out in the car. She called me – ha-ha-ha! – she called me – ha-ha-ha! – a cold-blooded killer.”

He laughed until his face was purple. (18-19)

This tale of criminal brutality ends the scene and never gets mentioned again. The use of non-sequiturs is more evident in Burroughs’s subsequent works

where he implements the Burroughsian “routine”. This “routine” form – based on the performance of comedy routines by stand-up comedians and vaudeville performers – is explicitly adopted later in *Queer* where it interrupts the main narrative. In *Queer* the “routine” is a form of performative parenthesis only obliquely related to the enclosing plot. The function of *Naked Lunch*’s “routines” are markedly different. That text is constituted by many “routines” where they establish a temporary narrative structure in a text that lacks overall structural unity. In *Junky*, the above story or “routine” highlights the arbitrary and cruel culture of urban drug addiction. *Junky*’s accompanying “Glossary” gives a definition for “routine” that is illustrative of its function throughout Burroughs’s work: “Put Down a Hype or Routine ... To give someone a story, to persuade, or con someone” (132). For Burroughs the dual wellsprings of literature are artifice and ambivalence. In the world of *Junky* to “Put down a routine” is both to tell a story and to con. However, Jack’s story above, while fuelled by machismo and sadistic cruelty, is illustrative of the landscape of violence and discontent in which addiction proliferates. While Jack’s story might appear as only tangentially related to *Junky*’s narrative, it effectively details some of the social causes of addiction that *Junky*’s more reflective and self-aware passages ignore.

In such a predatory and unpredictable environment, addiction provides the only sense of logic, meaning or narrative direction for junky and *Junky* alike. In *Junky*, “[the] formation of four habits is recounted, each one leading to a climax of trouble with the law and painful withdrawal” (Skerl 30). While the evolution of Lee’s addiction provides something akin to plot, it is often arbitrary anecdotes involving other characters that punctuate the novel, underlining the haphazard and diffuse nature of junk culture. The opaque subjectivity of the protagonist, Lee, offers first-hand accounts of the experiences of other addicts, often without interjection or critical analysis, leaving the reader to digest the raw data provided in this quasi-anthropological study. In another scene Mary, who happens to be “queer for” the psychopathic Jack, describes her life as a prostitute:

“Always build a John up. If he has any sort of body at all say,
‘Oh, don’t ever hurt me.’ A John is different from a sucker. When

you're with a sucker you're on the alert all the time. You give him nothing. A sucker is just to be taken. But a John is different. You give him what he pays for. When you're with him you enjoy yourself and you want him to enjoy himself, too”.

“If you want to really bring a man down, light a cigarette in the middle of intercourse. Of course, I really don't like men at all sexually. What I really dig is chicks. I get a kick out of taking a proud chick and breaking her spirit, making her see she is just an animal. A chick is never beautiful after she's been broken. Say, this is sort of a fireside kick,” she said, pointing to the radio which was the only light in the room.

Her face contorted into an expression of monkey-like rage as she talked about men who accosted her on the street. “Sonofabitch!” she snarled. “They can tell when a woman isn't looking for a pickup. I used to cruise around with brass knuckles on under my gloves just waiting for one of those peasants to crack at me.” (*J*, 28)

Mary here describes the cognitive dissonance required to be an addict and prostitute. Her compromised character, as both an abused and abusive woman, is prototypical in regards to the behaviour of characters in Burroughs's early novels. Characters like Mary reveal how dominant social structures interpellate dominated, degraded subjects who long to dominate and degrade others. In the violent world of *Junky* Mary is both perpetrator (“I get a kick out of taking a proud chick and breaking her spirit, making her see she is just an animal”) and victim (“They can tell when a woman isn't looking for a pickup”). Mary seems to be abused and damaged, but also proactive with her brass knuckles hidden under her gloves. Addiction is just another form of armoury used as a means of defence in this cruel environment. The unpleasant reality of this underworld demands the use of drugs to provide some sense of direction, camaraderie, purpose, enjoyment and protection. The same is true of *Junky*, where junk addiction provides it

with something approaching narrative structure, psychological motivation and character development. Out of the miasma of modern, urban discontent and aimlessness, junk seems to provide some semblance of purpose, pleasure and social identity for the *lumpenproletariat*. It is precisely at this crossroads that Burroughs meets his cultural forbearers, his (anti-)social identity and his artistic destiny.

Like Jean Genet, Burroughs recognises “in thieves, traitors and murderers, in the ruthless and the cunning, a deep beauty - a sunken beauty” (*The Thief's Journal*, 49). In the “Prologue” Burroughs writes of his affection for the novel *You Can't Win* (1926) by Jack Black, a burglar, addict and vagrant author who Burroughs read in his youth (xxxviii). Burroughs's reading of Jack Black's novel seems to have piqued the author's interest in the cultural underbelly of urban America. The “Prologue” suggests that the gritty criminal culture described in Black's novel inspired Burroughs to pursue and write about its contemporary equivalent. With the rise of metropolises after World War I “particular locations in the big cities—Montmartre in Paris, Soho in London, and 42nd Street in New York—became associated with narcotic use. These were the great racial, sexual, and class melting pots at the centres of modern cities: home to red-light districts, nightclubs, theatres, and cinemas; places of hybridity, mixture, danger” (Boon, 63). By describing such a world, Burroughs is picking up the mantle of an alternative literary tradition whose contributors include Jean Genet and Jack Black.

While the young Burroughs seems to have been enthralled by the urban underworld, in *Junky* it is apparent that Lee's relationship with New York's underclass is primarily based on his need of junk. “Alan Ansen suggested that one of the reasons that Burroughs became a junkie was to provide himself with the semblance of a social life, appointments, meetings, and so on”, or as doctor Benway puts it, “addiction imposes contact” (Miles, 1242, *NL*, 30). Junk appears to create an anti-social form of sociality; indeed, this seems to be an effect of the drug: “The drive to non-sexual sociability comes from the same place sex comes from, so when I have an H or M shooting habit I am non-sociable” (*J*, 124). Conversely the community of addicts is entirely arbitrary and interchangeable. “[Junky] social organization

is necessarily discontinuous, improvisatory, and not rigidly structured or centred” (Murphy, 50). After Lee checks into Lexington treatment centre, a doctor tells him that the “procedure here is more or less impersonal” (*J*, 61). And what is true of the medical treatment of addiction is even more pervasive in the society of addiction: outside of the junk relationship, “we don’t need you around here any more” (*NL*, 133). Underlying the junk community is the unspoken maxim of “‘total need’: You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need” (*NL*, xxxix). As such the social body of the addict’s cultural milieu is fragmented with only addiction providing it with anything approaching unity and identity. Lying shallowly beneath the veneer of addiction’s sociality is the profound dislocation that is a primary cause of addiction. The fragmentedness of the junky’s social life speaks to a lack of psychosocial integration:

Psychosocial integration is a profound interdependence between individual and society that normally grows and develops throughout each person's lifespan... Psychosocial integration is experienced as a sense of identity because stable social relationships provide people with a set of duties and privileges that define who they are in their own minds.... Psychosocial integration makes human life bearable and even joyful at its peaks. (Alexander, 58)

Contrary to this, drug addiction also provides individuals with “social relationships”, that, in tandem with the effects of drugs, “makes human life bearable and even joyful at its peaks”. However, the addict’s social being becomes ever more structured as part of a society where individuals are merely nodes in a system of drug supply. Addiction dehumanises subjects at the physical, psychological and social level, reducing them to mere consumers without subjective form or content.

Skerl claims that Burroughs became an addict because he was in search of “an absolute that will give peace of mind and provide escape from a repulsive social world devoid of spiritual values” (22). However, the world that Burroughs escapes into is the dark doppelganger of the one he purportedly leaves behind. One of *Junky*’s critical functions is to affirm the

social, cultural and spiritual similarities between mainstream America and its narcotic subculture. Furthermore, the junk world does not provide “peace of mind” and “escape from a repulsive world devoid of spiritual values”, rather it amplifies the trauma and discontents that are the fertile ground where addiction flourishes. While addicts frequently pursue addiction to escape their trauma and discontents, addiction becomes the very marker of trauma and discontent. Addiction is not a holistic panacea, instead being an addict involves:

the replacement of myths of human progress, of individuation, of development, by the brute facts of the absence of escape, the tying down to the wheel – not in this case the wheel of desire with its many, if painful, points and spokes, but the more bitter wheel, which perhaps Saint Catherine knew, the wheel which reproduces the same point of stasis while the body is being torn apart and demonstrating an endless, but in the end, unfriendly, resilience. (Punter, 48)

Lee in *Junky* is adept at describing the disenchantment and unfriendly resilience that accompanies heroin addiction. Indeed, the pleasure of heroin in *Junky* is notable by its absence. Addiction is less an escape from the discontents that *Junky* describes than a painful acceptance of the “absence of escape”. A reader of *Junky* might ask, ‘Why would anyone willingly enter into a world of such degradation?’ which begs another question, ‘Where is the joy of junk?’

Because of the absence of traditional forms of beauty in *Junky*, the reader is left to assume that the hidden pleasure of junk, that is pursued with such drive and focus, exists in the experience of heroin intoxication. *Junky* rarely describes the pleasure of drugs and when it does²³ – like on the occasion that Lee first tries morphine – it is followed by “a strong feeling of fear. I had the feeling that some horrible image was just beyond the field

²³ “Morphine hits the backs of the legs first, then the back of the neck, a spreading wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines, like lying in warm salt water” (*J*, 23).

of vision, moving, as I turned my head, so that I never quite saw it. I felt nauseous" (*J*, 23). Instead of allowing the reader to bask in the disembodied zero space of opiates, *Junky* details little of the somatic pleasure that the reader assumes junk must surely provide. Instead the reader, observing the junky's relentless suffering and toil, "must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111). The hermetic pleasure of junk is the source of readerly fascination and, perhaps, envy. As David Punter writes:

[We] sense another root of the demonization of the addict, which is envy, that which is withheld readily becomes the precious, that which is not available for the discourse of the everyday, that which manifests itself only in hints of the numinous, moments where the gaps between, or beneath, words come to seem more important than the words themselves and where secrecy becomes what Heidegger refers to as the 'ground of Being'. (54)

The "demonization of the addict" has the same origin as the fascination that draws readers to *Junky*: the "precious" incommunicable secret of intoxication. Readers are rarely given anything approaching an intoxicated pay-off in *Junky*. Instead they are shown a motley cast of addicts that "all looked alike somehow. They all looked like junk" (*J*, 31). Ann Marlowe explains that "[heroin] is a stand-in, a stop-gap, a mask, for what we believe is missing. Like the 'objects' seen by Plato's man in a cave, dope is the shadow cast by cultural movements we can't see directly" (155). The heroin addict is replacing forms of enjoyment from which he has been disbarred with a more immediate form of enjoyment. Ole Bjerg outlines how the "complete satisfaction of desire experienced by the drug user in his high is at the same time a momentary cancellation of his desire. Together with the desire, his engagement in social reality, and thereby a fundamental part of what makes him a subject at all, also disappears" (11). The blank subjectivity of the addict is both a symptom of his disengagement from "social reality" and a way to respond in kind to a society that has disbarred addicts from enjoyment. If heroin addicts are disbarred from society's approved pleasures, *Junky* similarly denies the reader any direct engagement with or description of

heroin's alleged pleasures. In *Junky* we only see the shadow of heroin and not its hedonic effects. Junk is a sunken beauty that can only be revealed to the user, yet these effects are artificial ephemera, concealing the true horror of addiction, something which is made all too apparent throughout *Junky*.

The Subjectivity of Junk

The ugly lifestyle recounted in *Junky* only vaguely suggests that heroin intoxication is enjoyable. The pleasure of junk is described as the absence of pain: "I experienced the agonizing deprivation of junk sickness, and the pleasure of relief when junk- thirsty cells drank from the needle. Perhaps all pleasure is relief" (12). Gilbert-Lecomte speaks similarly of the utility of drugs:

And now acknowledge this principle, which is the sole justification for the taste for drugs: what drug users ask for, consciously or unconsciously from drugs, is never these dubious sensual delights, this hallucinatory proliferation of fantastic images, this sensual hyper-acuity, stimulation, or all the other nonsense which those who know nothing about "artificial paradises" dream about. It is solely and very simply a change of state, a new climate where their consciousness will be less painful. (qtd. in Boon, 68-69)

Apparently drugs like heroin are not intensely euphoric but simply relieve pain; hence any perceived pleasure is only relative to pain experienced previously. The enjoyment of the heroin addict is based on the drug's ability to negate pain.

The transcendent emptiness offered by heroin resonates with modern conceptions of subjectivity. *Junky* suggests, through its absence, that the subjective enjoyment of the heroin addict is a myth and a traumatic void around which fictions are generated and on which cultural prejudices are foisted. The enjoyment of the addict is pure lack, as is the subjectivity around which the entire furtive lifestyle and culture of addiction orients itself. David Punter spoke earlier of the envy created in response to the hidden,

unspeakable pleasure of addiction. However, the popular perception of the excessive pleasure of narcotics is disputed in *Junky* where instead opiates are used primarily for the relief of pain, numbing emotions and feeding addiction. Lee in *Junky* lacks affect and almost any semblance of an inner, subjective life, thus he perfectly embodies the addict as a subject of illiterature, that is a subject who intensely desires the occlusion of his inner life along with all its traumas and discontents.

The addict as a blank subject of illiterature resonates with modern theories of subjectivity. Writing on subjectivity, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the function of an inner life is something like that of a drug. A personality or inner life is a fiction that human beings require in order to endure the painfully mundane reality of existence. Furthermore:

[If] we continue the division long enough, we will finally stumble upon a point at which a part will no longer be divided into smaller parts, but into a (smaller) part AND NOTHING – this nothing “is” the subject ... Subjects are literally holes, gaps, in the positive order of being: they dwell only in the interstices of being, in those places where the job of creation is not done to the end ... Far from being the Crown of Creation, a subject bears witness to the fact that there are spots of unfinished reality in the order of things. (Žižek, “Ideology I”)

Here Žižek describes the emptiness of the subject and its function as a potential for change, “where the job of creation is not done to the end”. Ideology fills this gap with the notion of an inner life, a something where there is a nothing and “this nothing ‘is’ the subject”. The tacit acceptance of an inner life ostensibly overcomes this trauma – of subjectivity being nothing instead of something – both for the subject and its Other.

In *Junky*, the inner life of the addict is approximate to the imagined and never described intense pleasure of heroin. However, what *Junky* articulates is that the pleasure of junk is entirely negative and has more to do with the absence of pain than the presence of pleasure. *Junky* suggests that the imagined fullness of narcotic pleasure is misperceived; rather, what *Junky* consistently and explicitly describes is how the onerous lifestyle demanded

by addiction consumes the addict. Heroin provides an experiential approximation of the empty subject described by Žižek, but addiction compels the addict towards an inflexible, repetitious and oppressive existence. The drive the addict has towards drugs is a grim form of the Schopenhauerian will. *Junky* details addiction as not so much a compulsion towards the intense pleasure of drugs, but an innate compulsion towards compulsion itself. The nothingness of the subject apparently creates a vacuum that drives the subject to fill nothing with something. However, at the same time the addict is compelled towards the erasure of trauma and discontent: the replacement of a painful something with a narcotised nothing. The addict is caught in a contradictory double bind, enslaved to the pursuit of something that is a kind of nothing. This contradiction does not resolve itself dialectically, rather it sustains addiction as a dynamic mode of being, that is also the very image of subjective stasis.

Whereas the narcotic emptiness of heroin addiction robs addicts of their autonomy, in Žižek's conception of subjectivity, the subject, as a cache of nothingness, remains as the potential for change. The addict forgoes this potential by becoming addicted and creating a lifestyle that oppresses their adaptability. Where the average subject, in Žižek's estimation, obsessively works to establish the fullness of an inner life in order to overcome the trauma of subjectivity's emptiness, the heroin addict compulsively pursues a narcotised zero space as the grounds for their being in order to escape the traumatic contents of their inner life. The addict is orientated towards the pre-symbolic order marked by the death drive, "which includes the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego" (Lacan, *Ego*, 326). The addict's pursuit of emptiness and silence can be considered a rejection of the symbolic order. While Žižek attempts to foreground the emptiness of the subject, *Junky* implicitly suggests that the pursuit of emptiness, rather than being an engagement with the truth of being, is itself an onerous form of false consciousness that denies that an individual subject contains substantial subjective and emotional content. Both concepts, of the subjective fullness of an inner life and an entirely empty subjectivity, are flawed. In *Junky* the disconnect between the inner life of the addict and their

body explicitly outlines the cognitive disassociation required in pursuit of an empty subjectivity. Lee describes this division, between the bodily destruction caused by addiction and its subjective experience, in his portrayal of Jack, a fellow addict:

His face was lined with suffering in which his eyes did not participate. It was a suffering of his cells alone. He himself – the conscious ego that looked out of the glazed, alert-calm hoodlum eyes – would have nothing to do with this suffering of his rejected other self, a suffering of the nervous system, of flesh and viscera and cells. (15)

This disjunction between body and mind is illustrative of a similar disconnect that Žižek recognizes, between the “fantasmatic” personality and the subjective Real:

What is difficult is not to perceive the wealth of personality beneath the face, but to avoid this trap, to ABSTRACT from the mirage of this wealth and to acquire the ability to see the de-fetishized reality of the subject: to see the gap, the darkness, without filling it in with the fantasmatic content of “inner life” that is supposed to shine through it. In other words, the difficult thing is to see reality in its pre-ontological status, as not fully constituted, to see the nothing where there is nothing to see... in contrast to constituted reality, in which actuality is more than potentiality, present more than future, in subjectivity, potentiality stands “higher” than reality: subject is a paradoxical entity which exists only as ex-sisting, standing outside itself in an ontological openness. (Žižek, “Ideology I”)

An addict, like Jack described above, while ostensibly pursuing an empty subjectivity is incapable of standing outside of himself and “ex-sisting” in an “ontological openness”. However, while Žižek may argue for the emptiness of the subject, both complete emptiness and complete fullness are impossible for an individual subject to attain. Jean Paul Sartre states that “[nothingness] lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm” (21), but the opposite is also

true: even where there is apparently nothing, there is something. An example of this is the traumatic real which cannot be assimilated and is experienced as an absence rather than a presence. Despite his attempts at erasure, the addict's traumas and physical discomforts are often redoubled by his addiction. Burroughs, outside of his addiction, attempted in other ways to erase his past, burning his diary as a youth (Miles, 130), destroying many of his personal correspondences (Harris, *Secret*, 43), and viewing writing as a means to "change fact" (*Q*, 55). Similarly, in *Junky* Burroughs consistently denies subjective or psychological causation in regards to addiction, rather he, "drifted along taking shots [and] ended up hooked. Most addicts... report a similar experience. They did not start using drugs for any reason they can remember" (*J*, xl). Although the personal causes of his addiction are largely absent in *Junky*, there remains some residue of traumas that might have contributed to the development of Burroughs's junk habit. While Burroughs throughout his fiction portrays the desire to achieve the autonomy and self-actualising potential of the empty subjectivity Žižek describes, heroin offered only a temporary simulacrum of that negative image of subjectivity. Despite the addict's attempts at erasure and autonomy he remains enslaved to an ever more limited mode of cognition.

The discontents of addiction remain despite the addict's attempts to burn them in the furnace of narcosis. The addict contains within him a substance, a stain of being that is often traumatic. While this traumatic experience is unique to each addict and cannot be decided upon *a priori*, it still exists. Gabor Maté writes that, "[a] hurt is at the centre of all addictive behaviours... The wound may not be as deep and the ache not as excruciating, and it may even be entirely hidden—but it's there. As we'll see, the effects of early stress or adverse experiences directly shape both the psychology and the neurobiology of addiction in the brain" (80-81). These wounds are obvious in regards to a character like Mary, and they permeate *Junky's* grey and oppressive atmosphere. Lee's wounds, however, are conspicuous by their absence, as are any descriptions of the pleasure of opiates. Eric Laurent suggests that addiction has nothing to do with enjoyment, rather it is "the verification of the colour of emptiness" (138-139). While addicts often

pursue subjective emptiness as an antidote to their traumas, this addictive pursuit of self-erasure becomes an overarching signifier of their unspoken pain.

Addiction reflects deeper traumas that have come to determine the course of the addict's life. Opiates offer a temporary respite for a dislocated, impoverished and post-traumatic existence, but addicts, while evading the experience of trauma, become locked into a form of cognitive behaviour that is a mode of being as well as a way of seeing. Addicts attempt to replace one form of cognitive behaviour with another, but addiction is more often an extension of this post-traumatic stress rather than an antidote to it. While the addict attempts to erase his traumatic and painful subjective experiences, these experiences remain as powerful cognitive determinants. The addict is a subject directly gripped by her addiction and indirectly beholden to the traumatic causes of her addiction. Maurice Blanchot writes, "[whoever] is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees" (*The Space of Literature*, 33). Trauma augments cognitive behaviour and so too does addiction. Addiction, as a form of fascination, is a mode of cognitive behaviour where the addict "doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees". This cognitive dissonance has a practical function: the addict is attempting to make his traumas insensible. Addiction is quite often a rational choice that helps the addict avoid the experience of post-trauma through obsessively pursuing a powerful mode of distraction. The pursuit of these hedonic moments is informed by a compulsion towards temporary avoidance of an experience of post-traumatic stress. Addiction offers a temporary respite, an altered state of consciousness, from a post-traumatic mode of cognitive behaviour.

In truth cognition is most often re-cognition. Cognitive behaviour, formed out of past subjective experiences, has a profound influence on an individual's future subjective experience. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the titular character declares that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison" (Act II, Scene II). Hamlet follows this remark with one that relates the alienation of addiction to the psychological experience of trauma: "God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count

myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (Act II, Scene II). Dreams are often the space where trauma articulates itself most freely, while the description of being bound "in a nut shell... king of infinite space" is an apt one for narcotics. Burroughs suffered from bad dreams as a child: "I was afraid some day the dream would still be there when I woke up. I recall hearing a maid talk about opium and how smoking opium brings sweet dreams, and I said: 'I will smoke opium when I grow up'" (*J*, xxxvii). Opiates allowed Burroughs to escape his bad dreams and temporarily make himself "a king of infinite space"; it provides that facility for many. But the relationship between childhood nightmares and servants of questionable morals raises a monstrosity from Burroughs's past, all the more horrific for the ambivalence that surrounds it:

Nursy was nevertheless responsible for a major trauma that occurred when Burroughs was four years old, something so extreme and shocking that despite ten years of psychoanalysis he was never able to properly retrieve it. Different analysts proposed various explanations, and Burroughs himself eventually identified some elements of the event. One Thursday in the late summer or autumn of 1918, possibly because of little Bill's hysterical tantrums, Mary Evans took him along with her on her day off. Mary Evans had a girlfriend whose boyfriend was a veterinarian who worked from his home on the outskirts of St. Louis. They went there for a picnic. It seems that Burroughs had been there before, because he also had a dim memory of seeing the vet deliver a foal, though he felt that this might be a "screen" memory. The general consensus among his analysts was that Mary had encouraged Billy to fellate the vet and that, scared, Billy had bitten the man's penis, causing him to smack Billy on the head. (Miles, 73)

Alan Ansen and James Grauerholz identify a section of “Word”²⁴ that provides some textual support for the abuse revealed in Burroughs’s sessions of analysis. Another section of *Interzone*, called “Lee’s Journals” contains traces of the event²⁵ and there are also some hints of the trauma scattered around *Junky*. For instance, before Lee relates how he “will smoke opium” when he grows up, he mentions something vaguely reminiscent of childhood trauma: “Actually my earliest memories are colored by a fear of nightmares. I was afraid to be alone, and afraid of the dark, and afraid to go to sleep because of dreams where a supernatural horror seemed always on the point of taking shape” (xxxvii). Later in *Junky* Lee describes an experience of nostalgia and the sense of lost innocence brought on by mild withdrawal:

I remembered a long time ago when I lay in bed beside my mother, watching lights from the street move across the ceiling and down the walls. I felt the sharp nostalgia of train whistles, piano music down a city street, burning leaves.

A mild degree of junk sickness always brought me the magic of childhood. “It never fails,” I thought. “Just like a shot. I wonder if all junkies score for this wonderful stuff.” (*J*, 105)

Lee does not hold onto this reminiscence for long:

I went into the bathroom to take a shot. I was a long time hitting a vein. The needle clogged twice. Blood ran down my arm. The junk spread through my body, an injection of death. The dream was gone. I looked down at the blood that ran from elbow to wrist. I felt a sudden pity for the violated

²⁴ “We are prepared to divulge all and to state that on a Thursday in the month of September 1917, we did, in the garage of the latter, at his solicitations and connivance, endeavor to suck the cock of one George Brune Brubeck, the Bear’s Ass, which act disgust me like I try to bite it off and he slap me and curse and blaspheme. [...] The blame for this atrociously incomplete act rest solidly on the basement of Brubeck, my own innocence of any but the most pure reflex move of self-defense and—respect to eliminate this strange serpent thrust so into my face [...] so I [...] had recourse to nature’s little white soldiers—our brave defenders by land—and bite his ugly old cock” (*J*, 166).

²⁵ Describing the beggars of Tangier, Lee writes, “[a] child about seven years old, barefooted and dirty, touches my arm. These people are raised in beggary and buggery. The nightmare feeling of my childhood is more and more my habitual condition. Is this a prevision of atomic debacle?” (*J*, 70).

veins and tissue. Tenderly I wiped the blood off my arm”.

(105)

The violations of Burroughs’s body continued from youth to adulthood, from child abuse to substance abuse, and it seems that Lee recognises as much in this scene, deciding to intervene: “I’m going to quit,’ I said aloud” (106). The key to this psychodrama is seen in the previous section of *Junky* which begins with, “Junk short circuits sex” (104). It is easy to speculate, and consistent with modern psychological approaches to addiction²⁶, that Burroughs used drugs to suppress the trauma of sexual abuse. However, this trauma remains frustratingly out of reach²⁷. Oliver Harris writes, “If junk suspends desire and the word, then its toxicity is actually a kind of withdrawal; a withdrawal from the will to communicate and from political or libidinal economy. It is as if to avoid the social and sexual perils of Charybdis, Burroughs had indeed first shackled up with Scylla” (73): given the disturbing, obscured details of Burroughs’s childhood, it is easy to imagine why he might choose the latter over the former. Burroughs’s *haute bourgeois* privilege turned out to be a kind of loss, and while it afforded him a generous allowance well into adulthood, wealth only helped manifest his addictive tendencies. Nelson Algren writes, “[there's] people in hell who want ice water” (158) and if the modern is “the time of hell” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 544), then drugs often provide the ice water. However, an individual’s personal traumas play an important role in driving individuals towards addiction.

Jennie Skerl suggests that Burroughs cultivated addiction as part of his hipster persona but I hope to have revealed something of the post-

²⁶ “The hardcore drug addicts that I treat, are, without exception, people who have had extraordinarily difficult lives. The commonality is childhood abuse. These people all enter life under extremely adverse circumstances. Not only did they not get what they need for healthy development; they actually got negative circumstances of neglect. I don’t have a single female patient in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver who wasn’t sexually abused, for example, as were many of the men, or abused, neglected and abandoned serially, over and over again. That’s what sets up the brain biology of addiction. In other words, the addiction is related both psychologically, in terms of emotional pain relief, and neurobiological development to early adversity” (Gabor Maté, qtd. in R. Hassan)

²⁷ In a footnote Oliver Harris states, “If we took up the psychoanalytical invitation posed by the preface and looked to Burroughs’ biography for support, we would begin by wondering not only about the ambiguous presence of the boy’s maid but about the striking absence of his mother” (*Secret*, 251).

traumatic kernel behind his addiction (*Burroughs*, 20-30). This trauma largely remains hidden and illegible in Burroughs's first work of illiterature. While *Junky* puts "emphasis on the literal and objective at the expense of the figural and the subjective" this does not necessarily occlude psychoanalytic interpretation (Wermer-Colan, 504). "[Trauma]... creates a sort of lump that the chain [of signification] is forced to skirt" (Fink, 28). This "lump that the chain is forced to skirt" is evidenced in *Junky* by the almost complete absence of the suggestion that trauma could be a causal factor in addiction. This is apt in a text whose subject is narcotic addiction as the narcotic addict is attempting to erase trauma. The repetitious form of *Junky*, as it describes the repetitious life of the addict, represents trauma as an absence which the addict compulsively returns to. Hence, *Junky* cannot offer a consistent theory of addiction nor outline its origins in trauma, instead it traces the literal repetitions of the addict's lifestyle, his undead drive towards narcotics and "the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain" (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 62). In *Junky* this "guilt and pain" has its source in an illegible trauma.

Skerl writes that, "[although] Burroughs argues persuasively about the lack of choice involved in addiction to opiates, it is clear that he chose this fate" (12). Given the traumatic details outlined above this suggestion seems cruel, but I reservedly agree. While there is a certain amount of predetermination behind Burroughs's addiction, there is also, throughout his works, a determination on his part to "change fact" (*Q*, 55); to permanently and positively alter his cognition. This aim results from what was described earlier as junk knowledge, where addiction and the symbolic order erase or elide the traumatic real. However, Burroughs's early illiterature will evolve as a means to change cognitive behaviour and, in turn reality. As difficult as it is to shift, cognitive behaviour plays a powerful role in addiction and subjectivity. As Gabor Maté explains:

Unwittingly, we write the story of our future from narratives based on the past... Mindful awareness can bring into consciousness those hidden, past-based perspectives so that they no longer frame our

worldview. 'Choice begins the moment you disidentify from the mind and its conditioned patterns, the moment you become present... Until you reach that point, you are unconscious.'... In present awareness we are liberated from the past. (*Hungry Ghosts*, 708)

Only by bringing the traumatic elements that form one's mode of cognition into conscious awareness can one hope to change one's cognitive behaviour. Cognition is both a gap and an apprehensible mode of being; it is both the site of historical oppression and the potential source of subjective freedom. Cognitive behaviour and misreading both suggest that perceptions are always interpreted and thus subject to organisation and potential re-organisations. In the trauma of Burroughs's past and the addiction that grew out of it, we can regard one of the author's central desires: to "change fact" through the alteration of cognition and consciousness. This desire will become central to Burroughs's writing and aesthetics. This personal desire, born of trauma and discontent, becomes the very material ground on which Burroughs bases his writing, not as a means of describing reality but as a means of changing reality and achieving personal agency. While the addict never achieves the pre-ontological freedom of the empty subject described by Žižek, this desire remains as a guiding principle throughout Burroughs's early works of illiterature. While *Junky* explicitly outlines the social and cultural determinants of addiction, the novel ultimately details how the addict can, through an act of will, break out of the biological, psychological and social bonds of addiction.

Rat Park

Addiction sets in motion a debate surrounding agency and social determination. Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls opium "this free-agency-annihilating poison" (qtd. in Boon, 36) and Eve Sedgwick asserts that, "[under] the searching rays of ... addiction-attribution the assertion of will itself has come to appear addictive" (584). David Courtwright recognises that social circumstances can create addicts: "Bored, miserable creatures are more likely to seek altered consciousness than engaged, contented ones.

Animals in captivity, for example, are much more likely to use intoxicants than those in the wild. And one could say that civilization itself represents a state of captivity” (92).

A famous experiment demonstrates how addiction might be determined by social and material circumstances. Bruce Alexander conducted research which demonstrated that caged rats would choose to consume morphine infused water over plain water: the rats became addicts. Alexander then altered the conditions for his participants. Instead of putting them in a standard laboratory rat cage, he created ‘Rat Park’, an ideal setting for rodents which provided them with lots of space, entertainment and company. The rats of rat park now preferred plain water over morphine infused water; even previously addicted rats went through withdrawal and avoided the readily available morphine in ‘rat park’ (Jay, 231). It appears addicted rats would choose a convivial existence without morphine, even if it entails suffering withdrawal symptoms. This choice however may be a non-choice as David Punter suggests: “Could [choice], for example, mean a narrowing of vision, like that, for example of the rat in an experimenter’s tunnel or cage?” (52). *Junky* ultimately outlines how the addict himself must break free of addiction through an act of will as Lee, at the end of the novel, leaves behind the culture and lifestyle of addiction. This is not something that the novel theorises but performs. Instead, the theories of addiction outlined in *Junky* are slighter than the one’s derived from Bruce Alexander’s experiment, but there are marked similarities.

Alexander’s “rat park” experiment is a synthesis of *Junky*’s two theories of addiction. The first experiment indicates that if you drift along taking shots you will become a junky (*J*, xl). With the creation of “rat park”, Burroughs’s second thesis is amplified: “You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction. Junk wins by default” (xl). This synthesis centres around the idea that the craving for narcotics is not essential to human nature, but also that drugs can offer a prosthetic where one’s social, sexual and/or cultural being has been supplanted. As Phillippe Bourgois writes in *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, “[self-destructive] addiction is merely the medium for desperate

people to internalize their frustration, resistance, and powerlessness” (319). Bourgois also states that, “[the] contemporary exacerbation of substance abuse within concentrated pockets of the US population has little to do with the pharmacological properties of the particular drugs involved. Indeed, history teaches us that the effect, or at least the meanings, of drug use are largely culturally constructed” (319); in other words, drugs are not simply addictive, instead, the deprivation that many experience in the modern world is the primary cause of substance abuse, while culturally constructed meanings formed around the consumption of drugs reinforce their status as addictive substances. However, if drug effects and meanings are culturally constructed that suggests they primarily involve prescriptive modes of cognition that exist prior to drugs consumption and only then evolve into an even more limited mode of being: addiction. As Avital Ronnell writes, “being-on-drugs indicates that a structure is already in place, prior to the production of the materiality we call drugs” (33).

Those who abuse drugs often believe that they have been denied other forms of enjoyment and connection. The addict does not fundamentally crave drugs but some proscribed form of convivial existence: ‘rat park’. In essence *Junky* describes the addict as someone who has internalized discontent and used it as a spur towards the pleasurable erasure of opiate intoxication. However, addicts may also be pursuing a life different to and more compelling than everyday existence. Addiction is not just a replacement for, but a resistance against mainstream modes of existence and enjoyment. Skerl argues that, “[freed] from social and physical bonds, the addict acquires a special vision of reality, different from and perhaps more profound than the perceptions of ordinary consciousness” (22). Yet the vision that addiction provides for Lee in *Junky* is one where the subject is constantly at the mercy of arbitrary social, biological and material forces: the life of addiction described in *Junky* appears to be more beholden to “social and physical bonds” than mainstream modes of existence. In fact, for Burroughs junk does not necessarily disconnect him from normality but introduces him to it.

While Burroughs's pursuit of drugs was driven by a need to escape reality and the traumas of his past, the biological need of drugs forced him to recognise the importance of money: "It was at this time and under these circumstances that I came in contact with junk, became an addict, and thereby gained the motivation, the real need for money I had never had before" (11). Commenting on this declaration, Oliver Harris writes:

Perversely, addiction becomes a positive gain because it teaches the dilettante the "real" necessity and value of money—which slyly accepts that *only* the need for money is real and of value, that this is the *only* meaningful economy, the only source of motivation and satisfaction. (*Secret*, 62)

Due to his economic privilege, Burroughs was already divorced from the material world. Junk, however, allowed Burroughs to become an everyman: "For Burroughs addiction is the paradoxical culmination, the glorious zenith of conformity" (Punter, 48). Junk becomes a means towards experiencing and understanding modern, everyday life and offers the "dilettante" an authentic taste of modern reality as it is lived by common people. *Junky* thus draws implicit lines of comparison between addiction and everyday life.

One of the facets of modern culture that *Junky* and contemporary novels of addiction, such as Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), describe is the nascent development of the war on drugs and its corresponding result, the illicit drugs economy. At the same time, these novels reflect upon the emerging economic and cultural boom that occurred in America after World War II. Algren illustrates the connection between addiction and a particularly American form of consumerism in this pithy passage:

The great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one. Guilt that lay crouched behind every billboard which gave each man his commandments; for each man here

had failed the billboards all down the line. No Ford in this one's future nor ever any place all his own. Had failed before the radio commercials, by the streetcar plugs and by the standards of every self-respecting magazine. With his own eyes he had seen the truer Americans mount the broad stone stairways to success surely and swiftly and unaided by others; he was always the one left alone... (17-18)

In Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* addiction functions as an alternative pursuit for those who fail to live up to the dictates of American capitalist culture. The inference here is that modern American life is in some way responsible for addiction. Algren is suggesting that addiction is the internalisation of "frustration, resistance, and powerlessness" (Bourgeois, 319).

Many of Burroughs's critics see a similar socio-economic form of critique operating in *Junky*. Jennie Skerl suggests that, "[deviant] society mirrors the dominant society, exposing a predatory, amoral social order and individuals without 'character' or free will whose identities are wholly formed by needs and social functions" (*Burroughs*, 28). However, this seems to contradict something that she writes earlier: "Burroughs's yearning to identify himself with an outlaw group of men whose daily action was an affront to the bourgeois social order. Furthermore, addiction ended dilettantism and gave a prophetic vision that enabled Burroughs to turn life into art" (7). The only way to resolve this impasse is to suggest that Burroughs's function, as addict/author, is to reflect the corruption of wider society. In other words, "Drug addicts are the mystics of a materialist age", who reveal the ubiquitous narcotic drive that simultaneously stupefies and invigorates all members of society in "a materialist age" (Drieu la Rochelle qtd. in Boon, 73). But this is another kind of mystification which elevates the addict above those he is only equal to.

A common feature in the criticism that surrounds Burroughs's work is the importance given to the "Algebra of Need," a theory which describes how the junk economy is a paradigm for understanding all forms of oppression (Ginsberg qtd. in *NL*, xx). Oliver Harris criticises those who suggest that the

relationship between addict and pusher detailed in *Junky* is the model that Burroughs will use later when discussing “Control” (*Secret*, 76). However, Harris states earlier that:

Far from romancing a utopian alternative space of desire and community, *Junkie* presents a dead society, a corpse-cold, one-dimensional realm as reduced to meaningless materiality as junkies are to their motiveless somatic needs, a realm that is the impoverished worldview of objective empiricism and capitalist rationality thrown back in its faceless face. (*Secret*, 62)

Here Harris’s reading connects with that of Timothy Murphy and Jennie Skerl, both of whom suggest that the world of junk reflects the mainstream world of capital “through a glass, darkly” (Murphy, 55). However, Harris outlines earlier that “Lee’s own behaviour as a peddler hardly indicts official, social, or economic institutions as monstrous or predatory. On the contrary, the force of *Junkie* depends on normalizing narcotics” (*Secret*, 76). However, while Lee is not yet the antagonistic protagonist he will become in later novels, his behaviour in *Junky* is far from normal. One could also argue that such moral relativism – he is not a “malicious pusher” like Bill Gains (Harris, *Secret*, 76) – allows Lee to continue in his amorality, pushing heroin and robbing passed out drunks on the subway (*J*, 28-34). Lee, like Gains, is a gentleman junky: a hybrid of upper middle-class pretension and underclass alienation. Lee is not exempt from the cruel socio-economic dynamics of the junk world nor those of society as a whole but, as a junky, is the dark double of capitalism’s self-interested subject. Murphy explains that, “[not] only is capitalist society haunted by the junky, its phantom double, but also capitalist society haunts the junky” (*Wising*, 55). Both capitalism and the junky are phantoms, both are insatiable wounds in the order of things, and, while Oliver Harris suggests that Bill Gains is “the exception that proves the rule” of the benign character of junk commerce, it seems that under the rule of the “faceless face” of capitalism’s and addiction’s predatory self-interest, Gains is unexceptional. Instead, in *Junky*, Bill Gains represents the negative and invisible ideal of an addict:

Bill Gains came from a “good family” – as I recall, his father had been a bank president somewhere in Maryland – and he had front. Gains' routine was stealing overcoats out of restaurants, and he was perfectly adapted to this work. The American upper-middle-class citizen is a composite of negatives. He is largely delineated by what he is not. Gains went further. He was not merely negative. He was positively invisible; a vague respectable presence. There is a certain kind of ghost that can only materialize with the aid of a sheet or other piece of cloth to give it outline. Gains was like that. He materialized in someone else's overcoat. (*J*, 35)

Bill Gains shows that the junky and the “American upper-middle-class citizen” are similarly vapid; both are blank, unremarkable subjects. If the junky mirrors the dominant social order, it is often for pragmatic reasons: Gains just wants to steal coats and “he was perfectly adapted to this work”. The empty “American upper-middle-class citizen” is also following his materialist interests by living an orthodox life. Jack Kerouac describes Burroughs's character, Bull Lee, in similar terms in *On the Road*: “He was a gray, nondescript-looking fellow you wouldn't notice on the street” (120). Indeed, in Tangier Burroughs was known as *El Hombre Invisible*. What this figure of the empty subject of illiterature indicates is that it is not the individual that counts, rather he is a product of arbitrary and impersonal political and socio-economic relations. The addict is not a substantive person, but a rhizome or node in a vast, international and, according to Burroughs, metaphysical network of junk.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Claude Farrère spoke positively of a transnational network of opiate users:

Opium, in reality, is a fatherland, a religion, a strong and jealous tie between men. And I can better feel a brother to the Asiatics smoking in Foochow Road than I can to certain inferior Frenchmen now vegetating at Paris, where I was

born . . . Opium is a magician which transforms, and works a metamorphosis. The European, the Asiatic are equal, – reduced to a level, – in the presence of its all-powerful spell. Races, physiologies, psychologies, – all are effaced; and other strange new beings are born into the world – the Smokers, who, properly speaking, have ceased to be men. (qtd. in Boon, 57)

In *Junky*, Lee describes a similar transnational network of junk but does so in supernatural terms:

I don't spot junk neighborhoods by the way they look, but by the feel, somewhat the same process by which a dowser locates hidden water. I am walking along and suddenly the junk in my cells moves and twitches like the dowser's wand: "Junk here!" (*J*, 58)

And later in Mexico, he describes a person who seems to be a transmitter of the junk frequency:

There is a type person occasionally seen in these neighborhoods who has connections with junk, though he is neither a user nor a seller. But when you see him the dowser wand twitches. Junk is close. His place of origin is the Near East, probably Egypt. He has a large straight nose. His lips are thin and purple-blue like the lips of a penis. The skin is tight and smooth over his face. He is basically obscene beyond any possible vile act or practice. He has the mark of a certain trade or occupation that no longer exists. If junk were gone from the earth, there might still be junkies standing around in junk neighborhoods feeling the lack, vague and persistent, a pale ghost of junk sickness. (93)

This person of near eastern origin is a floating signifier, "neither a user nor a seller", rather his function is arbitrary yet significant within the vast and inscrutable matrix of junk. This mysterious, impenetrable figure – who "is basically obscene beyond any possible vile act or practice... has the mark of a

certain trade or occupation that no longer exists” – suggests that junk is connected to human functions and acts that have been all but erased. Even if “junk were gone from the earth”, junkies would remain, like this man, as ghostlike figures drawn in by the vast, metaphysical network of junk.

While the above suggests that there is an occult, transnational and transtemporal connection between junkies, there is also a material, political and social reality that shapes the lives of junkies and non-junkies alike. Marcus Boon writes that, “[the] ‘junkie’ is an outsider, a no-man in flight from society and its rules. At the same time, narcotic use becomes an identity, with a new set of rules for behaviour and action that exerts its own discipline (scoring, fixing, kicking, going to jail)” (79). An addict, like any other “person, in other words, is not a material individual, but a socially dispersed system of communications” (Melley, 54). Despite Burroughs’s earlier insistence, addiction is not purely based on physical need as getting clean involves divorcing oneself from an array of political and interpersonal relationships. Ever the contrarian, Burroughs seems to acknowledge as much in his introduction to *Naked Lunch*: “If soma ever existed the Pusher was there to bottle it and monopolize it and sell it and it turned into plain old time JUNK” (xxxix). In *Junky* it becomes apparent that the culture surrounding junk is as addictive as the drug itself.

Parasitic Cops

In *Junky*, the addict’s primary antagonist is the figure of the policeman. With the Harrison Act of 1915 opiates were effectively made illegal and the addict became, by definition, a criminal. *Junky’s* “Glossary” illustrates how drug users augment their speech to avoid detection and arrest (129-133). However, the ability to augment meaning is not limited to drug users. The ambiguity of language is also put to creative use by legislators, ostensibly creating the figure of the addict: “The chief of police said, ‘This drive is going to continue as long as there is a single violator left in this city.’ The State legislators drew up a law making it a crime to be a drug addict. They did not specify where or when or what they meant by drug addict” (*J*, 96). The modern addict only comes into being with the law that opposes his existence.

What Lee is describing is the formation of what Ann Dally calls “Drugspeak”: “Like Newspeak, the purpose of Drugspeak is not only to provide a medium of expression for those in power but also to make all other modes of thought impossible. It aims to make heretical thought literally unthinkable” (1). However, “Drugspeak” suggests that semantic power is only held by those in power. *Junky* at many points highlights how heroin addicts use language to their advantage. While language allows for a certain kind of epistemological dominance, it is also a compromised site because “[not] only do words change meanings but meanings vary locally at the same time” (*J*, 133). The eternally mutating glossary of the hipster-addict stands in opposition to the moral, legal and linguistic certainty of the state where “[it] was just about illegal to talk about dope” (*J*, 4). The fluid linguistic interplay that takes place between the criminal and legal edifice is illustrative of the *ad hoc* style of drugs prohibition. By proxy the addict rather than being a substantive subject, is a vague and dispersed presence that functions as Other to the social, cultural and legal establishment that opposes his existence. However, the law, despite being presented as impervious to corruption, must still operate through the fluid medium of language. Addicts can use the fluidity of language and the ambiguities of the law to protect themselves from prosecution. The porous and transactional nature of the law is best encapsulated in the figure of the criminal lawyer:

Criminal law is one of the few professions where the client buys someone else’s luck. The luck of most people is strictly non-transferable. But a good criminal lawyer can sell all his luck to a client, and the more luck he sells the more he has to sell. (*J*, 87)

Money is also used to corrupt the law and oppose legal and political power. When Lee is arrested for possession of drugs, the same lawyer bribes two detectives to help with Lee’s case, displaying how financial corruption can trump the power of “Drugspeak”. Lee’s case is eventually dropped because the federal attorney refuses the charge, undermining the state’s case:

Despite such useful contradictions in law enforcement, the junky’s existence is precarious at best, with his living spaces

threatened by the police as well as by informers – ‘pigeons’ or ‘stoolies’ – inside his group, who make the landscape radically unstable. The line between inside and outside, between clandestinity and authority, is in constant flux. (Murphy, 51)

Far from the discourse of prohibition representing an all-powerful “Drugspeak”, it instead forges new means of corruption and new forms of identity that can negotiate the altered terrain. Despite the ability of addicts to use the inconsistencies of the legal system to their advantage, as Murphy suggests, addicts are subject to the insecurities formed in such a “radically unstable” landscape. “Drugspeak”, and the semantic and legal corruption that accompanies it, far from limiting the meaning of drugs, helps make a fluid and dynamic drug culture systemic, giving rise to new roles and identities in the burgeoning culture that *Junky* so effectively describes.

Stool Pigeons

The stool pigeon, as intermediary between the worlds of drugs prohibition and consumption, anticipates the figure of the double agent of *Naked Lunch* who plays both sides of the war on drugs off against each other. In *Junky* the predicament of the stool pigeon is described as follows:

Some of them don't need to be pressured. Junk and pocket money is all they want, and they don't care how they get it. The new pigeon is given marked money and sent out to make a buy. When the pigeon makes a buy with this money, the agents close in right away to make the arrest. It is essential to make the arrest before the peddler has a chance to change the marked money. The agents have the marked money that bought the junk, and the junk it bought. If the case is important enough, the pigeon may be called upon to testify. Of course, once he appears in court and testifies, the pigeon is known to the trade and no one will serve him. (*J*, 72)

The unending war between users and narcotics agents is encapsulated in the

figure of the stool pigeon, who is offered protection by the law and also provided with money and drugs to sustain his addiction. However, the liminal status of the pigeon places him at risk. The stool pigeon may be entirely expendable, as the drug enforcement agent is sure to find a fresh informant tomorrow due to the illegal status of drugs and their pervasive use in society. Indeed, his effectiveness, “if the case is important enough”, will result in his downfall. The term stool pigeon itself is illustrative of his inferior identity; a ‘stool’ signifies an item of furniture to recline on, but also a piece of faecal matter. A stool is at once subordinate and expendable. In the environment of the city, pigeons, like addicts, are seen as vermin subsisting on junk. The stool pigeon also prefigures the parasitic identities of the “talking asshole” and “the Vigilante” whose hidden, ‘true’ identities are made subordinate to their performative roles.

The stool pigeon, like the junky, is enslaved to the culture and economy of drugs, but even more so. The stool pigeon is not just an unwilling participant in the war on drugs, like the junky, but a direct product of drugs prohibition. By creating stool pigeons, the police exacerbate the conditions of addiction, making addicts and pushers more paranoid, while expanding the range of the junk socio-economy: “The motive was pure and simple: greed for money, salaries, blackmail & illegal profits, at the expense of a class of citizens who were classified by press & police as ‘Fiends’” (Ginsberg, “Introduction”, *J*, 156). The stool pigeon is representative of the symbiotic bind in which police and addicts are entwined. However, the stool pigeon is a residual and despised figure, neither at home in the junk world nor its legal double. In the world of *Junky* however, the stool pigeon is the exception that proves the rule of the co-dependent relationship that exists between addicts and the narcotics agents who ostensibly oppose their existence.

Medical Practice

Besides being a stool pigeon, another role that the addict may take is that of patient:

Doctors are so exclusively nurtured on exaggerated ideas of

their position that, generally speaking, a factual approach is the worst possible. Even though they do not believe your story, nonetheless they want to hear one. It is like some Oriental face-saving ritual. One man plays the high-minded doctor who wouldn't write an unethical script for a thousand dollars, the other does his best to act like a legitimate patient. If you say, "Look, Doe, I want an M.S. script and I'm willing to pay double price for it," the croaker blows his top and throws you out of the office. You need a good bedside manner with doctors or you will get nowhere. (*J*, 34)

Under drugs prohibition, the medical practitioner must be seduced by the junky's performance. The doctors of *Junky* contrast sharply with Thomas De Quincey's pharmacist who was an "unconscious minister of celestial pleasures . . . the beatific vision of an immortal druggist, sent down to earth on a special mission to myself" (71). In the world of junk, the doctor is, in truth, another adversary to be overcome in order to procure dope. The traditional relationship between patient and doctor is reversed, as the junky-patient must supply the doctor with 'a good bedside manner' or he will not be given a morphine script. The relationship between doctor and junky is illustrative of how in modernity "the boundary line between respectable and illegal rackets has become objectively blurred and in psychological terms the different forms merge" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 227). In *Junky*, instead of the doctor being a provider of health care, he becomes a "croaker" who administers narcotics, often unwittingly, to addicts (8). This ambiguous status is apparent in the differing meanings of the term 'doctor', which also means to falsify a document. Lee certainly doctors his story for the "croaker", while also, on occasion, doctoring medical prescriptions to subsidize his supply of drugs. Roy tells Lee that a doctor has given them a warning about this:

"You guys gave some wrong addresses on those scripts. That's a violation of Public Health Law 334, so don't say I didn't warn you. For God's sake, cover up for me if they

question you. This could mean my whole professional career". (*J*, 37)

This doctor seems aware of his ambiguous status, where the continuance of his "whole professional career" may rest on his criminal involvement being covered up by narcotic addicts. Timothy S. Murphy writes that, "doctors are important 'points of intersection' in... *Junky*, because they are in a paradoxical position: like the police, they are trained to treat the 'Human Virus' of control, to eradicate its symptoms, but they also earn their living off it and thus have an interest in preserving the virus" (*Wising*, 81). Indeed, many doctors are subject to the discontents of late capitalism and must resort to supplying addicts with opiates just to survive:

In Mexico City, there are so many doctors that a lot of them have a hard time making it. I know croakers who would starve to death if they didn't write morphine scripts. They don't have patient one, unless you call junkies patients. (*J*, 137)

Like the stool pigeon, these doctors function as intermediaries between the idealism of drugs prohibition and the reality of narcotic addiction which they encounter directly. These amoral doctors prefigure the character of Doctor Benway in *Naked Lunch* who is also ethically compromised due to the pressures of surviving in a capitalist society: "I managed to keep up my habits performing cut-rate abortions in subway toilets. I even descended to hustling pregnant women in the public streets. It was positively unethical" (21). In *Naked Lunch*, it becomes obvious that Doctor Benway's scientific and rational speech hide a vicious and pragmatic self-interest. The line between scientific objectivity and subjective desire is subverted here. Murphy points out that, "[even] in the somewhat more determined space of the doctor's office, where activities and roles are generally delineated in advance, a kind of negotiation takes place that, if successful, subtly undoes the official hierarchy and displaces the doctor from his controlling position in the totality" (*Wising*, 49). This doctor's office is in truth a theatre, where both junky and physician

are speaking from a junk script. Drugs prohibition does not stop drug use but reinforces it by creating addicts who are highly adapted to the inverted world of junk described in *Junky*.

The Performing Junky

Junky's factual style clashes with the gaming and mimicry Lee adopts in order to gain access to opiates. The addict must be extremely tactful, pragmatic and duplicitous in order to survive where his being is both illegal and physically onerous. "The junky is for Burroughs the archetypal 'performer' trying to 'maintain human form' despite the monkey on his back. The human form he maintains, however, is a sham, an empty cellophane skin subject to collapse in a vacuum" (Lydenberg, 40). This performativity is particularly evident in a character simply called "the Fag":

The Fag was a brilliantly successful lush-worker. His scores were fabulous... The Fag was always first on a good lush. One time he scored for a thousand dollars at the 103rd Street Station... If the lush woke up, he would simper and feel the man's thigh as though his intentions were sexual. From this angle he got this moniker. (45-46)

Addicts and conmen like "the Fag" are creative and conscientious criminals who operate within a dangerous, hierarchical and predatory urban environment:

A sleeping lush – known as a "flop" in the trade – attracts a hierarchy of scavengers. First come the top lush-workers like the Fag, guided by a special radar. They only want cash, good rings, and watches. Then come the punks who will steal anything. They take the hat, shoes, and belt. Finally, brazen, clumsy thieves will try to pull the lush's overcoat or jacket off him. (46)

"The Fag" sets himself apart from the lowlier scavengers of the subway with

his “tweed sport coats and gray flannels. A European charm of manner and a slight Scandinavian accent completed his front” (46). A creative, well-dressed and intuitive thief is at a distinct advantage, suggesting that the underworld mimics the meritocratic ethos of ultra-capitalist Manhattan above. The creativity and performativity of the addict glosses over the somatic need that lies beneath. This in part reveals the ethos of Burroughs’s illiterature. Rather than propping up the liberal humanist façade that is literature, Burroughs’s work aims to dispel the niceties of high culture, and reveal them for what they are: a sports coat and grey flannel veneer that mask a man’s dark intentions.

Banal Evil

Junky plunges the reader into the life of the addict, which seems to be one of debasing routine, pain and humiliation, only given meaning by the pursuit of heroin. Here, “[life] telescopes down to junk, one fix and looking forward to the next” (*J*, 36). “In stark contrast to *Junky*’s sensational promise, however, the surprisingly banal narrative dispels the very stereotypes about drug addicts that fuel the reader’s expectations and guide his or her interpretation.... heroin turns out to make the drug addict rather dull” (Wermer-Colan, 503). Burroughs does well to make a text that lacks any true narrative arc somewhat compelling. It is only when Lee is in a state of withdrawal that an uncanny and strange world breaks through the grey crust of *Junky*’s realism, thereby allowing the novel to be more than anecdotal. In a Mexican bar, Lee, in a state of withdrawal, describes the experience of listening into the discussions of other patrons: “The conversations had a nightmare flatness, talking dice spilled in the tube metal chairs, human aggregates disintegrating in cosmic inanity” (*J*, 203). Ironically, the most intoxicated passages in *Junky* follow Lee’s abstinence from drugs. Only after withdrawal does the addict return to a recognisable state of being: “Perhaps the intense discomfort of withdrawal is the transition from plant back to animal, from a painless, sexless, timeless state back to sex and pain and time, from death back to life” (*J*, 333). This return however is fraught with danger, as can be seen when Lee suffers a post-withdrawal and alcohol fuelled psychotic episode in Mexico. Lee gets in an altercation in a saloon and ends

up shoving a loaded gun in a cop's stomach: "Who asked you to put in your two cents?" (*J*, 109). Later, Lee's friend, Old Ike, tells him "You got to quit drinking, Bill. You're getting crazy" (114). It seems Lee is more of a fiend when he is off junk than when he is addicted. Yet these manic, drunken scenes²⁸ contrast sharply with the stasis of addiction. It seems that junk addicts are not unpredictable monsters, but uncannily 'normal'.

Early American prohibition rhetoric told of addicts who were immoral, "fiends" that had abandoned decent society. According to Harry Anslinger, America's first drug tsar, the addict was an "amoral vicious social leper" (qtd. in Davenport Hines, 282). Marcus Boon writes that, "The antinarcotic campaigns, with their endless evocation of darkness and ruin, also recreate the atmosphere of the sublime, with all its mystique and excitement, in every ad campaign, every hyperbolic speech. The antinarcotic laws, and the organizations that act as advocates on their behalf, thus directly promote an atmosphere that makes drugs attractive to people" (39). This observation is astute and compelling: *Junky* too contains sublime moments of "darkness and ruin" that make addiction "attractive to people". However, the generally flat narrative style of *Junky* is apt to make an important point: if heroin addiction is a morally deficient form of existence, it is a banal form of evil: "A junkie spends half his life waiting" (142). As a form of entertainment that appears to be so beguiling to the addict, the day-to-day reality of drug addiction is tedious. The tedium of addiction is succinctly described in the introduction to *Naked Lunch*: "I did absolutely nothing. I could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours. I was only roused to action when the hourglass of junk ran out" (xli). As David Punter puts it, "[the] behaviour of the addict, it is claimed is unpredictable, whereas in fact... it is the soul, the essence of predictability... the fate of the addict appears as a humiliating caricature, a cartoon of 'normality'. It is life... pared down to the bare bones" (53).

The disengaged, sedated and objectively monotonous form of addiction makes it more an amoral than immoral state of being. The moral

²⁸ This section of *Junky* was taken from the manuscript for "Queer" at the request of Ace Books (Harris, *Secret*, 77).

ambivalence of addiction is suggested by Roy, who buys junk from Lee: “‘It’s bad stuff,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘The worst thing that can happen to a man. We all think we can control it at first. Sometimes we don’t want to control it.’ He laughed. ‘I’ll take all you can get at this price’” (*J*, 7). The amorality of junk is heightened here: Roy gives a warning about the dangers of junk, while with the same breath he offers to buy more from Lee, further implicating Lee in the drug trade. Moral ambiguity and “factualism” (*NL*, xxvi) were central to Burroughs’s authorial intentions as he explains when speaking of *Junky* in a letter to Allen Ginsberg:

As a matter of fact the book is the only accurate account I ever read of the real horror of junk. But I don’t mean it as justification or deterrent or anything but an accurate account of what I experienced during the time I was on the junk²⁹. (*L*, 83)

While Burroughs’s honesty is commendable, the amorality of *Junky* is paradigmatic for the ambiguous position he will cultivate throughout his early works of illiterature. In *Junky* Burroughs rarely offers more than the bare facts devoid of moral judgement and theoretical interjection.

The factual, journalistic style of *Junky* highlights the dehumanising effects of addiction. *Junky* – a novel that is not just about addiction but written on junk – is all but stripped of literary content. *Junky* is literature reduced to the form of addiction and deprived of purpose beyond describing the addict’s daily rituals of procurement, concealment, theft and fraud. The world of *Junky* consists of “random events in a dying universe where everything is exactly what it appears to be, and no other relation than juxtaposition is possible” (203). Further to this, *Junky* was written by an addict primarily to make money (McConnell, 97). The novel exists as part of the junk economy and readers who consume it become embroiled in the trade. “This recurrent tactical trap, insinuating the reader’s complicity in the criminal world and making visible our voyeurism, is a unique feature of Burroughs’ style here”

²⁹ May 5th, 1951.

(Harris, "Introduction," *J*, xi). There is a contagious, viral quality to Burroughs's first novel that is underwritten by the intertwined biological and cultural determinism of junk, suggesting that *Junky* forges a hybrid form between illness and literature: illiterature. Marcus Boon writes, "[when] the attempt to escape the plastic fakeness of the modern world into the real through drugs fails, one turns to literature to reincorporate the failure of the transcendental into a narrative of worldly experience" (83). In *Junky* this worldly experience is narrated by an empty subject who invites the reader to imagine his pleasure and motivation into existence. The reader of *Junky* thus plays a major role in envisioning the subjectivity of the addict. *Junky*, like "junk [,] is a parasite" (*J*, 139), and breaking out of the junk world involves leaving behind the kind of junk realism that the novel primarily deals in.

Disintegration

Jennie Skerl outlines how "*Junky* is a complex and ironic work, and it leaves the disturbing impression that the author has somehow tricked the reader into a realm where physical and social realities begin to shift and dissolve" (30). The dissolution of "physical and social realities" that occur in *Junky* usually represent the movement away from addiction and an attempt to escape the determined reality of junk. The scenes of disintegration in *Junky* are usually precipitated by withdrawal. "In the absence of a governing addiction, the self is always an other, if not many others" (Murphy, 59). This disintegration of the self is evident when Lee describes his withdrawal in one of the most hallucinatory sections of the text that is markedly similar in style to *Naked Lunch*:

When I closed my eyes I saw an Oriental face, the lips and nose eaten away by disease. The disease spread, melting the face into an amoeboid mass in which the eyes floated, dull crustacean eyes. Slowly, a new face formed around the eyes. A series of faces, hieroglyphs, distorted and leading to the final place where the human road ends, where the human form can no longer contain the crustacean horror that has grown inside it.

(*J*, 152)

Lee also describes the effect of withdrawal on others:

Doolie sick was an unnerving sight. The envelope of personality was gone, dissolved by his junk-hungry cells. Viscera and cells, galvanized into a loathsome insect-like activity, seemed on the point of breaking through the surface. His face was blurred, unrecognizable, at the same time shrunken and tumescent. (*J*, 73)

The connection between subjectivity and addiction here is clear. As the addict begins to withdraw, his identity and personality start to disintegrate. Withdrawal here is a specifically depersonalizing experience. Inner life or personality, like addiction, is the refinement of the infinite potential of subjectivity down to the singular “I” of identity. The addict’s identity is formed not only by the narcotic actions of the drug, but by his place within a larger cultural milieu. In the scenes of withdrawal described by Lee in *Junky* we see not only the physical disintegration of the addict, but the disintegration of his humanity – “galvanized into a loathsome insect-like activity” – and perhaps even the disintegration of humanity itself: “the final place where the human road ends”. What Lee is implicitly outlining is how leaving junk behind as “a way of life” involves the complete disintegration of an individual’s physically addicted being along with his social identity that was formed in correspondence with junk culture (*J*, 64). The schizophrenic decline Lee describes in regards to his withdrawal in *Junky* is symptomatic of an individual who is attempting to break free from an oppressive system that organises every aspect of his being.

Junky’s sporadic descents into a schizophrenic aesthetic also offer some relief in what is, necessarily, a repetitive and aimless novel: “Such moments of subjectivity and spirituality are ghosts in the machine of Lee’s disciplined, dismal reportage” (Harris, *Secret*, 68). Writing of Burroughs, David Punter suggests that “[junk] vision might be the only vision left... according to this reading only the addict can see with the real clarity born of

despair” (46). Junk vision involves revealing the processes by which the traumatic real, as spoken about earlier, and the schizophrenic are elided by addiction just as they are by the symbolic order. In the “Prologue”, Burroughs states that he was diagnosed with schizophrenia: “They put me down for schizophrenia, adding paranoid type to explain the upsetting fact that I knew where I was and who was President of the U.S.”³⁰ (*J*, xxxix-xl). Writing to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs identifies junk as a potential cure for schizophrenia: “I have frequently observed that there are no psychotic junkies, at least not when on the junk”³¹ (*L*, 321). Although Burroughs is being speculative here, it appears that one of junk’s utilities is the silencing of traumatized and schizophrenic voices. As Irvine Welsh writes, “[sometimes] ah think that people become junkies because they subconsciously crave a wee bit of silence” (*Trainspotting*, 7). Junk performs the social and psychological function of silencing errant, discomforting voices, yet these schizophrenic voices come to prominence in works such as *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*.

It is not disintegration that is nightmarish in *Junky*, but the dull and hollowed out circularity of junk. This empty existence is presented in *Junky* in the form of junk realism, where addiction is not only described but limits and frames the mode of narration. Similarly, *Junky*’s “Glossary”, which defines the slang of contemporary heroin addicts, outlines a vernacular that was created not to further the addict’s agency but to abet the communal organization of the junk subculture. Escaping addiction involves divorcing oneself from the community and discourse of users, narcotics agents, thieves and doctors. Jean Baudrillard observes, “In order to understand the intensity of ritual forms, one must rid oneself of the idea that all happiness derives from nature, and all pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire. On the contrary, games, the sphere of play, reveal a passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that comes from ceremony, and not desire”

³⁰ Burroughs seems to have cultivated this diagnosis as a means towards being discharged from the army (*Junky*, xxxix – xl). As a result of the diagnosis Burroughs avoided the draft.

³¹ June 18th, 1956.

(132). Junk addiction is not only a physical addiction: “When you give up junk, you give up a way of life” (*J*,127). Getting clean involves breaking free of the entire junk system.

Conclusion: Exile from Junk

In *Junky*, Lee moves from New York to New Orleans and finally to Mexico. Lee’s restlessness is driven by his fear of the mounting anti-drug culture of the U.S. in the 1950s:

When I jumped bail and left the States, the heat on junk already looked like something new and special. Initial symptoms of nationwide hysteria were clear. Louisiana passed a law making it a crime to be a drug addict. Since no place or time is specified and the term “addict” is not clearly defined, no proof is necessary or even relevant under a law so formulated. No proof, and consequently, no trial. This is police-state legislation penalizing a state of being. Other states were emulating Louisiana. I saw my chance of escaping conviction dwindle daily as the anti-junk feeling mounted to a paranoid obsession, like anti-Semitism under the Nazis. So I decided to jump bail and live permanently outside the United States. (*J*, 119)

Initially Lee finds it is difficult to procure heroin in Mexico as the trade is apparently run by a single operator, Lupita, and her product is substandard: “Actually, it is pantopon cut with milk sugar and some other crap that looks like sand and remains undissolved in the spoon after you cook up” (96). Eventually Lee and his fellow addict Ike begin procuring junk through legitimate channels:

The price was about two dollars per gram. I remember the first time he filled the permit. A whole boxful of cubes of morphine. Like a junkie’s dream. I had never seen so much morphine before all at once. (99-100)

While one could imagine that such easy access to junk would consolidate a junky's addiction, it seems the opposite is the case. In a letter sent to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs writes:

I have been off junk for six months. It is easier here precisely because junk is easy to come by. You can really decide whether you want it or not without all that U.S.A. pressure.³² (*L*, 98)

Antonin Artaud states that “prohibition, which causes increased public curiosity about the drug, has so far profited only the pimps of medicine, journalism and literature” (qtd. in Boon, 66). Furthermore, prohibition forms an entire world of junk that is home to many like Lee and Burroughs. The inverted world of junk comes complete with its own culture, language and society: its own reality. *Junky* is primarily a work of junk realism, a form of literature infected by the disease it describes. *Junky's* compromised, infected form is paradigmatic in terms of Burroughs's work of illiterature. As the novel comes to a close, what becomes apparent is that, once the world of junk is gone, junk loses its hold on Lee. However, some residue of the psychology and cognitive behaviour of addiction remains. Lee at the end of *Junky* is contemplating another drug: “Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix” (128). Lee must keep moving further south, to Columbia, in search of the ineffable.

William Burroughs kept moving too, living in an almost constant state of exile. The author would move to Tangier, Paris and London before returning to live in the USA in 1974. Marcus Boon writes that, “there is in ... William Burroughs' writing—an obsession with finding shelter” (Boon, 39), but coupled with this is an interminable restlessness. According to Lukács “[philosophy] is transcendental homelessness; it is the urge to be at home everywhere” (29). Perhaps it is the fate of invisible men to be at home everywhere and nowhere: The final fix never comes.

Before searching for “yage”, Lee will chase a different obsession: Eugene Allerton. In *Junky* Lee attempted to make a home in the zero space of narcosis, but in *Queer* he will attempt to occupy the body, mind and soul of

³² December 20th, 1951.

the even more elusive romantic Other. While Lee in *Junky* tried to silence, erase and control the errant voices of his own traumas and discontents, in *Queer* Lee is a loquacious and psychotic obsessive who applies his controlling attitude to another human being. Burroughs in *Queer* implicitly outlines how desire and “Control” are, like addiction, other forms of the illness that he can incorporate into his writing and that it might become a remedy for.

Chapter Two:

The Romantic Other: William Burroughs's *Queer*

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves. We must die to one life before we can enter another.

Anatole France (*The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard*, Pt. II ch. 4)

Introduction

This chapter examines William Burroughs's novel *Queer* as a work of illiterature. In this novel Burroughs progresses from describing the pains of addiction to recounting the stings of desire. In *Queer* Burroughs explicitly adopts the "routine" form, which, in the context of this novel, is a protracted joke or performance that possesses the body and voice of the protagonist, Lee, when he is attempting to seduce the object of his desire, Eugene Allerton. This chapter firstly discusses the history of the novel's composition and publication as well as its place within Burroughs's *oeuvre* and how it contrasts and coalesces with *Junky*. While the subject matter, style and form of *Queer* is markedly different from *Junky*, it is still inflected by the topic of addiction. Lee appears to be caught between an addictive mode of behaviour and his desire for the Other. As such Lee seeks to control the object of his desire and this compulsion leads to the explicit revelation of the hidden forces that give rise to everyday relations. Lee's performance of "routines", which overpower him and give voice to his obscene fantasies, expose the micropolitical forces that underlie everyday life. The "routine" divulges the connection between desire and "Control" that largely remains hidden in society. *Queer's* "routines" both embody and undermine the relationship between desire and "Control".

Burroughs did not want *Queer* to be published as it reveals that his criticism of "Control" originated in his controlling desires. Instead *Queer's*

introduction focuses on addiction, the shooting of Joan Vollmer and the “Ugly Spirit” as manifestations of “Control”. However, while critics such as Oliver Harris and Jamie Russell emphasize the importance of queer desire in a novel called *Queer*, addiction plays an important role in Lee’s dislocation, ennui and psychosis. As such, Lee is queerer than queer, and this provides him with a form of destabilising insight which challenges all forms of identity, including queer identity. *Queer* does not seek to redeem the queer in regards to the heterosexual dominant, but aims to expose the epistemic violence that gives rise to homosexual stereotypes. Lee does this implicitly via his “routines” which frequently describe him occupying a position of power within the symbolic order that maligns him as a homosexual and near-schizophrenic drug addict. By doing this Lee reveals how fantasy and desire acquire a fascist determination.

Queer reveals the relationship between power, aesthetics and libido and attempts to expose “the obscene phantasmic support of ‘totalitarianism’ in all its inconsistency” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 92). Lee appears caught between the Lacanian models of desire and *jouissance* and the theories of desire espoused by Deleuze and Guattari’s. As can be seen in *Queer*, the synthesis of these theories discloses the concomitant relationship between desire and “Control”. By aestheticizing this relationship, Lee attempts to break the spell, however Burroughs’s introduction suggests that Lee’s psychosis is caused by an occult force: the “Ugly Spirit”. The “Ugly Spirit”, which is never mentioned in the novel, is a mask for the relationship between desire and “Control”. As such Burroughs, in *Queer*’s introduction, appears to be illiterate in regards to his own novel.

Queer’s “routines” seem to short-circuit control, yet the novel also presents moments where the fascistic elements of the “routine” slip over into real life. In turn the fascistic elements of the “routine” reveal their origins in Lee’s status as an “Ugly American”, while a certain fascist determination is also evident in Burroughs’s genealogy. By aestheticizing this determinism, that is a component of both genetics and language, Lee and Burroughs alike are attempting to break free of it. The “routines” intentionally incorporate indeterminate elements towards this end, leaving them open to

interpretation. However, the “routine” is also a seductive and coercive form that demands an audience. *Queer*, however, is redeemed as it explicitly reveals the relationship between desire, “Control” and aesthetics. Furthermore, while Lee’s “routines” seek to control Allerton, they become a warning to the younger man in regards to the controlling aspects of desire.

When Lee’s “routines” fail to seduce Allerton, the protagonist attempts financial control, but this only comes to highlight what Lee lacks: Allerton’s desire. Lee is seeking to replace social ties with financial obligations, but his and Allerton’s relationship has already acquired an interpersonal dimension. Lee’s debt to Allerton is libidinal rather than financial, and the more Lee tries to breakout of the economy of desire, the more he becomes enchained to it. The novel performs a similar action through refusing commodity satisfaction, installing the wound of desire in the reader by denying narrative closure.

Lee, as an addict, is stuck between an imaginary world of immediate pleasure and the frustrations of desire, and as such, he becomes a model capitalist subject. In one section of *Queer*, Lee criticises communism and espouses the benefits of capitalism. Lee talks of communists at Princeton, in turn revealing the schizophrenic nature of capitalism, desire and “Control”. “Control” is articulated at the micropolitical level in the fantasies of the disempowered who dream of occupying the dominant position in the corrupt, hierarchical and cruel system of political power, rather than imagining an alternative. The ventriloquised nature of Lee’s desires comes to the fore in the final section of the novel where his dream of finding Allerton is bound up with images of capitalism. Here, the word and name “bill” takes on a multivalent significance that reveals the toll that controlling desire took in Burroughs’s life. With this Burroughs comes to recognise the need to aestheticize his controlling desires and sublimate them into writing.

In contrast with *Junky*, Lee in *Queer* appears as a more subjective and reflective protagonist, but he is also loquacious, melancholic and psychotic. His “routines” deny understanding and control to both Lee and the reader, and as such, he remains a subject of illiterature. As with Burroughs’s other works of illiterature, *Queer* lacks a stabilising thesis or narrative structure in

regards to its central topic: the relationship between desire and “Control”. Instead the text problematizes issues regarding libidinal desire and personal liberty, adopting the trope of the depersonalising “routine” to illustrate how individuals are controlled by their desires while often blind to their own loss of control when in the grips of a controlling desire. Further to this, Burroughs’s introduction suggests that he is illiterate of the relationship between desire and “Control” that is so central to the novel. Lee and Burroughs alike continue to be firmly entangled in the fallen and diseased world they are critiquing in *Queer*, to the point where they often appear to be unaware of their complicity. However, *Queer* is the first instance in Burroughs’s *oeuvre* where Lee begins to aestheticize this illness, via his performance of “routines”; troublingly, this is both a means to gaining and undermining power. Hence *Queer* is emblematic of the ambivalent ethical and aesthetical position Burroughs adopts throughout his early works of illiterature. As he did in *Junky*, Burroughs hides as much as he reveals. Like *Junky*, *Queer* contains traces of a trauma that is central to the subject matter of the novel and reveals why Burroughs began to see writing as a potential cure for his personal malaise: “writing as inoculation” (*Q*, 128).

Oliver Harris discounts the importance of William Burroughs’s “Introduction”³³ to *Queer* – written in 1985 – because he believes it moves the discussion away from queerness and desire and back to junk and the killing of Burroughs’s common law wife Joan Vollmer. I assert, however that discussion of Junk, Joan and the “Ugly Spirit” – all of which are mentioned throughout Burroughs’s “Introduction” – matter in regards to *Queer*’s centrality in Burroughs’s early writing. This chapter also looks at how the tropes of genealogy seen in the novel relate to Burroughs’s ancestors, suggesting biological and linguistic determinism. This recalls the prefiguring of Burroughs’s heroin addiction in the life of his uncle, Horace Burroughs.

This chapter aims to reveal the importance of *Queer*’s portrayal of the obscure relationship between desire and “Control”. Furthermore, reading *Queer* as an ambiguous text of illiterature reveals important details about the

³³ The Oliver Harris edited *Queer 25th Anniversary Edition* relegates Burroughs’s “Introduction” to the appendices, replacing it with Harris’s own “Introduction”.

text's relationship to Burroughs's life. Despite the vicious images of colonial domination and crude and disturbing sexual violence, Burroughs hides much in this text. As Burroughs writes, "[there] are things of which I can not bring myself to speak"³⁴ (*L*, 160). This reading of *Queer* exhumes Joan Vollmer and the trauma of William Burroughs's most famous "routine", the starkest aspects of which remain as obscured presences in the text. Applying "an electron microscope and a virus filter" (*Q*, 118) to the illegible elements in Burroughs's second novel reveal "mistakes too monstrous for remorse / To tamper or to dally with"³⁵ (Burroughs qtd. in Levi Stevens, 134). As heroin was in *Junky*, writing in *Queer* becomes a means to both hide and expose trauma.

Queer History

William Burroughs's novel *Queer*, written in 1952 but unpublished until 1985, is emblematic of the queer, discontinuous chronology of the author's early realist texts. This is unintentional given that the realist trilogy, of *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*, effectively follows a linear narrative timeline, albeit one that becomes increasingly disjointed by the end of *The Yage Letters*. *Queer*, although second in the series, was published long after *The Yage Letters* (1963) and *Naked Lunch* (1959). Burroughs intended *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters* to form a continuous three-part text, which was originally to be called "Naked Lunch". Much like the many prefaces Burroughs wrote for *Naked Lunch*, the realist trilogy of *Junky*, *Queer* and *Yage*, "atrophy and amputate spontaneous like" (*NL*, 224). As Oliver Harris writes, "Far from forming 'one book,' each of these texts is radically plural, a composite of several distinct and often contradictory material histories" (*Secret*, 40). These discontinuities may have been intentional, however, since

³⁴ April 22nd, 1953.

³⁵ As Levin Stevens notes "'mistakes too monstrous for remorse / to tamper or to dally with' - this line, frequently quoted by [William Burroughs] throughout his life, is a slight misremembering of 'There are mistakes too monstrous for remorse / To fondle or dally with' from *Arthurian Poets (Tristram)* by American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)" (340).

Queer – written at the same time as *Junky* but stylistically and attitudinally distinct – marks itself as a patently queer text in the Burroughs canon.

In *Queer*, Burroughs outlines the anti-social and limiting effects of addiction as he describes Lee entering a state of post-junk ennui and psychosis. The post-addict, Lee, is filled with renewed desires for sex, interpersonal power and love, but lacks the tact, physicality and social nous to attain them. In *Queer*, Lee's attempts to satisfy his romantic desire for the love-object Eugene Allerton are unsuccessful because he regards the younger man as akin to a drug or commodity. However, the contrast between *Junky* and *Queer* is striking; while Lee in *Junky* possesses a stable identity, in *Queer* he is in a state of nervous breakdown. Addiction's short-circuiting of libido in *Junky* is followed by *Queer*'s self-sabotaging desire.

While *Junky* outlines how both desire and schizophrenic voices are controlled or erased through opiate addiction, *Queer* gives voice to a peculiarly schizophrenic form of desire. In *Queer*, this schizophrenia results from Lee's liminal status. No longer enclosed in the womb of junk, but not integrated in the socio-sexual, external world, Lee is positively dislocated. Lee's paranoia results from the disjunction between the immediacy of junk and the frustration of his socio-sexual desire. Lee can no longer control his desires as he did in *Junky*, instead he is in the grips of a desire for control in a situation that refuses it.

The painful transition described in *Queer* is apparently necessary, as is the pursuit of sexual desire once the solipsism of junk is left behind. Decrying the asceticism of Buddhism, Burroughs, in a letter to Jack Kerouac, uncharacteristically celebrates the importance of love:

I say we are here in *human form* to learn by the *human* hieroglyphs of love and suffering. There is no intensity of love or feeling that does not involve the risk of crippling hurt. It is a duty to take this risk, to love and feel without defense or reserve. I speak only for

myself. Your needs may be different. However, I am dubious of the wisdom of side-stepping sex.³⁶ (*L*, 213)

Suffering results from giving up control and taking “this risk, to love and feel without defense or reserve”. In *Queer*, Lee has not quite reached the stage of loving and feeling “without defense or reserve”. Instead the protagonist is schizophrenically split between interpersonal desire and the asceticism of junk. Lee descends into depression and paranoia, partly as a result of withdrawal and partly because he has entered into an asymmetrical love affair where he is suffering a loss of control.

While Lee in *Queer* seems trapped in his madness and melancholia, his outsider status offers him insight. Lee’s obsessive desire for control over Allerton often draws a direct connection between the personal and the political. This can be seen when Lee reports that the CIA and the Russians were researching the potential of “yage” as a mind control drug and that Lee, similarly, would like to use “yage” to control Allerton’s thoughts (*Q*, 81). As John Marks points out in *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate: The CIA and Mind Control*, Lee was being historically accurate as both superpowers were researching *yagé* as a mind control drug at the time (203). Burroughs’s knowledge of the Cold War “yage” connection is detailed in a Letter to Ginsberg dated March 5th, 1952: “I think the deal is top secret. I know the Russians are working on it, and I think U.S. also. Russians trying to produce ‘automatic obedience,’ have imported vast quantities of Yage for experiments on slave labor” (*L*, 104). Despite the “deal” being “top secret”, Burroughs knows “the Russians are working on it”. Burroughs’s procured his “secret” knowledge from “the stories in Cold War pulp magazines” and from “his former hypnoterapist, Dr. Lewis Wolberg, who informed him that *yagé* was ‘under wraps’ because the U.S. Army was conducting secret experiments” (Miles, 634, Lees, 385).

Lee’s desire for “yage” in *Queer* directly coincides with that of Russia and the U.S., hence libidinal desire in the novel directly connects with the Cold War’s history of political and ideological control. “Control” is at the very heart

³⁶ May 24th, 1954.

of Lee's interest in "yage" in *Queer*, as is a certain paranoia regarding his place in the economy of "Control". Lee sees in "yage" a direct means to control Allerton, yet this is something that he is already attempting via his performance of "routines". Lee tries to seize "Control" for himself using his "routines" yet these reveal, despite their illegibility, the obscene and contradictory nature of "Control" which takes both micropolitical and macropolitical forms. *Queer* marks a definitive link between Lee's fascistic outbursts and the everyday experience of social hierarchies and sexual desire. Just as junk knowledge allows for an insight into the relationship between power and erasure, *Queer* reveals the powerful and unfriendly political determinants that remain hidden in everyday relationships. Hence in *Queer* the mad Lee in love is set to work against the microfascism that constitutes a fundamental part of apparently trivial, everyday encounters.

A New Routine

Contrasting with the addicted, consumerist and pragmatic model of desire displayed towards Allerton throughout Lee's internal monologue in *Queer*, the "routine" allows Lee to unleash a counter-economy of vicious, excessive discourse that overcomes his rational consciousness and disturbs any straight reading of Lee's desires. The queer form of the "routine" creates a unique textual dialectic in *Queer*, between the explicit, fascistic sentiments of Lee's "routines, and the hidden, ideological power of what Deleuze and Guattari call microfascism: "[only] microfascism provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression?" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 214-215). In the theory of microfascism a dynamic connection is delineated between desire and control, where desire is used to undo the subversive and liberating power inherent to desire using social and personal formations to "[shape] postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, semiotic systems, etc." and limit desire's radically productive potential (215). As outlined earlier, however, Lacan views desire as a drive and "every drive pursues its own extinction" (*Écrits*, 844). As such desire always already contains within it a microfascistic determinant where desire desires "its own repression". Furthermore, Deleuze's "Postscript on

the Societies of Control” outlines how the deterritorializing³⁷ forces of capitalism, despite allowing desire to be free of “fascist determination”, maintain institutions like “the corporation, the educational system, the armed services [as] metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation” (4). According to Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan’s model of desire, where desire always desires its own extinction, is microfascistic, while, in Deleuze’s “Postscript”, desire arrives at the destination of the “Control Society” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215, Deleuze, “Control”, 3). In either case desire fuses with “Control,” and this is one of the critical lessons *Queer* offers its readers.

The synthesis of desire and “Control” largely remains hidden in everyday life, but in *Queer* controlling desires are brought into sharp focus. Lee in *Queer* is obsessed with possessing Eugene Allerton, while his “routines” explicitly outline the obscene, violent and controlling form that desire can take. However, the “routine’s” function is to reveal desire’s fascistic determinants and disclose the connection between “Control” and desire. Lee in *Queer* is caught in the bind of a pathological exposure, whereby he is patient zero for the disease of “Control” that he is attempting to diagnose. Much like Edward Jenner did with the small pox vaccine, Lee, in *Queer*, injects himself with the disease of controlling desire, just as he did in *Junky*. This is “writing as inoculation” (*Q*, 128).

In *Queer* the “routine” is both the voice of the “Ugly Spirit” – the personal demon that Burroughs speaks of in *Queer*’s introduction – and the means for its exorcism. The ambiguity and confused ethics of *Queer*’s illiterature is specifically evident in how the depersonalising “routine” both disrupts and makes explicit Lee’s desire for control. The “routines” in *Queer* overwhelm Lee and he is possessed by their obscene and violent passions. Burroughs writes that “the possessor shows itself only when absolutely

³⁷ Deterritorialisation is the process by which old codes and territories are shattered: “Against the Oedipal and oedipalized territorialities (Family, Church, School, Nation, Party), and especially the territoriality of the individual, *Anti-Oedipus* seeks to discover the ‘deterritorialized’ flows of desire, the flows that have not been reduced to the Oedipal codes and the neuroticized territorialities, the *desiring-machines* that escape such codes as *lines of escape* leading elsewhere” (Sneem, “Introduction”, *Anti-Oedipus*, xvii).

necessary,” and in *Queer* this demon appears all but irrepressible (*Q*, 133). Lee had silenced his desires with junk but now they return tenfold in lewd, mischievous and apparently uncontrollable forms.

While *Queer*'s “routines” are prompted by libidinous desire, addiction is another form of routine. As David Lenson highlights, the etymology of addiction “points to *addictus*—the past participle of the Latin verb *addicere* (to say or pronounce, to decree or bind)—which suggests that the user has lost active control of language and thus of consciousness itself, that she or he is already ‘spoken for’, bound and decreed. Instead of *saying*, one *is said*” (35). *Queer* is the only one of Burroughs's novels where the “routine” is explicitly a form of possession. It is also the first of Burroughs's novels to utilise the aesthetic device of the “routine” as a form of inoculation or exorcism against “Control” as it appears in the various guises of junk, “Ugly Spirit” and microfascism. “The way OUT is the way IN”; language must be fought by language and, in the textual economy of *Queer*, the ‘Ugly Spirit’ is exposed by its explicitly fascist utterances (*NL*, 229). *Queer* thus is a not a minor novel in the Burroughs canon, nor an “abortive attempt to elaborate... an idea of community” (Murphy, *Wising*, 57), but one that is instrumental in forging the (an)aesthetic, (anti)theoretical and (a)moral frameworks that inform and structure subsequent works.

Not Queer

While *Queer* is a seminal work in Burroughs's *oeuvre*, the author's style had evolved long before it saw publication in 1985. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg he states, “I really *do not* want *Queer* published at this time. It is not representative of what I do now, and no interest except like an artist's poor art school sketches—and as such, I protest”³⁸ (*L*, 430). However, this disavowal of *Queer* may have stemmed from an embarrassment similar to that which prompted him to destroy his diary in his youth.³⁹ Burroughs's

³⁸ October 7th, 1959.

³⁹ From Barry Miles's biography *Call Me Burroughs*: “Burroughs wrote that he ‘formed a romantic attachment for one of the boys at Los Alamos and kept a diary of this affair that was to put me off writing for many years’... ‘Even now I blush to remember its contents.’...The school packed his things, including the incriminating diary, and sent them to him. ‘I used to

dismay at the publication of *Queer* may have more to do with its content than its perceived form: “like an artist's poor art school sketches”, “not representative of what I do now”.

In *Queer* the armour of addiction is stripped away and the social and personal loss that junk incurred, that was only presented through its absence in *Junky*, is made all too clear. Many critics highlight the psychological and libidinal disjunction between *Junky* and *Queer*. “In blocking [the] formation of utterances”, Timothy Murphy writes, “junk abets the societal repression of homosexual desire just as its economy mimics capitalist enterprise; the silence it produces, however, is only one of many silences shrouding that desire” (*Wising*, 58). Further to this Jamie Russell suggests that, “[no] longer is [Lee] the single-minded protagonist of the earlier novel simply looking for his next fix; suddenly he has become a needy, desperate individual in search of contact with the external world” (17). Oliver Harris notes that there is little reference to addiction and junk in *Queer* (“Can you see a Virus”, 249), yet as Murphy and Russell point out, there is clear opposition set in place between junk and sex in *Junky* and *Queer*. Harris contends that the novel is not truly about junk or withdrawal: “*Queer* does not say until the seventh of nine chapters that ‘Lee was little junk sick’” (*Secret*, 82). However, the second line of the novel details that “[the] first time he saw Carl, Lee thought, ‘I could use that, if the family jewels weren't in pawn to Uncle Junk’” (*Q*, 1): and while this is not specifically about junk sickness, it succinctly articulates the psychosexual distinctions between *Junky* and *Queer*. While Oliver Harris wishes to discount a reading of *Queer* that is centred around junk⁴⁰ and Jamie Russell wishes to move the discussion of Burroughs's writing in the direction of his identity as a gay author, nevertheless junk plays at least a minor but no doubt pivotal role in the formation of *Queer*'s queer dynamics.

turn cold thinking that maybe the boys are reading it aloud to each other. When the box finally arrived I pried it open and threw everything out until I found the diary and destroyed it forthwith without a glance at the appalling pages” (130-132).

⁴⁰ Instead of concentrating on addiction in his reading of *Queer*, Oliver Harris chooses to emphasize *Queer*'s disruptive power within Burroughs's *oeuvre*, its inauguration of the routine form, while also highlighting how Lee's method of seduction is the prototype for Burroughs's later models, theories and images of control (*Secret*, 78-132, also “Can You See a Virus?”, 243-266).

Lee's sexuality is back with a vengeance in *Queer*, after what we assume is, and what the introduction describes as, a withdrawal from heroin addiction. While Lee has, for the most part, left heroin⁴¹ behind in *Queer*, he still retains the psychology of the addict and adapts it to his pursuit of sexual companionship. In effect Lee is applying the arrested logic of addiction to the socio-sexual sphere and while this makes for scenes of cringe-worthy comedy – where Lee flouts social convention – it also displays the gulf between Lee's desires and the means of their fulfilment. Lee's dislocation is evident throughout the novel but especially when first encountering Allerton:

As Lee stood aside to bow in his dignified old-world greeting, there emerged instead a leer of naked lust, wrenched in the pain and hate of his deprived body and, in simultaneous double exposure, a sweet child's smile of liking and trust, shockingly out of time and out of place, mutilated and hopeless". (*Q*, 11)

Lee is hopelessly out of step with socio-sexual conventions due to the junk wracked "pain and hate of his deprived body", while the second, contradictory emotion revealed here, "a sweet child's smile of liking and trust", recalls the childhood trauma which was discussed in Chapter One. Jamie Russell states that, "[in] spite of Burroughs' suggestion that Lee's disintegration is a result of his withdrawal symptoms, it quickly becomes apparent that Lee's confusion is predominantly a result of his homosexual status" (17). However, the origin of Lee's inability to fit into the socio-sexual world described in *Queer* is multifaceted. Oliver Harris writes that "homosexual desire offered the very image of subversion from within: corrupt and corrupting drives that could not be controlled, only hidden" (*Secret*, 86). The means that allowed Burroughs and Lee to hide their errant desires was provided by junk. *Queer* demonstrates that, post-junk, these desires take on their own conspicuous identity, particularly in Lee's "routines". Due to the psychological dysfunction that results from withdrawal

⁴¹ Lee mentions "Uncle Junk" (1), "opium" (64) and being "Junk Sick" (71, 74).

and the concomitant return of libidinal desire, sexual attraction takes on the disconcerting form of intoxication in *Queer*. Lee here is not just queer in the sexual sense of the term as he is notably different from the other gay characters in the novel: Lee is told by Joe Guidry, “You just go around pretending you’re queer to get in on the act” (*Q*, 31). Unlike characters like Hyman and Guidry, Lee assumes the semantic fullness of the term ‘queer’: this is particularly evident when he becomes a receiver and compulsive performer of “routines”.

Lee is alienated from the gay socio-sexual sphere of the Ship Ahoy Bar because he retains a connection to the anti-world of junk. Deleuze and Guattari describe a similar anti-world in terms of Lacan’s model of desire: “The world acquires as its double some other sort of world, in accordance with the following line of argument: there is an object that desire feels the lack of; hence the world does not contain each and every object that exists; there is at least one object missing, the one that desire feels the lack of; hence there exists some other place that can cure desire (not in this world)” (*Anti-Oedipus*, 26). Lee in *Queer* occupies a liminal state, in between an addictive, Lacanian desire as lack and a more social and expansive Deleuzian desiring-production. Mary Douglas writes that, “[danger] lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others” (97). Lee’s homosexuality makes him gay, but it is his dislocation that makes him queer.

Burroughs like Lee, suffers from a form of dislocation due to his queer identity. Jamie Russell writes that Lee’s need to possess Eugene Allerton, in every sense of the word, is a symptom of his unstable identity, which undoes Burroughs’s practice of identifying as a hyper-masculine “queer”:

Lee fails to be “queer” ... for as long as he needs to act out this fantasy of becoming. The stable masculine queer subject would not need to invade, usurp, or steal. (21)

Lee is apparently gay, but also uncanny, funny, outlandish, weird, camp, anti-social, and all the other words queer, in the context of *Queer*, implies. While Burroughs explicitly seeks to be identified as a “masculine queer”, he

frequently works to undo the stability of such an identity. In a letter to Ginsberg, Burroughs appears determined to retain an unstable, multifaceted queer identity:

I don't mind being called queer. T. E. Lawrence and all manner of right Joes (boy can I turn a phrase) was queer. But I'll see him castrated before I'll be called a Fag. That's just what I been trying to put down uh I mean over, is the distinction between us strong, manly, noble types and the leaping, jumping, window dressing cocksucker. Furthechrissakes a girl's gotta draw the line somewheres or publishers will swarm all over her sticking their nasty old biographical prefaces up her ass.⁴² (*L*, 119-120)

Despite the effeminophobia on display here, Burroughs assumes the effeminate homosexual stereotype at the end of this passage: in a classically Burroughsian double move, he simultaneously maligns and adopts the effete image of the homosexual male. "The passage's strict dichotomies of gender behaviour are startling, yet simultaneously the tone is playful, almost parodic" (Russell, 9). Burroughs sets out not to be a queer stereotype, but a "strong, manly, noble type" that will set him at odds with the effeminate homosexual stereotype. Burroughs feels that this identity will be compromised by the publisher's "nasty old biographical prefaces". Jamie Russell writes of this passage:

The feminizing rape can only be avoided through violent (masculine) retaliation...Burroughs is caught between two conflicting visions of himself as a homosexual man: his own belief that he is a "strong, manly, noble" queer, and the stereotypes of homosexuality upon which his publishers' reactions are based. (11)

Burroughs refuses to be hemmed in by the stereotypical image of the effeminate queer, viewing it as a form of epistemic violence, or in Russell's words, "feminizing rape". By explicitly demonstrating how publishers will insert their own texts into him bodily, Burroughs is subverting the "violence

⁴² April 22nd, 1952.

of a reason that founds itself by its own assertions” (Foucault, “On the Archaeology of the Sciences”, 331). However, in this letter Burroughs appears to become infected by the very stereotype he is attempting to subvert when he begins writing in drag: “Furthechrissakes a girl’s gotta draw the line somewhere”. As much as Burroughs attempts to escape the semantic and epistemic limits of homosexual identity, he is infected by their logic. Burroughs is not queer here because he is gay but because he occupies both a masculine and feminine gay identity in the same passage. Burroughs’s confused gender here relates to the ambiguous, liminal position Lee occupies throughout Burroughs’s early novels. The critical importance of Lee’s compromised state is suggested by Oliver Harris when he writes of “Lee’s contradictory national identity—abjected un-American, abjecting ugly American” (Harris, 125). Lee in *Queer* works not to stabilise identity as such, be it American, queer, masculine or otherwise. Rather his purpose is to reveal and undermine the microfascistic processes that give rise to knowledge and identity. *Queer* aims not to redeem the figure of the queer in the eyes of the heterosexual dominant, but to amplify the epistemic violence endemic to common sense and everyday life, which gives rise to homosexual stereotypes and homophobia, and articulate it in a more potent, explicit form.

Cold and Practical

Queer not only describes Lee’s life in a post-addiction funk, but retroactively delineates the psychological and interpersonal dissatisfaction that created the desire for addiction in the first place. The addict Lee is much like the park bench he sits on at the start of *Queer*: “a concrete bench that was molded to resemble wood” (*Q*, 7). He has organic form but his substratum is cold and practical. Junk has made Lee into a cynical machine and in *Queer* he turns his steely gaze towards the experience of sexual relations and their discontents. The change of subject matter and location⁴³ in *Queer* sees *Junky*’s grey monotony give way to the lively viscera of the “routine” and the fascistic

⁴³ While Lee spends most of his time in *Junky* in New York, in *Queer* he lives in Mexico city and later travels to South America.

obscurity of Lee's 'ugly American' character. Oliver Harris writes, "one way to grasp the vital, paradigmatic difference between *Junky* and *Queer* is through their differing mode[s] of organisation around this emptiness⁴⁴" (*Secret*, 97). In *Junky* addiction was its mode of organisation, while in *Queer* the void or gap manifests itself in Lee's desire for the Other: Eugene Allerton. Encountering his renewed sexuality Lee "felt the tearing ache of limitless desire" (*Q*, 96). The "routine" was forged out of this insatiable yearning: the desire to seize the attention and gaze of the Other. While Lee will sleep with Allerton and have a relationship with him, he is unable to achieve *jouissance* and become the object of the younger man's desire.

The sedated Lee of *Junky*, while involving himself in criminal activities and recounting violent incidents, lacks the striking angst, cynicism and melancholia of Lee in *Queer*. In *Queer* Lee ceases to objectify his body and enjoyment, becoming something more akin to a literary subject. However, Lee's speech and actions in *Queer* mark him out as a uniquely grotesque, loquacious, melancholic and psychotic protagonist. For example, one of Lee's "routines" describes the protagonist perusing the wares of a used-slave lot, thereby condensing sexual and imperial fantasies of power: "You call those senile slobberings baby talk? My grandfather got a clap off that one. Come again, Gussie" (58). The asymmetrical power dynamics in this "routine" offer an exaggerated facsimile of those to which Lee is subject to, rather than a master of. This is seen in the very first scene of the novel where Lee imagines himself being rejected by a procession of boys: "He saw a shadowy line of boys. As each boy came to the front of the line, he said 'Best of luck,' and ran for a streetcar" (*Q*, 3). The "Used-Slave Lot routine" simply reverses the role Lee assumes in his earlier daydream, allowing Lee instead to reject a line of boys. This "routine" can be regarded as an articulation of Lacanian phantasy which protects "the traumatic real" of the pitiless hierarchies of sexual attraction, here codified in images of slavery and colonialism (Lacan, *Four Fundamental*, 41). The sheer violence and toxic masculinity on display in the "Used-Slave Lot routine" mask a profound sensitivity and despondency on

⁴⁴ Harris here is referring to the Lacanian Real.

Lee's part. Earlier, after Carl Steinberg leaves him, Lee "felt lonely and defeated. 'I'll have to look for someone else,' he thought. He covered his face with his hands. He was very tired" (*Q*, 3). Lee's violent speech and ennui largely result from his dejection regarding his romantic prospects. Despite Lee's efforts, it seems that all lines of escape, including his "routines", are marked by, and a mark of, his failure in the romantic realm.

Queer's "routines" are a form of self-sabotage which foreground Lee's rage against the asymmetrical economy of socio-sexual enjoyment. Highlighting the arbitrary, micropolitical function of attraction, Sigmund Freud outlines that, "[beauty] has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it" (*Civilization*, 48). Lee's ugly "routines" in *Queer* are a protest against the power of Allerton's beauty, its social currency, and, in turn, the control it has over the protagonist. The 'routine' is also an attempt to seize the gaze of the desired other and Burroughs outlines the "frantic attention-getting format" of "routines" in *Queer's* introduction (129). The "routine" form used in *Queer* foreshadows its adoption as a key narrative technique in *Naked Lunch* where its purpose is, similarly, to both confound and seduce the reader. The use of the "routine" form in *Queer* marks Lee's sublimation of his discontent into aesthetic practice rather than erasing it through addiction.

The illiterature of the "routine" – as opposed to the erasure of junk – is performed in order to aestheticize, rather than anaesthetize Lee's malaise, and in turn give him "Control". As Harris writes, "[routines] ground both the aesthetic and the libidinal in relations of power. This is where, quite literally, the action is: for Lee's "routines" are essentially performative, intended, that is, to 'make things happen'" ("Can you see a Virus?", 253). The "routine" comes with the absence of junk, when the return of Lee's sexual desires demands action from the protagonist. *Queer* then is not just a description of the author's homosexual lifestyle, as he had first envisioned, but of the spontaneous forces denied by the internal policeman, junk. However, on their return these desires appear to have acquired "a fascist determination" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215).

“Indeed You Are”

One of the problems that *Queer* creates for Burroughs upon publication – and why he might have preferred if it had not seen the light of day – is that it reveals that his criticism of control, spoken of in *Naked Lunch* as “The Algebra of Need” (206), was inspired by his desire for control over Lewis Marker: the real-life inspiration for *Queer*’s Eugene Allerton. As Harris writes, “[this] is where the fantasmatic exercise of and resistance to power in Burroughs’ writing originates then: in his material experience as a writer of being controlled by the need to control, rather than from either the condition of addiction or from the pulling of a gun trigger” (*Secret*, 146). While the specific images and psychosocial dynamics of control were forged by Burroughs’ desire for Lewis Marker, addiction turned him into a desiring machine that would seek control with the compulsive drive of an addict. Furthermore, junk knowledge introduced Burroughs to the relationship between power and erasure. However, in *Queer* the relationship between the economies of power, libido and aesthetics are radically put to the fore. Some of the images used later to critique political domination and addiction in *Naked Lunch*⁴⁵ are used in *Queer* to illustrate the addict, Lee’s vision of love:

“While we are in Ecuador we must score for Yage,” Lee said. “Think of it: thought control. Take anyone apart and rebuild to your taste. Anything about somebody bugs you, you say, ‘Yage! I want that ‘routine’ took clear out of his mind.’ I could think of a few changes I might make in you, doll.” He looked at Allerton and licked his lips. “You’d be so much nicer after a few alterations. You’re nice now, of course, but you do have those irritating little peculiarities. I mean, you won’t do exactly what I want you to do all the time. If I had my way we’d sleep every night all wrapped around each other like hibernating rattlesnakes.”

⁴⁵ Specifically the images used to describe the mind-controlling senders (*NL*, 162) and the ectoplasmic addict (7).

Lee was taking off his clothes. He lay down beside Allerton. "Wouldn't it be booful if we should juth run together into one gweat big blob," he said in baby talk. "Am I giving you the horrors?"

"Indeed you are." (96)

While in *Naked Lunch* control is seen as a hostile and alien force, here it is Lee's desire for Allerton that arouses his need for control. Lee, in this scene, is acting in an identical fashion to the liquefactionists in *Naked Lunch* who would like to physically subsume all other persons into themselves (162). In craving control of Allerton, Lee is in turn controlled by control: He has become a "control addict": "*You see control can never be a means to any practical end ... It can never be a means to anything but more control ... Like junk*" (NL, 164, italics in original). In *Queer* desire becomes another name for control. Earlier in the novel Lee describes his desire for Allerton as, "an amoeboid protoplasmic projection, straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other's body, to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals" (Q, 36). What Lee is describing here is not simply control however. He wants to seize Allerton's desire and become his *jouissance*: that is, he wants to be for Allerton what Allerton is for him and for them both to reach a fluid equilibrium of mutual desire. Lee's desire is not to obliterate Allerton's subjectivity but to merge with it. Burroughs will write later that "[it] is highly questionable whether a human organism could survive complete control. There would be nothing there" (*The Adding Machine*, 117). Basing his theory of control on the fluid libidinal economy of desire, rather than on the oppressive need of junk, gives it a much more nuanced and pervasive relevance. With desire as its basis, "Control" takes on a universal quality.

This section's images of "Control" are adapted in the "Islam Incorporated and the Parties of Interzone" section of *Naked Lunch* to critique "Control", particularly as it relates to politics, ideology and sociality, yet, as mentioned, it is important that *Queer* first identifies these maladies in Lee,

not as a victim but perpetrator of what will later be accounted for as 'virus' (*The Ticket That Exploded*, 270). As David Punday writes, "Burroughs' description of language and power as a 'virus'... implies a hidden, logically replicating structure that gives rise to everyday relations" (38). Lee's controlling desires in *Queer* amount to a micropolitical critique of desire as such, since "language and power as a 'virus'... gives rise to everyday relations". While junk appears to have kept Lee's fascistic impulses in check in *Junky*, *Queer* describes a deeper, more profound sickness: the desire for "Control" of the Other.

Libidinal desire involves the desire to become a source of fascination for the Other, whereby their desire is returned freely, by choice. As Lacan writes, "[man's] desire is the desire of the Other" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 235). In other words, "[desire] full stop is always the desire of the Other. Which basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires" (*My Teaching*, 38). Controlling desire effectively tells the other what to desire. This is difficult to achieve on the interpersonal level, between individuals. However, individuals desire according to cultural codes, "rich in interactions: a whole supple segmentarity that processes molecular energies and potentially gives desire a fascist determination" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). As such, Lee's awkwardness and outlandishness result from his controlling desire being a reflection of the macropolitical powers that use desire as a means to "Control". Lee would like to wield power, rather than be subject to it, but this is simply a phantasy like that of the "Used Slave-Lot routine". However, Lee's psychosis and unreasonable demands for "Control" function, again, to reveal, rather than protect the obscene, self-serving contradictions that underlie "Control".

"Slugging", in Burroughs's fiction, is the name given to the merging of people into an undifferentiated blob: "This slup is the sound of the routine form itself as a fantasy of devouring desire, emerging like a kind of monstrously extended Freudian 'slip'" (Harris, "Introduction", *Queer*, xxxii). What Lee desires is the "booful... gweat big blob": that is an even more radical and impossible desire, where the self and the Other's desires become

indistinguishable. Lee is imagining Deleuze and Guattari's "Body without Organs", for which they use the image of the egg which exists, "before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 153). Deleuze and Guattari quote from *Naked Lunch* in order to further elucidate their concept of the "BwO": "No organ is constant as regards either function or position, ... sex organs sprout anywhere,... rectums open, defecate and close, ... the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 153, *NL*, 9). The "BwO" is the horizon or unachievable goal of desire, the desire of desire itself, where desire is a purely deterritorializing force that schizophrenizes ⁴⁶ or breaks apart the organisation of bodies, be they social, political or biological. As such the BwO as an image of the fragmented body is desirable and future orientated, while for Lacan the fragmented body is "Monstrous" and represents "a pre-ontological universe of the 'night of the world' in which partial objects wander in a state preceding any synthesis, like that in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (which are strictly correlative to the emergence of modern subjectivity)" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 49-50). The Lacanian fragmented body instead represents "the passage from 'natural' to 'symbolic' surroundings" (*The Ticklish Subject*, 35). Images of the fragmented body, "images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body", constitute an attack on egoic consistency and represent how "[the subject] is originally an inchoate collection of desires - there you have the true sense of the expression fragmented body" (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 11, *The Psychoses*, 39). As such the fragmented body described by Lacan is not future-orientated like the 'BwO' and instead represents a pre-symbolic and pre-egoic state.

The image of the child's body reflected in the mirror becomes the basis for Lacan's conception of ego formation. Lacan explains that "the mirror-stage is not simply a moment in development. It also has an exemplary

⁴⁶ "[Schizophrenia] is the process of the production of desire and desiring-machines" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 24).

function, because it reveals some of the subject's relations to his image, in so far as it is the *Urbild* of the ego" (*Freud's Papers*, 74). "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, 'imago'" (*Ecrits*, 94). The imago, despite being an external, mirror image of the subject, represents a turning inward. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, describe the "BwO" – using images such as the "tantric egg" and *Naked Lunch's* description of fragmenting bodies – as a means to break out of the determinism and egocentrism of psychoanalysis: "Where psychoanalysis says 'Stop, find your self again,' we should say instead, 'Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self'" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 151). This dismantling of the self and becoming "we" involves pushing beyond, into the realm of the Other, where the desire of a body without organs becomes the image of desire itself: "At any rate, you make [a Body without Organs], you can't desire without making one" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 149).

The image of Lee/Allerton as a "booful... big blob" is this image of desire and the image of the end of desire. Its impossibility means that a desire for a "Body without Organs", unlike microfascism, is the desire of desire itself: "You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit" (150). This limit, impossibility or lack, means that Lacan's and Deleuze and Guattari's theories of desire are of a piece: despite the protestations of the latter, they too form a "booful... gweat big blob". "Desiring-production" and "desire as lack" differ in terms of imagining what the source of desire is: Lacan, with his concept of "desire as lack", imagines desire organising itself around an internal emptiness (*Ethics*, 130), whereas Deleuze and Guattari, with their concept of "desiring production"⁴⁷, see desire as something that is always drawn to producing new "assemblages".

⁴⁷ Against Lacan, who views desire as lack, Deleuze and Guattari outline how desire is always producing: "desire produces, its product is real" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 145).

The “Body without Organs”, as an image of productive desire, moves towards different assemblages, that is towards the “plane of consistency”, an infinite realm containing all possible configurations of the “Body without Organs” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 157).

Lee’s personality is split between these two models of desire, and this gives him specific insights on the nature and forms that “desiring production” and “desire as lack” take. While Lee lacks Allerton’s *jouissance*, his “routines” suggest an aesthetically productive potential for his desires. As such *Queer* is a text both produced out of desire and one which performs, via Lee’s “routines”, desiring production. The aesthetic evolution of the “routine”, which resulted from desire, has the potential to, if not move beyond desire, call it into question through aestheticizing its concomitant desire for “Control”. While Allerton is a cypher for a Lacanian model of “desire as lack”, this yearning inspires the “routine” as a form of “desiring production”. However, what the “routine” reveals, as a hybrid of Lacanian desire as lack and Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring production, is the connection between desire and “Control”. As stated earlier, Deleuze comes to recognise this negative and controlling aspect of desire in his article “Postscript on the Societies of Control”⁴⁸.

While Oliver Harris argues that “*Queer* is almost textbook Lacan” (*Secret*, 102), the production of Lee’s “routines” and the image of Lee/Allerton as a “booful... gweat big blob” can be regarded as images of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “desiring production” and the “Body without Organs” respectively. While *Queer* frequently describes a melancholy “desire as lack”, it routinely performs a manic “desiring production”. However, the utility of the “routine”, as a form of “desiring production”, lies in its ability to reveal the controlling, microfascistic nature of desire itself.

⁴⁸ “These are the societies of control, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies. “Control” is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future. Paul Virilio also is continually analyzing the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old systems operating in the time frame of a closed system” (4).

While these microfascist potentialities remain hidden in everyday life, they are brought into sharp focus by Lee's disturbing, psychotic and uncontrollable "routines".

Oliver Harris suggests that "everything turns on whether Burroughs' position is that of the excluded observer safely exempted from the content of his enunciation or whether he is himself included in the content, inscribed fully into the process" (*Secret*, 148), yet this somewhat misses the point. If "Control" is based on the desire to control the other's *jouissance* then anyone who enters into the socio-sexual world becomes embroiled in the microfascistic economy of "Control"; Burroughs's consistent complicity is an image of the impossibility of escape. This is precisely the ethico-textual economy that Burroughs creates: he is always asking the reader, "*Wouldn't You?*" (*NL*, xlv, italics in original). The ubiquity of desire is what makes Harris's connection between "Control" and the libidinal economy of *Queer* so compelling; when we "go further still", "Control" becomes all-pervasive. "This should prompt us to recognise not only how surprisingly dense Burroughs' queer novel is with political references but the connection it repeatedly implies between the intimate world of individual desires and a global narrative of power" (Harris, "Introduction", *Queer*, xxvi). Unlike the limited, localised economy of junk, desire is ubiquitous: "'I'm not queer,' [Lee] thought. 'I'm disembodied'" (*Q*, 86). Lee's "disembodied" desires put him in touch with what Deleuze and Guattari call a "highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions... [that] potentially gives desire a fascist determination" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). This fascist determination of desire is what Lee is excavating in *Queer*. Harris is right: the queer libidinal model of "Control" revealed in *Queer* is historically accurate – in terms of Burroughs's conceptual development – but more importantly, it is much more critically potent than the "Algebra of Need". Desire creates the desire for control but also reveals how this desire also controls those who desire control. Burroughsian "Control" outlines the addictive nature of "Control": how the desire for "Control" controls the subject. This dichotomy is evident in the relationship between the opening scene of the novel, where

Lee imagines “a line of boys” rejecting him, and the “routine” where he envisions himself in “Corn Hole Gus's Used-Slave Lot” rejecting a line of boys. Desire reveals itself here, not as an authentic and personal reaction, but a “highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions”. Desire here is an image of “Control” involving a fantasy of occupying a controlling position within the system that controls Lee. As Oliver Harris states:

Queer acts out not only fantasies of fascism but the fascism of fantasy, of desire turned against itself...What makes Lee so powerful a vehicle for political critique is the fact that the Ugly American, defined so brutally in terms of class and colonial authority and exercising a fascistic elitism, racism, and will to power is a death-driven, near-schizophrenic homosexual. (*Secret*, 109)

At once Lee gives voice to, and thoroughly undermines, the fascist impulse, one which is communicated through a pervasive network of microfascistic desire that cannot be escaped, only short-circuited. Lee’s desire, revealed in his “routines”, is the desire of the Other; not just the desire for Allerton’s desire, but the desire of a “death-driven, near-schizophrenic homosexual” to occupy a position of power in a system that maligns and controls him and others. *Queer* describes how Lee’s desires involves an overidentification with the ruling ideology; a fantasy of becoming, rather than overthrowing, the fascistic, elitist and colonising power that subjugates him. Only by aestheticizing this fascistic desire – “writing as inoculation” – is the spell broken. The image of desire on display in *Queer* clears the way for the far-reaching critical power of *Naked Lunch*: “*Naked Lunch* was written – like *Queer* – out of desire as much as on drugs” (Harris, “Introduction”, *Queer*, xviii). *Queer* doesn’t fit into the *oeuvre* then, it transforms it (Harris, *Secret*, 79).

While desire plays a pivotal role in *Queer*, drug addiction remains key to understanding Lee’s behaviour. As Lee demonstrates in *Queer*, stepping outside the bounds of addiction and its comparatively rational worldview does not lead to freedom or enlightenment, but a collapse into psychosis and

unfettered, fascistic desire. Addiction and intoxication do not allow for a return to a previous, virginal status of being clean, instead the user and addict remain augmented, dirty and removed from “normal” life. As Timothy Murphy notes:

Lee must reestablish contact with the otherness of other people in the same way as he reestablishes contact with his own internal otherness: by dramatizing it. To this end he deploys obscene and satirical comic monologues called “routines.” These “routines” allow him to make simple one-way contact with other people while shielding him from the demands of reciprocal interpersonal relations, for which his addiction has left him unprepared. (59)

“Routines,” which come to Lee “like dictation”, speak to the undead, repetitious drive of the addict (*Q*, 57). The uncanniness of the “routine” – its unnaturalness within the social order – represents “the constitutive discord between drive and body: drive as eternal – ‘undead’, disrupts the instinctual rhythm” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 72). In *Queer* the “routine” consistently “disrupts the instinctual rhythm” of the narrative to remind the reader of Lee’s otherness. However, the “routine” also reveals how Lee, while alienated from the symbolic order, is in the process of entering into the symbolic order. The uncanny aspects of the “routine” reveal it to be a performance of the Lacanian death drive. The “routine”, as the articulation of a desire which short-circuits that desire, explicitly outlines how “every drive is virtually a death drive” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 844). The “routine” is an intermediary between the inarticulate death drive of addiction and the symbolic order: “And the death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order, in so far - this is what Freud writes - as it is dumb, that is to say in so far as it hasn't been realised” (Lacan, *Ego*, 326). The silence of addiction invokes the dumbness of the death drive, but when Lee performs “routines” he is being spoken for by the symbolic order. Thus when Lee articulates most openly his desire for “Control” in his “routines”, he is under the control

of the symbolic order. As such entering the symbolic order involves becoming subject to its economy of “Control”.

The desperate status of Lee as the ugly, psychotic, desirous and fascist protagonist in *Queer* allows him to become a vaccine, antidote or explicit form of the insidious virus of “Control”. As Eric Mottram writes, “Burroughs employs no ideological alibis or false objectivity: his map of his location in history includes himself” (271). Burroughs thus aligns with Foucault’s assessment which outlines, “[where] there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (*History of Sexuality*, 95). However, Burroughs employs many strategies, including addiction, in an attempt to escape his ideological and personal place in history. While Burroughs is attempting to reveal impersonal fascistic forces in *Queer* in order to understand and control his negative psychological impulses, ideological determinants and personal tendencies, in the introduction to the novel, written in 1985, he distils these forces down into an occult spirit, his bespoke hieroglyph of evil: the “Ugly Spirit”.

The Ugly Spirit

The “Ugly Spirit” is only mentioned in *Queer*’s introduction in relation to Burroughs’s killing of his common-law wife Joan Vollmer; the text itself makes no reference to the term. *Queer*’s introduction perversely suggests that shooting Joan, the mother of his child, enabled Burroughs to become a writer:

I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out. (*Q*, 135)

This is discounted by Oliver Harris:

But surely, this secret—don't we already know its name? Hasn't Burroughs himself confessed where the body is buried, in the very introduction to *Queer*, where he reaches his famous "appalling conclusion": that it was the shooting of his wife, Joan, in September 1951 that "motivated and formulated" his writing by bringing him in contact with Control, aka "the Ugly Spirit"? But the difference between *Junkie* and *Queer*, let alone the ground of an *oeuvre*-long war on control, cannot be left to the repercussions of that single gunshot, one evening in Mexico. (*Secret*, 41)

Harris here is astute in his observation, but perhaps he misses the point. Burroughs directly encountered his inner fascist, "the Ugly Spirit", when his insanely irresponsible party-trick – shooting a glass off Joan Vollmer's head – ended tragically. Burroughs could no longer allow this 'Ugly Spirit' to control his life. Instead he sublimated this recklessness into writing illiterature, creating a complex and antagonistic form of literature that is impossible to control.

Joan's death and the agency of the "Ugly Spirit" puts another kink in any attempt to form a totalising interpretative strategy in regards to *Queer*. While Harris's positing of the important genetic and political connections between desire and "Control" are extremely insightful and wide-ranging, Burroughs's introduction, which gives agency to a personal demon – the "Ugly Spirit" – and significance to a personal tragedy – Burroughs's killing of Joan Vollmer – puts Harris's reading in jeopardy. Furthermore, for Harris the problem with Joan's death is that it allows the reader to ignore the queer subject matter of the text: Burroughs's heterosexual relationship with Joan defaces the queerness of a novel called *Queer* (Harris, "Can You See a Virus?", 249). However, while the "Ugly Spirit" is Burroughs's personal and literal *bête noire*, it often takes on a far-reaching significance. Much later Burroughs will claim that the "Ugly Spirit" is "very much related to the American Tycoon. To William Randolph Hearst, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, that whole stratum of

American acquisitive evil. Monopolistic, acquisitive evil. Ugly evil. The ugly American. The ugly American at his ugly worst. That's exactly what it is" (Miles, 17). The "Ugly Spirit" is thus a literal parasite which occupies both an internal and external position, where it is both representative of Burroughs's internal traumas and a widespread cultural malaise. Thus the "Ugly Spirit" is a cypher for microfascism – that is an "evil" that is both internal and external – as it is figured in *Queer*.

Burroughs's "Introduction" to *Queer* appears to be a piece of misdirection but also a fruitful textual supplement in regards to explaining the compulsions and obsessions of Lee, the 'ugly American'. In spite of this, the surprising revelation of the "Ugly Spirit" as the origin of Burroughs's literary career seems to have little to do with the actual content of *Queer*, as neither Joan nor the "Ugly Spirit" are directly mentioned in the novel. It would seem that the "Ugly Spirit" is being used not only to explain Joan's death, but also the ugliness of Burroughs's literary proxy, Lee, in what remains Burroughs's most self-deprecating novel. The "Ugly Spirit" is used to explain Lee's cruel and unusual behaviour, epitomised in his "routine" performances. Despite the distance of 32 years between Burroughs's writing of the novel and its introduction, Burroughs has not unravelled its secrets, beyond providing them with a name: the "Ugly Spirit". Burroughs is "being written in *Queer*" (128), receiving "messages from other planets", and even after more than three decades, Burroughs's orders have not been "clearly decoded yet" (*Everything Lost*, 189). Burroughs at this juncture is either unwilling or unable to reveal that Lee's ugliness is a reflection of a broader socio-cultural illness that festers in between desire and "Control".

Lee's ugliness remains an occult mystery for Burroughs, but this ugliness is occasioned, at least within the structure of the novel, by one person: Eugene Allerton. Despite the negative portrayal of Lee in *Queer*,⁴⁹ he remains a surprisingly sympathetic and painfully honest protagonist. While Lee consistently engages in attempts to manipulate and dominate Allerton,

⁴⁹ Burroughs describes Lee in terms of his "reckless, unseemly, outrageous, maudlin – in a word, appalling – behavior" ("Introduction", *Queer*, 127)

the younger man's aloofness and inscrutability make for a character who is difficult to empathise with, much like Lee in *Junky*. Eugene Allerton manages to completely destabilise the formerly cool and calculating Lee, turning him into something entirely other. It would seem that Allerton is more than capable of conjuring the "Ugly Spirit" in Lee.

Despite the connections between desire and "Control" evident in *Queer*, Lee's "routines", psychotic behaviour and general lack of self-control suggest that desire puts Lee in contact with something that is approximate in its inscrutability to the Other and his *jouissance*: the Real. The "Ugly Spirit" is the name given by Burroughs in his introduction to *Queer* to the aspects of himself and his novel which he cannot comprehend or explain in a logical or rational way. The "Ugly Spirit" is an occult "mode of organisation around this emptiness" (Lacan, *Ethics*, 130). This 'Ugly Spirit' possesses the 'ugly American' Lee, thereby illustrating how the depersonalizing Real, which ostensibly exists outside the realm of common sense, law and rational language, is capable of entering into consciousness, language and everyday life. For Lacan, art becomes the most significant means for demonstrating the existence of the Real and its power over the human subject (130). Slavoj Žižek writes that "[the] gap that separates beauty from ugliness is ... the very gap that separates reality from the Real: what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real" (*Plague of Fantasies*, 83). *Queer* may be an ugly novel, but Burroughs remains an artist because his writing attempts to grasp the Real rather than affirm "reality". Burroughs states:

Writing must always remain an *attempt*. The Thing itself, the process on sub-verbal level always eludes the writer. A medium suitable for me does not yet exist, unless I invent it.⁵⁰
(*L*, 126)

"The Thing itself, the process on sub-verbal level" is that which the author is

⁵⁰ May 23rd, 1952.

attempting to capture and describes what Burroughs does not understand, or at least cannot put into words, and it becomes another name for the Real, the “Ugly Spirit” or the all-pervasive microfascism that is concomitant with desire in *Queer*. However, the Real here is not that which exists outside the symbolic order, rather it is the symbolic order, or at least those aspects of the symbolic order that are incomprehensible yet controlling. For Burroughs, the “Ugly Spirit”, Joan’s death and Lewis Marker are hieroglyphs for the all-consuming economy of ‘Control’ or impersonal determinism: “Yes, the hieroglyphics provided one key to the mechanism of possession” (*Q*, 133). Writing for Burroughs functions as a form of therapy or exorcism⁵¹, but also as an encounter with the malevolent forces of the Real. The rendering of the demonic Real in Burroughs’s fiction evolved out of his addiction, homicidal behaviour, compulsive desire and the recognition that the ‘Ugly Spirit’ needed to be sublimated into literature. As such *Queer* is attempting to symbolise the Real that is, in turn, the controlling, irrational and fascistic aspect of the symbolic order. In *Queer*, the “Ugly Spirit” as a manifestation of the Real is a mask for the ugly and fascistic elements of the symbolic order as they establish themselves in Lee’s unconsciousness, and this becomes apparent upon examination of the novel’s implicit critique of the relationship between desire and “Control”. Oliver Harris refuses to give agency to the “Ugly Spirit” as it covers over this relationship. This relationship is traumatic for Burroughs as it suggests that he lacks authentic agency. The “Ugly Spirit” and writing as a form of exorcism are imagined as means to escape a system that apparently has no outside, and as such these may function to sustain that system by covering over it. However, the “routine”, short-circuits controlling desire and the system that forms it.

⁵¹ George Orwell describes his experience of writing in similar terms: “Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist or understand” (“Why I Write”, 58-59).

The Fascist Routine

Foucault states, the “strategic adversary is fascism... the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (qtd. in Miller, *Passion*, 369). *Queer* can be read as a text that both confronts and gives voice to the fascistic elements of the symbolic order. According to Slavoj Žižek, *Queer* would not be a totalitarian work “in so far as it publicly displays the underlying obscene phantasmic support of ‘totalitarianism’ in all its inconsistency” (*Plague of Fantasies*, 92). *Queer*’s fascistic “routines” are a literal performance of the “obscene and phantasmic support of ‘totalitarianism’”, while Lee, as both “Ugly American” and “death-driven, near-schizophrenic homosexual”, embodies the simultaneous ubiquity and inconsistency of “Control”. Lee’s fascistic and totalitarian impulses stand out only because of their psychotic form and ugly style. “Routines”, as manifestations of desire, allow for *Queer*’s far-reaching political criticism. However, one does not have to read *Queer* as a revelation or critique of microfascism; it can also be read as a celebration of fascism as such. The following passage illustrates how the fascistic impulse, which Lee is articulating in his “routines”, is always in danger of manifesting itself in reality:

Lee smiled. “Just imagine some old humanist German doctor. I say, ‘Well, Doc, you done a great job here with malaria. Cut the incidence down almost to nothing.’

“Ach, yes. We do our best, is it not? You see this line in the graph? The line shows the decline in this sickness in the past ten years since we commence with our treatment program.’

“Yeah, Doc. Now look, I want to see that line go back where it came from.’

“Ach, this you cannot mean.’

“And another thing. See if you can't import an especially

debilitating strain of hookworm.'

"The mountain people we can always immobilize by taking their blankets away, leaving them with the enterprise of a frozen lizard."

The inside wall to Lee's room stopped about three feet from the ceiling to allow for ventilating the next room, which was an inside room with no windows. The occupant of the next room said something in Spanish to the effect Lee should be quiet.

"Ah, shut up," said Lee, leaping to his feet. "I'll nail a blanket over that slot! I'll cut off your fucking air! You only breathe with my permission. You're the occupant of an inside room, a room without windows. So remember your place and shut your poverty-stricken mouth!"

A stream of chingas and cabrones replied. "Hombre," Lee asked, "¿En dónde está su cultura?" [Where is your culture?] (Q, 94-95)

Here Lee performs a fascist "routine", where he discusses using infection to control the population of South America. When interrupted, the mask slips and he threatens to suffocate his neighbour using the item, a blanket, that he had taken from the mountain people in the "routine", "leaving them with the enterprise of a frozen lizard." At this moment the "routine" crosses from fantasy into reality, revealing, in the materiality of the blanket, one of the unique aesthetic features of the "routine" form, something which Burroughs discusses in a letter to Allen Ginsberg:

I've been thinking about routine as art form, and what distinguishes it from other forms. One thing, it is not completely symbolic, that is, it is subject to shlop over into "real" action at any time (like cutting off finger joint and so forth). In a sense the whole Nazi movement was a great,

humorless, evil *routine* on Hitler's part. Do you dig me? I am not sure I dig myself. And some pansy shit is going to start talking about living his art.⁵² (*L*, 216)

For Burroughs, it is precisely the "routine's" humour that separates it from fascism proper, yet the fascist content of the "routine" is always in danger of crossing over into reality. It is its aesthetic form, whereby it "publicly displays the underlying obscene phantasmic support of 'totalitarianism' in all its inconsistency", that differentiates it from fascism proper. The depersonalisation of the "routine", where Lee seems to be literally possessed by his utterances, is an important aspect of the "routine's" criticism of "totalitarianism" as it manifests itself as microfascism: "the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us". This is most clearly evident in *Queer*, the only novel where the "routine" possesses Lee, supplanting his voice and identity.

Writing of *Queer's* "routines", Jamie Russell states that, "[both] fantastic and realistic, the 'routine' is monstrous. Its schizophrenic oscillation between opposed registers (real/fictional, comic/terrifying, masculine/feminine) threatens to overwhelm the teller, turning him into a mere ventriloquist's dummy" (22). Just as the talking asshole "routine" subsumes the performer in *Naked Lunch*, the fascism of the performance overwhelms Lee's identity in the above scene from *Queer* (*NL*, 132-133). The viral power of the "routine" and its ability to turn Lee "into a mere ventriloquist's dummy" is key to its critical force. Microfascism, as a manifestation of totalitarianism, is a free agency robbing virus that the "routine" implicitly undermines. The critically resonant aspect of the "routine", which is "subject to shlop over into 'real' action at any time", is that it reveals not only the "obscene phantasmic support of totalitarianism" but of everyday "reality".

In *Queer* the ability of the "routine" to cross over into reality allows Lee's personal discontent to take on far-reaching political relevance. Furthermore, the fascist content of Lee's "routines" has its roots in Lee's

⁵² June 24th, 1954.

inability to control Allerton. The “routine” is a node between desire, “Control” and “reality” revealing the latter’s “obscene phantasmic support”. Writing of the previously quoted section of *Queer*, Oliver Harris states that Lee’s “sadistic aggression towards racial ‘Others’ seems to be an act of hysterical compensation for the impotence in his sexual relationship. The aggression also appears directed at Allerton himself, fantasizing the power of absolute economic leverage, and threatening to act out Lee’s suffocating demands” (“Can you See a Virus?”, 259). Jamie Russell notes that “[the] intersection of sexual inadequacy, ego disintegration, and American nationalism can be related to the broader issue of Lee’s masculinity” (26). Lee’s discontent is channelled into the creation of a caricature of political and cultural dominance: “This is what makes *Queer* such a precise and potent political text: the way Lee gives the lie to what Amy Kaplan has described as the historical ‘disavowal of American imperialism’” (Harris, *Secret*, 107). When Lee asks his invisible South American neighbour, “¿En dónde está su cultura?”, the irony is palpable. If *Queer* is literature, it is an artefact of a heterogeneously cruel culture for which Lee is a mere ventriloquist’s dummy. According to Walter Benjamin “There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, *Reflections*, 248) and it is apparent that *Queer* is a document of a barbaric civilisation. However, it is in the very honesty of its violence and its ability to transfer from fantasy to reality where the “routine” becomes undone. The ventriloquism evident in Lee’s “routines” give “the disease not only a name, but also a tongue, making it possible thereby to converse with the disease itself” (Connor, 114). As the disease speaks, its pathological nature becomes obvious. As Oliver Harris states, “[routines] work not to achieve but to *short-circuit* mastery” (*Secret*, 117). However, the mastery the “routine” is trying to short-circuit is not Lee’s agency but that of an all-encompassing, multifaceted determinism.

Queer Genetics

Lee’s “routines” in *Queer* show the protagonist being possessed by a verbal force he can neither control nor understand. That Bill or William Lee is

consistently referred to in the novel by his surname, rather than his Christian name, is also indicative of genetic determinism in regards to Lee's character and actions. It can be difficult to separate the codes of language and culture from those of genetics as individuals come to mimic their progenitors. According to Lacan, the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, more precisely:

It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce – that's what we call the super-ego. I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else. (*Ego*, 89)

Breaking out of “the chain of discourse” is an apt summation of the methods and aims that Burroughs adopts throughout his literary career. In *Minutes to Go*, Burroughs relates the determinism of language to genetic determinism: “As to the distant future say 100 years Dr Stanley sees the entire code being cracked ‘We will be able to write out the message that is you’” (61). The name of the father and mother, so intertwined in Burroughs's early novels, thus are signifiers for the entangled determinism that exists between language and genetics. Lee's fascistic language in *Queer* thus becomes a cypher for the totalitarian determinism that exists at both the level of communications and genetics. Lee and Burroughs are the names of the author's mother and father respectively, and these directly connect the author to his grandfather's famous invention, the Burroughs adding machine, and to Ivy Lee, Burroughs's maternal uncle, an innovator in the field of public relations. Both Burroughs and Lee are linguistically and genetically connected to the ultra-capitalist class of American enterprise. Lee's fascism has its genetic origins in Ivy Lee's service as a spin-doctor for antiunion movements in America, as well as the German Nazi party, and IG Farben, the company who manufactured Zyklon B, the gas used to murder millions in the Nazi death camps (Miles, 42). Lee's violent speech gives voice to atrocities that are both

impersonal and an intrinsic part of his being. The genetic determinism that *Queer* suggests is also highlighted by Allerton's first name: Eugene, or Gene for short, and Gene becomes a cypher for Lee's queer genetics. In one scene in *Queer* Lee relates his queerness to his genealogy in another of his "routines":

"A curse. Been in our family for generations. The Lees have always been perverts. I shall never forget the unspeakable horror that froze the lymph in my glands—the lymph glands that is, of course— when the baneful word seared my reeling brain: I was a homosexual. I thought of the painted, simpering female impersonators I had seen in a Baltimore night club. Could it be possible that I was one of those subhuman things? I walked the streets in a daze, like a man with a light concussion—just a minute, Doctor Kildare, this isn't your script. I might well have destroyed myself, ending an existence which seemed to offer nothing but grotesque misery and humiliation. Nobler, I thought, to die a man than live on, a sex monster. It was a wise old queen— Bobo, we called her—who taught me that I had a duty to live and to bear my burden proudly for all to see, to conquer prejudice and ignorance and hate with knowledge and sincerity and love. Whenever you are threatened by a hostile presence, you emit a thick cloud of love like an octopus squirts out ink. (*Q*, 35-36)

Lee speaks of his homosexuality both in terms of its genetic and linguistic determination: "Been in our family for generations... the baneful word seared my reeling brain: I was a homosexual." It is noteworthy that Lee describes the recognition of his homosexuality with an image of "an unspeakable horror that froze in the lymph in my glands" as this biological description suggests him being determined by his ancestry. This is reinforced by the medical and theatrical imagery of: "[just] a minute, Doctor Kildare, this isn't your script". Familial origins are a biological and linguistic script that both

Lee and Burroughs are trying to break out of.

Later in this section, Lee seems to realize that his biological and lingual determinism is in fact an existential calling towards authenticity. The ironic nod towards love and the conquering of “prejudice and ignorance and hate” seems entirely at odds with Lee’s ugly American character. The Christian ethos of turning the other cheek is queerly re-inflected, not just in the context of Bobo’s and Lee’s sexuality, but also as it is used as a means of defence, “like an octopus squirts out ink”. The ink implies that love itself is a con, or source of confusion that can be used to outwit the other who might believe the Christ-like sentiment of Bobo’s earlier instruction. This undoes the spell of the “routine”, or at least creates an enigmatic counter economy where Lee is both offering the hand of Christian charity to Allerton, but at the same time trying to force his hand. Lee’s playfulness is marked by his desire to reveal the mechanisms of “Control” and his contrasting desire to manipulate and control Allerton. It is the contradictory impasse between these two opposing desires where *Queer*’s “routines” frequently turn. Lee’s hypocrisy in this regard is the source of much of the irony, humour and pathos in *Queer*. It is precisely *Queer*’s humour and that of its “routines” that save it from being a document of fascism, that “humourless, evil routine” (L, 216). Indeed, it is the “routine’s” power of inducing laughter and confusion in the observer that disempower it.

At the same time the “routine”, like “Poison” Ivy Lee’s communications nous, has a coercive charm. The “routine” functions using the same psychological dynamics as “Control”⁵³ and thereby reveals that “Control” has a literary and aesthetic dimension. What Barthes says of the text is applicable to the “routine”: it “must prove to me that it desires me” (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 6). Without an audience the “routine” breaks free from its aesthetic location and ceases to be an ironic performance, becoming in danger of turning into a “humourless, evil routine”. Burroughs attests to this desire of an audience for his “routines”: “I am not self-sufficient. I need audience for

⁵³ Burroughs outlines that there are limits to control, “[because] control also needs opposition or acquiescence; otherwise it ceases to be control” (*The Adding Machine*, 116).

my routines”⁵⁴ (*L*, 233). This desire of an audience is the desire for resistance and at the same time a desire for the impossible: to be the *jouissance* of the Other. While the “routine” undoes its own explicit fantasies of dominance, it also possesses a certain seductive, aesthetic charm. This is evident in the role that *Queer*’s most central “routine” took in the relationship between William Burroughs and Lewis Marker:

The Slave Trader routine came to me like dictated. It was the turning point where my partial success was assured. If I had not achieved the reckless gaiety that charges this fantasy, Marker would have refused to go with me to S.A.⁵⁵ The point is these fantasies are vital part of the whole set-up.⁵⁶ (*L*, 126)

The “routine” functions as an aesthetic means of control precisely because it desires an audience’s participation. It is the “routine’s” aesthetic, ambiguous form and “reckless gaiety” that make it seductive. The “routine”, with its disempowering presence – “The routine was coming to [Lee] like dictation” – and forceful desire of an audience raises questions about the relationship between desire and agency, and it problematizes the connection between aesthetics and the freedom of interpretation (*Q*, 57). As a method of seduction, the “routine” is both frighteningly literal in its intentions and disconcertingly effective. The reason for its efficacy is that it is, primarily, an aesthetic performance that requires participation. All successful artworks are seductive, but the “routine” lays bare the “obscene phantasmic” desire that triggers its performance. For the individual who is being seduced, his desire must never be forced, it must always feel as though it is freely given, and this is the terrifying power of seduction: that it is a force that feels like a choice. He who is seduced is like a cyborg and “[what] makes this figure so tragic is the extent to which he has been programmed to believe in his own autonomy” (Plant, *Zeroes and Ones*, 99). *Queer*’s “routines” prefigure the mind-controlling potential of the “cut-up technique” which Burroughs discusses in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970): “Remember that when the

⁵⁴ September 3rd, 1954.

⁵⁵ South America.

⁵⁶ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated May 23rd, 1952.

human nervous system unscrambles a scrambled message this will seem to the subject like his very own ideas which just occurred to him" (16). Burroughs implicitly suggests throughout his career that literature does not necessarily involve a democratic or egalitarian relationship, that it too can be a means towards "Control". However, Burroughs is redeemed because he continues to explicitly reveal the way in which "Control" functions via desire, aesthetics and the other manifestations of microfascism.

Desire, like genetics and language, is an impersonal determining force misrecognised as "myself". This is why Allerton holds back his desire from Lee: "'What you got to lose?' [Allerton] replies 'Independence.'" (*Q*, 62). Lee, like he did in *Junky*, has pawned his independence for a fantasy of controlling desire and thus, despite the seductive power of his "routines", he remains a warning for Allerton about giving way to desire. Lee, the "Talking Asshole", ensures that *Queer* is a "parable about giving too much power to transgressive desire" (Beard, 838). This offers another fold in Lee's desire: Lee desires Allerton's aloofness, as this is an image of freedom from desire and also the image of Lee becoming what Allerton is for him: his *jouissance*. Lee might have been able to perform this aloofness if he had not given "too much power to transgressive desire". Lee cannot even temporarily divorce himself from the fantasy of controlling Allerton and so must apply another form of pressure: financial.

Queer Capital

When Allerton tells Lee that he fears losing his "Independence" it is in response to Lee's offer to pay for him to travel with Lee to South America. Lee makes the offer in terms of a contract, which alerts Allerton to the legal and financial power that Lee is trying to attain over him: "So who's going to cut in on your independence? You can lay all the women in South America if you want to. All I ask is be nice to Papa, say twice a week. That isn't excessive, is it? Besides, I will buy you a round-trip ticket so you can leave at your discretion" (*Q*, 62). That Lee chooses to adopt the position of "Papa" in their relationship is telling: he wishes to achieve the symbolic, legal and financial

power of the father figure. Allerton responds to this request with appeals to another financial power: his job. "I'll think it over", he said. "This job runs ten days more. I'll give you a definite answer when the job folds" (62). Lee is tempted to re-assert his financial dominance but has second thoughts: "Your job..." Lee was about to say, 'I'll give you ten days' salary.' He said, 'All right' (62). While Allerton's job is a commitment, it also provides him with independence. Lee is keen to utilise his fiscal advantage over Allerton, but he is aware that it lacks tact and so he holds back on this occasion.

The explicit aim of capitalism is to replace social ties with financial obligations. "[Capitalism]... brings about the decoding of the flows that the other social formations coded and overcoded." (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 267). With the arrival of capitalism, "[a] man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt" (Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 181). Lee wishes to turn Allerton into a man in debt, but in the realm of libidinous desire, some of "the flows" of "other social formations" remain. Lee longs to turn Allerton into something akin to a rent boy but simultaneously desires that Allerton freely return his desiring gaze. Lee is attempting to induce desire in Allerton, with his promises of financial benefits, but the gifts Lee offers were never desired by Allerton and only serve to highlight what Lee lacks: Allerton's desire.

Non-capitalist forms of desire are invested in a community of others and thus form and are formed by these communities which are often hierarchically stratified. An aesthetic order is apparent in the opening scene of the novel:

Lee felt lonely and defeated. "I'll have to look for someone else," he thought. He covered his face with his hands. He was very tired.

He saw a shadowy line of boys. As each boy came to the front of the line, he said "Best of luck," and ran for a streetcar.

"Sorry ... wrong number ... try again ... somewhere else ... someplace else ... not here... not me ... can't use it, don't need it, don't want it. Why pick on me?" The last

face was so real and so ugly, Lee said aloud, "Who asked you, you ugly son of a bitch?"

Lee opened his eyes and looked around. Two Mexican adolescents walked by, their arms around each other's necks. He looked after them, licking his dry, cracked lips. (*Q*, 2-3)

Due to his age, plainness and psychotic behaviour, Lee is cut off from the community that would satisfy his desires and instead must devise alternative methods of seduction, performing "routines" and using financial leverage. However, Lee's attempts to implement control often lacks social nuance and reveal his weaknesses.

After Allerton and Lee sleep together for the first time, Lee says. "Oh, by the way, you said you had a camera in pawn you were about to lose?" (19). This generosity, Lee feels, lacks tact: that is to say it broke an unspoken rule of romantic relations. Offering to pay Allerton after sex betrays Lee's propensity for viewing sex in terms of a financial transaction. The camera is symbolic here, as Harris outlines: "The economic articulation of Lee's desire not only suggests the market's colonization of all relations – hence his final fantasy of working for Friendly Finance – but implies the erotic, objectifying economy of predatory capitalism via the specific object of exchange: the camera" ("Can You See a Virus?", 258). The camera is a means to capture Allerton's desire, objectifying their relationship through the lens of "predatory capitalism". In *Queer* Lee and his friends engage in, and talk about paying for sex (9-10). Prostitution seems to explicitly negate any social or libidinal debt that might otherwise be incurred. In prostitution all exchange is explicitly above board, unlike the more complicated relationship that Lee is entering into with Allerton. When Lee offers to get Allerton's camera out of hock, it is an attempt to reduce this relationship to a monetary one, but the lack of tact that Lee intuitively senses in regards to this offer indicates that the relationship is already interpersonal.

Allerton's camera in the pawn shop also calls back to the second line of the novel where Lee, thinking of Carl Steinberg states, "I could use that, if

the family jewels weren't in pawn to Uncle Junk." (1) Similarly, the debt that Skip Tracer is looking to collect from Allerton in the final section of the novel is not a financial one but a libidinal one. Lee is constantly attempting to escape the libidinal economy, by converting libidinal debts into financial debts or addictive needs, like the family jewels "in pawn to Uncle Junk". "[Converting] ... live orgones into dead bullshit" (*NL*, 116) is the desire inherent to addiction and capitalism, but this desire of the end of desire is impossible, "at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation" (Lacan, *Ego*, 223-224). This paradox means that the more Lee attempts to control and escape the vortex of desire, the more he is controlled and imprisoned by it. That *Queer* ends without a satisfying conclusion, for Lee and the reader, formally installs the psychic wound of desire in the text, one that cannot be satiated by the chain of signification or capitalist means of exchange. In Fredric Jameson's terms *Queer* is decidedly modernist as "modernism conceives its formal vocation to be the resistance to commodity form... to devise an aesthetic language incapable of offering commodity satisfaction" ("Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 134-135). In this sense *Queer* is not like junk, the "ideal product... the ultimate merchandise", but rather the opposite: illiterature (*NL*, xxxix).

Communists at Princeton

Junky ends with the possibility that desire can be reduced to pharmacology – "Yage could be the final fix" (128) – while *Queer's* ambiguous conclusion denies the possibility of such a final solution. The psychosocial reality of *Queer* does not entertain the biological rationalizations suggested in *Junky*. Despite this, Lee in *Queer* is still unstuck between an imaginary world of immediate enjoyment and the frustrations of desire. Lee's addictive mind-set makes him the capitalist subject *par excellence*. Lee's discussion of the communist ethos of Princeton in the back of a Mexican taxi exemplifies the sublimation of transgressive desire that allows capitalism to function:

Inside, Lee turned to Allerton. "The man plainly harbors subversive thoughts. You know, when I was at Princeton, Communism was the thing. To come out flat for private

property and a class society, you marked yourself a stupid lout or suspect to be a High Episcopalian pederast. But I held out against the infection—of Communism I mean, of course.”

“Aquí.” Lee handed three pesos to the driver, who muttered some more and started the car with a vicious clash of gears.

“Sometimes I think they don't like us,” said Allerton.

“I don't mind people disliking me,” Lee said. “The question is, what are they in a position to do about it? Apparently nothing, at present. They don't have the green light. This driver, for example, hates gringos. But if he kills someone—and very possibly he will—it will not be an American. It will be another Mexican. Maybe his good friend. Friends are less frightening than strangers.” (37-38)

Queer was written between 1951 and 1953, at the height of Senator McCarthy's “Red Scare” and Lee's anti-communist stance explicitly marks him as an ugly American rather than a political radical. However, despite its communist culture, which Lee criticises, Princeton is a symbol of wealth, privilege and American capitalist values. By and large academia attempts to foster diverse and inclusive dialogues, but this synthetic “apolitical” ethos is ideological in a quintessentially American way, as Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate:

The death of a social machine has never been heralded by a disharmony or a dysfunction; on the contrary, social machines make a habit of feeding on the contradictions they give rise to, on the crises they provoke, on the anxieties they engender, and on the infernal operations they regenerate. Capitalism has learned this, and has ceased doubting itself, while even socialists have abandoned belief in the possibility of capitalism's natural death by attrition. No one has ever died from contradictions. And the more it breaks down, the more it

schizophrenizes, the better it works, the American way.

(*Anti-Oedipus*, 166)

Rather than fully embracing radical political positions, American institutions make them part of the schizophrenic, capitalist order. What Lee says about Princeton communists seems quite contradictory, when in actuality, Ivy League Marxists are *de rigueur*. In Princeton “Communism may be the thing” but Princeton persists as a stronghold of capitalist values. Ivy League Marxists essentially perform Marxism while occupying a pivotal role in the schizophrenic system of capitalism.

The neutering of transgressive forces is dramatized later in this scene, in the description of the homicidal taxi driver, who, provoked by anti-American rage, kills his good friend, another Mexican. Lee predicts that the microaggressions of the taxi driver – “Sometimes I think they don't like us” – will escalate into a homicidal assault on his neighbour, rather than on the “gringos” he actually despises. As such, the imagined homicidal act of the taxi driver is like Lee’s “Used-Slave Lot routine” as both enact a fantasy of dominating others rather than overthrowing the system of domination. The taxi driver in this fantasy is also like a communist at Princeton, thoroughly encircled by an ideology he abhors, yet when he does commit a radical act, its violence and self-loathing merely reaffirms the social order. The short-circuiting of indignation into addiction and domestic violence is a self-destructive, impersonal impulse that reinforces the status quo. The Ivy League communists and the fratricidal taxi driver both speak to a lack of authenticity, and while Lee’s speech is crude and fascistic, he is attempting to reveal the universal rottenness of microfascism, where “desire desires its own repression” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 215).

The performance of “The Used-Slave Lot routine” exemplifies the difference between Lee’s “routines” and those who maintain the schizophrenic order of capitalism. In this “routine” Lee revels in a fantasy of colonial and capitalist dominance, where he cynically peruses the human wares that Gus sells for the sexual enjoyment of his clientele. “The Used-Slave Lot routine” displays Lee’s desire to reduce sex down to relations of capitalist and colonial power, but it is a “routine” he performs alone: “Mary and

Allerton left. Lee was alone in the bar. The monologue continued” (57). This “routine” is a capitalist’s and addict’s fantasy but in the context of the novel, it ultimately marks him as a lonely, raving lunatic cut off from the community of others who might fulfil his desires. Lee embodies the contradictions of microfascism, revealing its “obscene phantasmic support of power in all its inconsistency” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 92). Here Lee is so possessed by desirous fantasies that they occlude any possibility of their fulfilment. The scene is the most excruciatingly awkward moment in the entire novel where Lee is caught in a fantasy of hedonistic and cruel self-indulgence that has possessed him bodily. It is only redeemed by its audience of readers: “when Allerton walks out, at this point a reader necessarily steps in” (Harris, *Secret*, 133). By aestheticizing the microfascist tendencies of fantasy in the “routine”, Lee reveals how the subversive fantasies of Ivy League communists and disgruntled Mexican taxi drivers function to repress their desires. It can be observed here that phantasy protects the Real and the Real supports phantasy, but the Real throughout *Queer* is a cypher for the obscene and fascistic elements of the symbolic order (Lacan, *Four Fundamental*, 41). This is what differentiates Lee from those he criticises: while he is like them, controlled by his fantasies, he is prepared to reveal the “obscene phantasmic support of power in all its inconsistency”. Through aestheticizing Lee’s fantasies, Burroughs provides himself with the opportunity to “write [his] way out” of “Control”.

Skip Tracer

Queer concludes with a dream where the protagonist finds his paramour after a protracted search throughout Mexico City. It is notable that the dream describes Lee finding Allerton while simultaneously losing his name and becoming “Skip Tracer”, a representative of an organization called “Friendly Finance” and a finder of missing persons. In the dream Lee’s desire becomes bound up with the symbols of capitalism:

The Skip Tracer's face went blank and dreamy. His mouth fell open, showing teeth hard and yellow as old ivory. Slowly his body slid down in the leather armchair until the back of the

chair pushed his hat down over his eyes, which gleamed in the hat's shade, catching points of light like an opal. He began humming "Johnny's So Long at the Fair" over and over. The humming stopped abruptly, in the middle of a phrase.

The Skip Tracer was talking in a voice languid and intermittent, like music down a windy street. "You meet all kinds on this job, Kid. Every now and then some popcorn citizen walks in the office and tries to pay Friendly Finance with this shit."

He let one arm swing out, palm up, over the side of the chair. Slowly he opened a thin brown hand, with purple-blue fingertips, to reveal a roll of yellow thousand-dollar bills. The hand turned over, palm down, and fell back against the chair. His eyes closed.

Suddenly his head dropped to one side and his tongue fell out. The bills dropped from his hand, one after the other, and lay there crumpled on the red tile floor. A gust of warm spring wind blew dirty pink curtains into the room. The bills rustled across the room and settled at Allerton's feet.

Imperceptibly the Skip Tracer straightened up, and a slit of light went on behind the eyelids.

"Keep that in case you're caught short, Kid," he said. "You know how it is in these spic hotels. You gotta carry your own paper." (*Q*, 118-119)

While on the surface this dream appears to be the fulfilment of Lee's desire to find Allerton, it contains hidden traumatic resonances that stretch beyond the content of the novel. The Skip Tracer talks "in a voice languid and intermittent, like music down a windy street", that is in a voice that refuses

to fully satisfy the reader's hermeneutic desires. However, the Skip Tracer dream sequence is a cypher for the psychoanalytic content of *Queer*.

The latent quality of dreams often follows a tripartite structure centred around a certain word:

Freud describes a dream as a certain knot, an associative network of analysed verbal forms that intersect as such, not because of what they signify, but thanks to a sort of homonymy. It is when you come across a single word at the intersection of three of the ideas that come to the subject that you notice that the important thing is that word and not something else... it is the hidden centre of gravity of the desire... the nodal point where discourse forms a hole.

(Lacan, *My Teaching*, 28)

If analysed according to Lacan's suggestion, then it should be noted that the Skip Tracer dream centres around one particularly significant word: Bill. It is remarkable that Bill Lee's name is effaced in the dream, as the scene manifests itself around his desires and identity. Lee's character appears to be shaped around the name and word "bill" and its various semantic connections. As such the word "bill" in the Skip Tracer dream sequence helps to illustrate how "[psychoanalytic] experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has shaped him in its image. It exploits the poetic function of language to give his desire its symbolic mediation" (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 322). When Lee changes his identity to Skip Tracer, his first name, Bill, becomes latent and thus significant. The Skip Tracer then is not only effective in finding Allerton, he is also a finder of another person missing from the dream: Bill. In the Skip Tracer dream sequence which closes the novel, a traumatic nexus forms around the word/name "Bill". While, as Freud suggests, dreams are forms of wish fulfilment, "[every] one has wishes which he would not like to tell to others, which he does not want to admit even to himself" (*Dream Psychology*, 56). It is Burroughs's unconscious wish to reveal monstrous traumas in the final section of *Queer*, thus the Skip Tracer dream situates the resolution of *Queer* in traumas that are only obliquely referred to

in the text. The dream's significance thus telescopes down from Lee's dissatisfaction with Allerton towards darker and more disturbing content.

Bill Lee's wish of finding Allerton is staged in the Skip Tracer dream, yet the last lines of the novel suggest that he disappears once again, without a trace: "The door opened and wind blew through the room. The door closed and the curtains settled back, one curtain trailing over a sofa as though someone had taken it and tossed it there." (*Q*, 119). This in turn reminds the reader of the opening of the novel and Lee's daydream where he sits on a park bench and is abandoned by a line of boys: "He saw a shadowy line of boys. As each boy came to the front of the line, he said 'Best of luck,' and ran for a streetcar" (*Q*, 3). Alfred Kazin notes how Burroughs "writes scenes as fluently as other people write adjectives, so that he is always inserting one scene into another, turning one scene into another" (263). Similarly, scenes in *Queer* frequently coalesce and re-inflect each other, despite temporal and spatial separation. The conclusion repeats the opening chapter's motif of abandonment, and Lee appears locked into a cycle of rejection, where, inevitably, his desires will be frustrated. As Oliver Harris notes, "these formal patterns create an effect that is indeed uncanny in Freud's strict sense: a 'constant recurrence of the same thing' that reminds us of our inner 'compulsion to repeat'" (*Secret*, 99). This compulsion to repeat is a reflection of the traumatic kernel of the Real which cannot be contained within the symbolic order (Fink, 28). In the Skip Tracer dream the "compulsion to repeat" centres around the word "bill" and the multiple meanings it can take become reflections of Burroughs and Lee's traumas.

Bill Lee's identity may be latent in the dream, but the word, bill, is mentioned and its meaning alluded to throughout the sequence. First to be mentioned are "yellow thousand-dollar bills", their colour alluding to Lee's oriental name and also the oriental product, opium or heroin. The word "bill" is always used here in plural, suggesting that there is always more than one bill; both in terms of the many meanings of the word "bill", but also that there are two Bills in this novel, Burroughs and Lee, as well as the multiplicity of identities that exist in each of them. The "bills" mentioned here suggest this personification: "The bills dropped from his hand, one after the other, and lay

there crumpled on the red tile floor.... The bills rustled across the room and settled at Allerton's feet." Bill has laid out all his identities, or Bills – as well as his dollar bills – in an attempt to woo Allerton, but, ultimately, they are excrement, “shit” as Skip Tracer states, and they fall at his feet. Bill is nothing more than the money or means of exchange that his name suggests and in the case of Allerton he can never move beyond his role as “Friendly Finance”. It is ultimately Lee that cannot pay the psychic bill and not Allerton, despite the suggestion by Skip Tracer that it is otherwise: “We don't like to say ‘Pay up or else’” (Q, 118). It is clear from the action here that it is Lee who owes a bill to Allerton: the bill being Allerton’s *jouissance*, that is the ideal Bill, the one who could be loved by Allerton. Unfortunately, this is the one bill Lee cannot pay. This psychic bill also recalls the desire of Lee to become another kind of psychic Bill, one who can control the thoughts and psychological make-up of others by finding and taking “yage”: “Think of it: thought control. Take anyone apart and rebuild to your taste. Anything about somebody bugs you, you say, ‘Yage! I want that routine took clear out of his mind’” (96). This fantasy, like *jouissance*, is impossible. Despite Lee’s deployment of “routines” and financial pressure, he cannot become what the Other desires and he cannot escape his desire of the Other.

Jamie Russell suggests that “the Skip Tracer is an instrument of control (and therefore part of the capitalist, consumer hierarchy) unleashed when a debtor tries to escape the control machine” (25). Bill may desire to occupy a controlling position in the economy of “Control”, but it is Allerton, through his lack of desire for Bill, that possesses the true psychic power in this scene and throughout the novel. To use Burroughs’s parlance, Lee is strictly a receiver (Q, 81). While Lee and Skip Tracer attempt to install capitalism as the pre-eminent power in the sexual sphere, this dream sequence details the ineffectiveness of capital in the realm of desire. While capitalism thrives on the impossibility of *jouissance*, it too cannot offer a resolution to it, only the fantasy of its resolution.

The word ‘bill’ also has a third meaning, a proposed law or pact, and this recalls Bill’s proposed contract with Allerton before their South American sojourn: “So who's going to cut in on your independence? You can

lay all the women in South America if you want to. All I ask is be nice to Papa, say twice a week. That isn't excessive, is it?" (62). The contractual nature of this agreement is emphasized when Allerton later protests, "I wish to register a complaint concerning breach of contract... You said twice a week." (96). The economic and the legal conflate here, and while it seems Bill holds all the cards, it is Eugene who trumps these with the psychic power ensured by his lack of desire for Bill.

Bill may desire to control Eugene Allerton, but it is clear at the end of the novel that it is Allerton who continues to manipulate Lee. Eugene Allerton turned Bill into his rube and caused Lee to recognize that "there is one Mark you cannot beat, the Mark inside..." (*NL*, 11): that one's desire for control opens one up to being controlled. The use of the word "Mark" to describe those who are manipulated relates to the real-life inspiration for Eugene Allerton: Lewis Marker. Marker is a literal marker then as he turned Burroughs into his "Mark". As such Burroughs becomes a marked Bill, a marked man, if not a marksman. Lewis Marker was in attendance at the party where Burroughs shot and killed Joan Vollmer while attempting to shot a glass that was placed on top of her head (Miles, 552). Burroughs killed Joan Vollmer on 6th September, 1951, only days after returning to Mexico following his trip with Lewis Marker in search of "yage" in South America. The end of Burroughs's "Introduction" to *Queer* includes a "cut-up" text that contains the following: "The day of Joan's doom and loss. Found tears streaming down from Allerton peeling off the same person as a Western shootist" (135). It would not be difficult to imagine that the author was trying to impress his young lover with the William Tell Act that ended with the tragic death of Joan Vollmer. It turns out that this is the other "Bill" that Skip Tracer lays at Allerton's feet: The Bill Tell "routine". By accidentally killing Joan in an attempt to impress Lewis Marker, it seems that the greatest psychic wound in Burroughs's life, the one so central to the novel's introduction but so latent in the actual text, was committed as part of a "routine" designed to satisfy an impossible debt, the *jouissance* of the other. Of all the explicit and debased "routines" that populate *Queer*, the cruellest one is hidden. It is not just the tragic details of Joan's death but its meaninglessness in terms of

seizing Marker's desire that marks it out as a truly pathetic act. Even a sacrificial killing, the most powerful symbolic performance, cannot elicit *jouissance* from the Other. This recalls another Bill, Burroughs's son "Billy" or William Burroughs Junior, who Lee dreams of crying, after Lee is rebuffed by Allerton at the end of the novel (*Q*, 104). *Queer* reveals a nexus of pain that cannot be signified directly but is made all the more poignant for being obscured. The William Tell "routine" reveals that Burroughs's "routines" had to be aestheticized in the form of literature, otherwise their violent and fascistic elements would cross over into reality. It is writing that can be regarded as the author's only line of escape. Only through writing illiterature, as an opaque, diseased and transgressive form of literature, is Burroughs capable of capturing the otherness of *jouissance* and the *jouissance* of the Other.

Conclusion: Love and Truth

Albert Camus states that "[seeking] what is true is not seeking what is desirable" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26) and while Lee is seeking Allerton's desire in *Queer*, instead what he finds is truth. Similarly, Alain Badiou writes, "[love] can only consist in failure... on the fallacious assumption that it is a relationship. But it is not. It is a production of truth" (*Conditions*, 182). What *Queer* stages as failure is the desire for control, which, through "writing as inoculation" becomes the production of truth. Yet truth and desire, are, as Camus suggests, easy to confuse, especially from the point of view of the addict.

Lee's addicted psyche desires to control Allerton through possessing his desire. It is this desire for mastery that turns the object of desire into the angel of death. While one can sometimes influence the Other's desire, one cannot completely control it. Allerton creates a desire in Lee akin to his desire for junk, but Allerton cannot be objectified in the same way. While junk connects pleasurably with the deep recesses of the body and mind, the Other remains Other. Addiction should be regarded as negative, but it is also egalitarian: anyone can become an addict. The socio-sexual sphere, on the other hand, is pitilessly hierarchical.

While addiction seeks to manage and speak for the world of intoxication, intersubjective desire is intoxication in a more radical, negative and ego shattering form, for in the hierarchy of the social Real we realize we are different, in our relationship to the Other, from the enlightened subject who believes in equality. In regards to *jouissance*, we are often lesser and greater than we can imagine. Burroughs said ““Love? What is it? Most natural painkiller what there is” (*Last Words*, 351). Junk is not “God’s own Medicine”, love is (*The Adding Machine*, 107). It seems, however, that the pursuit of love, as documented in *Queer*, creates the very pain that love was designed to kill.

The opacity of Allerton’s desire is the source of Lee’s pain in *Queer*. As Burroughs notes in his “Introduction”:

What Lee is looking for is contact or recognition, like a photon emerging from the haze of insubstantiality to leave an indelible recording in Allerton's consciousness. Failing to find an adequate observer, he is threatened by painful dispersal, like an unobserved photon. Lee does not know that he is already committed to writing, since this is the only way he has of making an indelible record, whether Allerton is inclined to observe or not. Lee is being inexorably pressed into the world of fiction. He has already made the choice between his life and his work. (*Q*, 130)

What fiction represents here is sublimation, just like addiction, but it is superior because of its interpersonal, aesthetic and critical possibilities. The addict-author is not a single entity but one in transition from addict to author. “As soon as something is written, it loses the power of surprise, just as a virus loses its advantage when a weakened virus has created alerted antibodies. So I achieved some immunity from further perilous ventures along these lines by writing my experience down” (*Q*, 128). The sickness of being a junky and the disease of desire finds its cure, not in “yage”, which like Allerton’s love proves to be highly elusive, but in the medium of writing itself.

Timothy S. Murphy points out that telepathy means “to suffer from

afar" (65) and with the writing of *Queer* telepathy becomes a reality. "Yage" is not the means to telepathy, writing is. This ability of art to make others "suffer from afar" is encapsulated in one particular scene in *Queer*. In Guayaquil, Lee observes an Ecuadorian musician:

A hunchback with withered legs was playing crude bamboo panpipes, a mournful Oriental music with the sadness of the high mountains. In deep sadness there is no place for sentimentality. It is as final as the mountains: a fact. There it is. When you realize it, you cannot complain.

People crowded around the musician, listened a few minutes, and walked on. Lee noticed a young man with the skin tight over his small face, looking exactly like a shrunken head. He could not have weighed more than ninety pounds.

The musician coughed from time to time. Once he snarled when someone touched his hump, showing his black rotten teeth. Lee gave the man a few coins. (*Q*, 83-84)

What Lee is observing here is an image of his future identity as a writer of illiterature. The musician's otherness is exaggerated by his deformities and illustrated by his playing of oriental music, yet, despite his difference, both Lee and the other passers-by connect with him and "suffer from afar". Indeed, the music seems to create an empathic community of outsiders, between Lee, the musician and "a young man with the skin tight over his small face, looking exactly like a shrunken head". Music is different from literature as it possesses "an origin different from all other arts, because unlike them, it is not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself" (Schopenhauer, 100). Burroughs is attempting to make his writing a "copy of the will itself", that is to write to make things happen. This is the desire the "routine" form arose out of and that is its destiny. As such the desire for "Control" is never abandoned by Burroughs but sublimated into writing.

Lee must learn not to give way to his desire and writing becomes part

of that process. However, writing is another kind of desire: the desire to be read. In *The Yage Letters* Lee will attempt to win another lover with his “routines”: Allen Ginsberg. The literary economy of sender and receiver will be made explicit in the epistolary form of *The Yage Letters*. Lee will also find “yage” and take it. While the drug will have a profound effect on his writing, it is the South American postcolony in *The Yage Letters* that will become the setting for the novella’s radical encounter with an illegible otherness. In *The Yage Letters* there is also specific evidence of Burroughs’s writing taking an occult turn. Here he envisions his literature breaking free of the page and into the world.

Chapter Three:

The Illiterature of the Postcolony: *The Yage Letters*

But Evil is in all things and I, as a man, can no longer feel pure. There is inside me something horrible which rises and which does not come from me, but from the shadows that I have in me, where the soul of man does not know where the *I* begins and where it ends, or what made it begin as it sees itself. And this is what *Ciguri* tells me. With *Ciguri* I no longer know untruth and I no longer confuse *that which wills* truly in every man with that which does not will but mimics being with ill will. And soon that is all there will be...

Antonin Artaud (*The Peyote Dance*, 34-35)

Introduction

This chapter examines *The Yage Letters* as it corresponds with Burroughs's other works of illiterature. While *Junky* focused on the illegible character of addiction, and *Queer* on the otherness of libidinal desire, *The Yage Letters* explores Latin America, the postcolonial Other and the mysterious intoxicant "yage". *The Yage Letters* is a liminal text in Burroughs's career and functions as a contact zone for the various literary styles and formal innovations he employed throughout his *oeuvre*. Like *Queer*, *The Yage Letters* opens up new possibilities for reading Burroughs's other works, in particular *Naked Lunch*. *The Yage Letters* also suggests that writing has a consciousness-altering potential akin to drugs. In *The Yage Letters* writing comes to the fore as a means to augment cognition and, in turn, reality.

This chapter firstly outlines the history of the production and publication of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters*. This novella's structure is markedly different from Burroughs's earlier works and contains many of the diverse literary styles and forms that the author adopts

throughout his career. *The Yage Letters* also reveals the epistolary origins of Burroughs's other works, including *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*. As such *The Yage Letters* opens up new ways of reading these other novels.

The composite structure of *The Yage Letters* is reflective of the heterogeneous, postcolonial culture of South America. However, Lee's colonial mode of apprehension and violent speech function to highlight the continuation of the forms of exploitation and oppression that are fundamental to the histories of the Latin American nations that Lee visits. Lee, as he did in *Queer*, both perpetuates and undermines tropes of colonial exploitation. At crucial moments in the text Lee displays a profound admiration for what he regards as the inherently tolerant and diverse culture of South America. While Lee performs the role of coloniser, it is he who is colonised by Latin America's postcolonial culture.

Lee in *The Yage Letters* often presents a crude, cruel and contradictory appraisal of Latin America and its racial and cultural Others. However, unlike the superficial representations of the racial and cultural Other offered by Jack Kerouac in *On the Road*, Burroughs and *The Yage Letters* undermine colonial modes of representation. While Lee celebrates Latin America's cultural difference, he also highlights the hierarchical and neo-imperial structure present in South American societies. Lee often embraces and exploits his privilege, revealing that colonial modes of socio-economic control continue to operate in South America. While "yage" intoxication helps disrupt Lee's position of white, male privilege, Lee's disintegration largely results from his recognition that his American privilege is a kind of loss and that postcolonial culture stands above the dismal, grey, metropolitan lifestyle recounted in *Junky*. Lee as an addicted, modern, realist subject cannot assimilate postcolonial difference, and *The Yage Letters* signals a separation between Burroughs and Lee that continues throughout the author's career. Lee will no longer be Burroughs's alter-ego, but in *The Yage Letters* he comes to represent the spiritual and aesthetic poverty of realist literature and modern, western modes of subjectivity. In *The Yage Letters* Lee becomes a scapegoat who is ultimately abandoned at the end of the text.

The Yage Letters marks the becoming of an occult style of literature which proposes that writing is capable of augmenting reality. While *The Yage Letters* describes a journey in search of “yage”, the novella also signals that Burroughs is moving beyond writing about drugs and instead is endeavouring to draw a correlation between the consciousness-altering power of drugs and language. Underlying this is a fluid or magical conception of the nature of reality. *The Yage Letters* maintains a connection with realism in order to reveal the mythical structure of modern, western modes of cognition; that truth has the same structure as fiction (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 233). However, *The Yage Letters* precedes to divorce itself from realism, embracing myth as a means to move beyond “reality”. “Yage” is a means to become aware of the structured nature of consciousness and reality, while also being a way to envision new relations of space and time, which in turn can create new realities.

Burroughs adapts these insights to his literary method, employing collage techniques to create new spatiotemporal relations in writing. This new type of writing functions to highlight the intoxicated nature of modern, western conceptions of subjectivity and reality. While the death of God became central to existentialism’s conceptions of agency and authenticity, the birth of myth in Burroughs’s writing allows him to reimagine reality and move beyond it. Burroughs’s early works, including *The Yage Letters*, maintain an important connection with realism in order to reveal its intoxicated, hallucinatory structure. While *The Yage Letters* finishes with the “cut-up” text “I AM DYING MEESTER?”, the success of this text is based on its relationship with the writing that precedes it, as well as its relationship with other intertextual sources. As such, this “cut-up” functions as a kind of reading, or misreading of the previous text, revealing the forms of compression, suturing, misinterpretation and dissemination that take place as part of any reading. *The Yage Letters* thus implicitly reveals reading and writing as potentially revolutionary practices that can augment cognition, consciousness and “reality”.

As a work of illiterature, *The Yage Letters* contains many of the same tropes of illegibility and epistemological uncertainty as were outlined in

regards to Burroughs's earlier novels. *The Yage Letters*, like *Junky*, is a work of quasi-anthropology which offers little direct theoretical insight in regards to the cultures it describes. Instead the text implicitly draws connections between the modern and the postcolonial, intoxication and reality as well as aligning colonial modes of cognition and domination with those of American neo-imperialism. There are also similarities between how *The Yage Letters* and *Junky* highlight the importance of socio-cultural dynamics and historical traumas in the worlds they portray. Both of these texts also refuse to meticulously recount the subjective effects of the drugs that they are ostensibly about. As such, despite their first person, realist perspectives, both *Junky* and *The Yage Letters* are about the hidden structures that underlie the realities they describe.

While junk knowledge in *Junky* functioned to reveal how power erases or masks the traumatic or undesirable, *The Yage Letters* reveals how realism and modern modes of subjectivity cover over and disregard the mythic basis of reality. *The Yage Letters* seeks to reveal the violence of certain modes of knowledge directly. Lee is frequently cruel and violent in his descriptions of his time in Latin America, but he is also contradictory and ambiguous in his portrayal of the colonial Other, thereby explicitly adopting and implicitly resisting colonial stereotypes. *The Yage Letters* frustrates approaches that would seek to fix the postcolonial Other within a system of knowledge.

A mythic or occult method becomes a means for Burroughs to imagine a new way of writing as well as "a new state of being" outside of the rigidity of realism and its correlative form of subjectivity ("Yage Article", *The Yage Letters Redux*, 95). Writing becomes a means to exorcise or inoculate against the western gaze and its subjective and epistemological correlatives. The composite structure of *The Yage Letters* functions to disrupt and reinfect realism, yet the connection with realism, a defining feature of Burroughs's early works of illiterature, is maintained here in order to challenge its cultural hegemony. "I AM DYING MEESTER?" offers a type of "cut-up" reading of the previous novel that reveals the arbitrary, ad-hoc and provisional aspects of reading. As such reading or misreading becomes a means to radically reimagine and reconstruct "reality".

Because *The Yage Letters* contains stylistic elements from across Burroughs's career, including the "cut-up" section "I AM DYING MEESTER?", it offers a contrasting overview of the differences between Burroughs's early illiterature and his later "cut-up" work. The letter dated June 21st, 1960 also portrays Burroughs as a zealous advocate of the "cut-up technique" who is keen to disclose its quasi-religious power. *The Yage Letters* thus implicitly outlines the incorporation of the occult into Burroughs's writing which comes to adopt the "cut-up method" and its alleged supernatural potential. *The Yage Letters* details the evolution of Burroughs's desire to create a form of literature that will "change fact" and "make things happen" that was first seen in regards to *Queer's* "routines". Furthermore, Burroughs is moving beyond drugs and addiction in *The Yage Letters*, towards a literature that becomes an approximation of the drugs experience, and as such, is a means to break out of realism and "reality".

A History of "Yage"

William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters*⁵⁷ is an epistolary novella comprising letters dated between January 1953 and August 1963. Although these letters were apparently sent between Burroughs and Ginsberg, only the last letter written by Burroughs is signed off by him: the rest are attributed to "Bill", "William" or "Willy Lee". The plot of the novella ostensibly details both men's travels and travails through South America in search of "yage", a hallucinogenic preparation used as an entheogen by certain Amerindian tribes in the Putamayo region of Peru, Ecuador and Columbia. An entheogen is an intoxicating substance used by a number of indigenous cultures to directly commune with spirits and literally means 'generating the divine within'. "Yage", *yagé* or *ayahuasca* is a powerful

⁵⁷ *The Yage Letters* was first published by City Lights in 1963 and subsequent editions have added supplementary material to it. I will refer mainly to this first edition which includes the 1963 'Epilogue' and the cut-up text "I Am Dying Meester?" but not Burroughs's famous description of "yage" intoxication that first appeared in "The Market" section of *Naked Lunch* and was included in the second, 1975 edition of *The Yage Letters*. The original 1963 publication of *The Yage Letters* also includes the "Billy Bradshinkel" routine, concerning a teenage dalliance, but excludes another routine, "Roosevelt after Inauguration", which was censored prior to the original publication.

psychedelic preparation whose active ingredient, DMT⁵⁸, is the most potent hallucinogen found in the natural world. Burroughs first became interested in “yage: after reading “an article in a popular science magazine at Grand Central Station that claimed that the medicine men of the Amazon and the Andean foothills used a decoction to foresee the future and communicate with the spirits of their ancestors” (Lees, 385). Burroughs continued his research into the substance, reading Richard Spruce’s *Notes of a Botanist*. Burroughs became fascinated by “yage”, especially as so little was known about the substance (Harris, *Secret*, 165). What was contained in the books he read on the topic was often ambiguous and inconsistent, yet this seems to have piqued the author’s interest: “No doubt about it. Yage is a deal of tremendous implications, and I’m the man who can dig it”⁵⁹ (L, 125).

William Burroughs is considered a pioneer in regards to *yagé* as he was amongst the first westerners to experience and write about “yage” intoxication. As Ralph Metzner states, the “shamanic lore of ayahuasca entered most strongly into Western culture initially through *The Yage Letters*” (14). Further to this, Burroughs was the first westerner to discover that “yage” or ayahuasca is a concoction that requires at least two ingredients to be hallucinogenic: the DMT bearing *Banisteriopsis caapi* and a plant containing harmine, a MAO inhibitor that potentiates DMT in the body (Lees, 390).

Burroughs played a large role in helping to publicise the “yage” cult, which has created a burgeoning tourist economy in the Amazonian basin, appealing primarily to young westerners in search of psychological healing and “spiritual experiences”. “For ayahuasca tourists, these emotions qualify the experience as transformative but such perceptions may also reflect the way ayahuasca is commodified and marketed. The spiritual aspects of the experience as perceived by participants can also be linked to the motives of participation such as the need to get away from ‘routine’ and ‘materialistic environments’.... Yet, tourists’ narratives are unclear as to what extent they are willing to compromise their Western values in the longer term and seem

⁵⁸ N,N-Dimethyltryptamine.

⁵⁹ May 15th, 1952.

to reproduce scripts in which the 'colonising world' and its imbued values struggle to fully embrace the 'colonised' cultural practices of ayahuasca" (Prayag et al, 322-323). Furthermore, the west's co-option of ayahuasca has been perceived as a threat by members of indigenous cultures: "For shamans, globalisation and commercialisation of ayahuasca practices... are perceived as significant threats to the power and indigenous epistemologies of shamans" (323). Further to this, in recent times overseas demand for *yagé* has seen the price of its raw materials more than triple, putting it economically out of reach of locals, while commercial operators set up plantations in the rain forest in order to profit from "the vine of the dead" (Opray, "Tourist Boom").

The Yage Letters, a minor work in the Beat catalogue, is one that has had a vast, but largely unacknowledged cultural, environmental and economic impact. "One of the peculiarities of intellectual history," Mark Greif notes, "is that the most extreme positions taken after a particular conjunction of surprising events, outliers in their own times, periodically turn out to be lasting or, at least, recurring positions for subsequent years" (*The Age of the Crisis of Man*, 227). The "yage" economy ensures that the mass counterculture inspired by the Beats is alive and well, even if many of these ayahuasca tourists have never heard of Allen Ginsberg or William Burroughs.

"A How-to Book"

Allen Ginsberg supplies only two letters in *The Yage Letters*, the last of which is extremely short. Yet it is Ginsberg's first letter, appearing near the end of the novella, that contains the most sustained and detailed description of "yage" intoxication in the first published edition of *The Yage Letters*. Ginsberg's extensive account of the "yage" experience describes an extremely traumatic episode that he has difficulty assimilating:

I do want to hear from you Bill so please write and advise me whatever you can if you can. I don't know if I'm going mad or not and it's difficult to face more - tho' I suppose I will be able to protect myself by treating that consciousness as a temporary illusion and return to

temporary normal consciousness when the effects wear off. (YL, 56)

With Ginsberg searching for spiritual and psychological guidance, Burroughs, replies cryptically, insisting that, “Your AYUASKA consciousness is more valid than ‘Normal Consciousness’” (YL, 60). This letter conveys a dramatic change in tone reflected in the sign off. “William Burroughs” is a decidedly different writer from the one who signed off earlier letters with “Love, Bill” or “As ever, Willy Lee”. This shift continues and in the second half of this letter Burroughs turns to writing in capitals, typographically indicating the attitudinal distinction between Burroughs and Lee. As the relationship between William and Allen has changed in the previous decade, so too has Burroughs’s style of writing, with the subjective realism of earlier letters giving way to a messianic tone and accompanying ethical and metaphysical confidence prompted by his recent discovery of the “cut-up method”. While *The Yage Letters* cannot be considered a “cut-up” novel, its structure lacks the spatial, temporal and stylistic unity of *Queer* and *Junky*. *The Yage Letters*, given its composite structure, no longer occupies the same space as Burroughs’s earlier novels but rather helps to explain the differences between these and later works.

If *Naked Lunch* is as Burroughs describes, “a blueprint, a How-To Book” (111) then *The Yage Letters* is equally a blueprint of, not only *Naked Lunch*, but of much of Burroughs’s literary career. No other Burroughs novel contains elements from his most recognizable literary innovations: the realism and life writing of the early texts, the vaudevillian “routine” style of *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, as well as the “cut-up method” used later in *The Soft Machine* and subsequent works. As Oliver Harris states, “[this] is a literally composite text” (*Secret*, 171). *The Yage Letters* is a synecdoche of Burroughs’s output at the time and a compendium of his literary styles and techniques. As such, the novel is a radically liminal text that exists in correspondence with a vast swathe of Burroughs’s literary career.

The Yage Letters is also revelatory of the material practice of writing *Naked Lunch*. One of the key insights that Oliver Harris offers in *The Secret of Fascination* is the degree to which much of *Queer* and *Naked Lunch* were

written firstly as letters to Allen Ginsberg: “‘Yage’ seems to confirm Burroughs’ deliberate engagement with the genre to which his compositional practice belongs. Since it is the letter medium that, in a very material sense, produced the distinctive persona of William Lee, then the epistolary mode of ‘Yage’ becomes his natural, because natal, form” (Harris, *Secret*, 159). As Allen Ginsberg states in his “Introduction” to *Junky*, “correspondence...was the method whereby we assembled books not only of *Junky* but also *Yage Letters*, *Queer...* and much of *Naked Lunch*” (J, 154-155). The epistolary form of *The Yage Letters* also implies the importance of collaboration, particularly for *Naked Lunch*, a text that benefitted from diligent editing carried out by a number of individuals including Allen Ginsberg. *The Yage Letters* retroactively reveals the epistolary origins of *Naked Lunch*.

However, in keeping with Burroughs’s illiterary ethos, all is not as it seems: “‘Yage’ may well be considered *in relation to* epistolary tradition but not as written *within* it” (Harris, *Secret*, 159). Oliver Harris details how large parts of *The Yage Letters*’ “In Search of Yage” section were translated from Burroughs’s “yage journal” into the epistolary format of the novella (*Secret*, 176-177). That much of “In Search of Yage” is not sourced from letters is illustrative of the vast amount of editorial work that went on behind the scenes of Burroughs’s early work. This editorial process seems to have contributed to decisions around form, with the letter format providing an unobtrusive structure for the text while imbuing it with authenticity. The epistolary format also marks the text as an explicit form of travel writing.

The epistolary origins and editorial decisions evident in the genetic origins of *The Yage Letters* suggest that Burroughs’s literary practice diverges from that of his peers. Burroughs’s maturation signals a change in textual politics from those of *Junky*, a rejection of Jack Kerouac’s “Spontaneous Prose” and its practice of documenting direct experience (Kerouac, *Good Blonde*, 102-105). Instead Burroughs moves towards the creation of a self-conscious form of literature that is profoundly aware of the ability of drugs and language to alter consciousness and, in turn, “reality”. The depersonalizing disruption of *yagé* is rendered not only in sections of *The Yage Letters* and *Naked Lunch* but intervenes directly in Burroughs’s literary

development. The aesthetic discrepancies between *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*, the first two novels to be published by Burroughs, only start to make sense through the intervention of *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*. As Harris quite rightly asserts, “This is one of the great interests of *The Yage Letters*, that it makes so readily available, if not positively invites, comparisons between Burroughs’ writing across decades” (*Secret*, 172). Indeed, it becomes almost necessary to deny the structural importance of heroin addiction in terms of the production of *Naked Lunch* after imbibing the libidinal and hallucinatory intoxicants offered by *Queer* and *The Yage Letters* respectively. Oliver Harris demands that we turn our attention to “the overlooked place of *yagé* in *Naked Lunch*, where the drug has stayed a kind of open secret, its significance eclipsed entirely by the relentless overdetermination of junk and addiction” (*Secret*, 167). *The Yage Letters* not only declares the importance of *yagé* but also the significance of the epistolary form, South America and its postcolonial heterogeneity in the evolution that is apparent in *Naked Lunch*. That publication’s dependence on junk to defend itself at censorship trials can be regarded as a kind of addiction. *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*, even in their titles, imply new ways of reading *Naked Lunch* outside of its didactic function, detailing the horrors of addiction.

The Yage Letters reveals the origins of one of the most intriguing parts of *Naked Lunch*. “The Market” section, Burroughs’s most famous description of “yage” intoxication, is *Naked Lunch*’s central articulation of the world of “Interzone”, the heterogeneous, multicultural and anarchic setting where much of the action of the novel takes place. Oliver Harris argues that *Naked Lunch* has far more to do with “yage” than it does with heroin addiction (*Secret*, 167), and yet it seems this assessment does not go far enough. Much has been made of the importance of the “International Zone” of Tangier in Burroughs’s conception of “Interzone” yet at the time of writing what would become “The Market” section of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs had not stepped foot in Morocco. In regards to Tangier’s central importance for Interzone’s development, discussion has focused on Burroughs’s attitudes to its colonial status. Kurt Hemmer notes Burroughs’s ignorance and distrust of Moroccan nationalism, and suggests that discussion of Burroughs’s relationship with

the Islamic world needs to move beyond debates about sexual morality and towards “his complex and ambiguous relationship with Islam” (Hemmer, 72). Andrew Hussey, writing of Burroughs’s time in Tangier, comments on how Burroughs’s postcolonial ambivalence is both a source of exotic and libidinal enjoyment and colonial insight: “Don’t ever fall for this inscrutable oriental shit” (Burroughs qtd. in Hussey, 76-77). Hussey offers a shrewd analysis of Burroughs’s conflicting attitudes regarding colonialism but his assertion that “Tangier [functioned] as Burroughs’s ‘composite city’” ignores that it was in South America that this “composite city” was first envisioned and written of (78). This is not to suggest that Tangier does not form part of this “composite city” but to affirm the “composite” nature of Burroughs’s postcolonial imagination.

The Composite Text

While *The Yage Letters* illustrates a nascent contact zone between North American psychonauts and South American culture, the text itself is also a contact zone for the various threads of Burroughs’s career. The disruptive, heterogeneous form of *The Yage Letters* breaks from the standards of Western narrative: “Narrative itself is a representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 273). However, the epistolary form of *The Yage Letters* helps it retain some semblance of traditional narrative structure, albeit one that increasingly disintegrates as the novella progresses. In format and intention, *The Yage Letters* individuates itself from *Junky*. Despite Oliver Harris’s suggestion that this is a work inspired by anthropology and “the atavistic pull of the ethnographic field itself” (*Secret*, 161), *Yage* displays an almost complete lack of interest in the native cultures and people of the Putamayo. “Whatever scholarly interest and respect Burroughs had for the local people he met during his time in Latin America or their culture and history is not reflected in *The Yage Letters* – Lee is not interested in learning about the peoples or cultures of Latin America” (Keomany, 2). Lee is far more concerned with the substances of the *brujos* than their “atavistic” culture. While the disintegrating form and structure of *The Yage Letters* reflects the

cut-up culture of postcolonial South America, Lee is frequently a proxy for neo-imperial, “Ugly American” attitudes and nowhere is this outlook more prevalent than in the protagonist’s response to the indigenous population. According to Lee, most of the medicine men are simply opportunistic drunks and thieves:

This old drunken fraud was crooning over a man evidently down with malaria. (Maybe he was chasing the evil spirit out of his patient and into the gringo. Anyway I came down with malaria two weeks to the day later.) The Brujo told me he had to be half lushed up to work his witchcraft and cure people. The high cost of liquor was working a hardship on the sick, he was only hitting two cylinders on a short count of lush. I bought him a pint of aguardiente and he agreed to prepare the Yage for another quart. He did in fact prepare a pint of cold water infusion after misappropriating half the vine so that I did not notice any effect. (YL, 21)

Lee criticises the *Brujo*, a figure of colonial “otherness”, for committing the same crimes – addiction, theft and fraud – that Lee engages in throughout *Junky*. However, Lee’s viperish attitude throughout Burroughs’s early works functions ironically *and* as a mark of his authenticity. Unlike works such as *The Peyote Dance* by Antonin Artaud and the “Don Juan” series of books by Carlos Castaneda, *The Yage Letters* does not describe the indigenous cultures of Latin America in terms of their ancient wisdom and quiet nobility. For Lee, the *brujo* is just another pusher capitalising on his access to the “vine” and his ability to prepare “yage”. Although vicious and cynical, Lee’s unromantic honesty is refreshing in comparison to the cultural appropriation that often surrounds consumption of ayahuasca by westerners. Furthermore, Lee’s purely selfish desire for “yage” is simply an authentic reflection of his background as a product of white, American, capitalist values. *The Yage Letters* offers no illusions in terms of Lee’s psychedelic tourism, he is here for

one thing only, and far from the *brujos* offering atavistic wisdom or an insight into their culture, more often they are simply another hurdle standing in the way of Lee's desires.

Despite this, in *The Yage Letters* there is an implicit recognition that colonial representation consolidates colonial power and this is indicated by how the novella's structure corresponds with Lee's ambiguous place within the social structures of Latin America. Lee is uninterested in relating to the wisdom and culture of the *brujos* but offers observations on South America's cultural miscegenation. Burroughs obliquely attempts to represent South America as a composite text and a composite culture. In essence, just as Burroughs was revealing the microfascistic power at play in sexuality and everyday life in *Queer*, in *The Yage Letters* Lee is illuminating, again via his ugly American persona, the vicious exploitation that forms a large part of the history of postcolony. However, in *The Yage Letters* this reading of microfascism in the postcolony is couched in a structure and aesthetic that reflects the postcolony's heterogeneous nature.

The term "contact zone" is used by Mary-Louise Pratt "to refer to social spaces where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" ("Contact Zone", 34). In *The Yage Letters* Lee insists on foregrounding his place in the upper echelons of the colonial power structure. Lee clearly enjoys being "treated like visiting royalty under the misapprehension I was a representative of the Texas Oil Company travelling incognito" (*YL*, 27). However, Lee's racial and colonial power is frequently undermined. This is made apparent in the first two lines of *The Yage Letters*: "I stopped off here to have my piles out. Wouldn't do to go back among the Indians with piles I figured" (*YL*, 7). Speaking of this section, Oliver Harris states:

And so, if for Lee as an American in Panama the Hotel Colon is the residence of colonial occupation, in a contradictory move he prepares himself for offering up

his body for sexual colonization by the colonized...this contradiction inaugurates the radical ambiguity and reversibility of Lee's position throughout "Yage" and between "Yage" and *Queer*. (*Secret*, 162)

The Yage Letters continues the theme of control addiction – of being controlled by the need to control – that is a central feature of *Queer*. This should not downplay the sexual violence that is hinted at here and made explicit when Lee writes, “[maybe] I could capture an Auca boy. I have precise instructions for Auca raiding. It’s quite simple. You cover both exits of Auca house and shoot everybody you don’t wanna fuck” (*YL*, 38). This combination of sexual violence and colonial exploitation recalls similar sentiments in *Queer*, in particular “Corn Hole Gus’s Used-Slave Lot routine”. Lee’s piles, while used as a way to set up his sexual interest in the Indians, suggest a wound or illness that is hidden, connecting the anxiety of being homosexual with that of being colonised. Furthermore, as outlined earlier, Lee maligned the Brujo for being an addict, thief and fraud, moral failings Lee openly admits in *Junky*. While Lee perpetuates the pitiless hierarchical structure he is a victim of, he implicitly undermines the ideological structure of microfascism: “the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (Foucault qtd. in Miller, *Passion*, 369). That part of Lee who feels oppressed – which is made clear by the titles of his previous novels, *Junky* and *Queer* – can empathise with the pain of the postcolony, but he is also drawn to the vibrancy and diversity of Latin America. Lee clearly admires the tolerant culture of South America and suggests that it results from its colonial history and the postcolonial culture of difference that stems from it:

Homosexuality is simply a human potential as is shown by almost unanimous incidents in prisons - and nothing human is foreign or shocking to a South American. I am speaking of the South American at best, a special race part Indian, part white, part god knows what. He is not, as one is apt to think at first fundamentally an Oriental nor does

he belong to the West. He is something special unlike anything else. (YL, 40)

While the composite culture of South America is more liberal than that of his homeland, Lee feels that South Americans must still free themselves of certain residual elements of colonialism: “He has been blocked from expression by the Spanish and the Catholic Church. What we need is a new Bolivar who will really get the job done” (YL, 40). And yet Lee’s revolutionary desire stems from his own wish for liberation rather than a broader political interest in a genuine postcolonial independence for the South American nations he visits. This apolitical attitude is typical of Burroughs who tells Ted Morgan, “I was never tempted by any political program. [...] I don’t want to hear about the fucking masses and I never did” (qtd. in Miles, 148). As Andrew Hussey notes in regards to Burroughs’s ambiguous political assertions regarding Tangier’s colonial status, “He had no interest in Moroccan nationalism but rather a politics of liberty that transcended all forms of nationalism” (77). There is an implicit awareness on Lee’s part that it is the South American nations’ very lack of a consolidated identity that marks South America as a zone open to all forms of “human potential” while residues of the “Spanish” and “Catholic Church” could result in these nations collapsing under the illusion of a national monoculture. Lee’s form of postcolonial criticism may reflect his distrust of Moroccan nationalist movements whose no doubt justified revolutionary successes resulted in the consolidation of a national identity that is steeped in Islamic cultural tradition and its concomitant conservative moral demands.

Against the background of “La Violencia”, the Columbian civil war that took place between liberals and conservatives from 1948 to 1958, *The Yage Letters* performs its own revolutionary practices that form part of its narrative development, reflecting the violence and heterogeneity of its setting. While the text is mostly written in an empirical, realist and epistolary style typical to the genre of travel writing, it is interrupted by “routines”, such as the grotesque “Roosevelt After Inauguration”, while the novella closes with the postcolonial “cut-up” “I am Dying Meester?” *The Yage Letters’* mixture of anachronistic styles and literary forms is an analogue of

the South American postcolony, and while Lee may explicitly desire to appear as a dominant colonialist and sexual predator, both he and his writing are willingly colonised by the cut-up culture of South America. Although Lee is still ostensibly the acerbic misanthrope of *Queer*, his objectionable, violent tones betray how it is he who is made subordinate in his relationship with the postcolony. Despite his compulsive need to send letters, Lee remains just as he was in his relationship with Eugene Allerton, “strictly a receiver,” but this time it is for the postcolonial culture of South America.

The Postcolonial Other

While Lee still uses the same violent and obscene language that he did throughout *Queer*, his experience with Allerton has compelled him to refrain from attempting to control and speak for the Other. In *The Yage Letters*, Lee portrays a colonial honesty that is commendable when compared with Jack Kerouac who makes a fetish of blacks, Hispanics and native Americans in *On The Road*. In that novel, Sal Paradise speaks of wanting to become a negro (180). Robert Holton argues that Kerouac’s “longing” to become a negro, for instance is “a sort of fantasized racial version of cross-dressing [that] tells us little, however, about that other world” (267). Under the influence of “yage” Burroughs describes a similar “becoming negro”, where he becomes a highly sexualised “Negress”:

Yage is it. It is the drug really does what the others are supposed to do [sic]. This is the most complete negation possible of respectability. Imagine a small town bank president turning into a Negress and rushing to Nigger town in a frenzy to solicit sex from some Buck Nigra. He would never recover that preposterous condition known as self respect.⁶⁰
(*L*, 180-181)

⁶⁰ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 8th, 1953.

Although articulated in violent racial language and telling “us little... about that other world”, Burroughs becoming a “Negress” is explicitly hallucinatory and results in the dissolution of normative identity and its accompanying racialized and heteronormative conception of “respectability” and “self respect”. Burroughs experiences in this “yage” trip what Lee perceives as the inherent value of the postcolony as a contact zone: racial, sexual and cultural heterogeneity, particularly as these stand against the conservative standards of white heteronormativity represented here by the “small town bank president”.

While, in *On the Road*, Kerouac unflinchingly portrays the racial Other as a figure of inherent beauty, Burroughs, in *The Yage Letters*, is much more ambiguous, calling the Columbian people that he sees on the road to Cali, “some of the best looking and the ugliest people I ever saw” (YL, 14). *The Yage Letters* seems to resist the colonial stereotype theorised by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha states that, “[the] stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference ... constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations” (*The Location of Culture*, 75). Although explicitly violent and exploitative, *The Yage Letters* frustrates readings that would attempt to fix the postcolonial Other within a system of knowledge. It is precisely the difference of South America that drives Burroughs’s imagination, assuring its centrality in the works that would follow, such as *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, *The Wild Boys* and *Cities of the Red Night*.

Both Burroughs’s and Kerouac’s opposing perspectives on the Other are based on their reading of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Here Spengler discusses “primitive” cultures using the term “fellaheen” (1513-1514). The “fellaheen” contrast with the urban, modern lifestyle and mindset of “the West”. Spengler derives the term “fellaheen” from the name given to ancient Egyptian people who were not part of “the knightly class... of the Egyptian feudal period” and thus were peripheral to civilization (1677). The Beats identified with the primitive, authentic spirit of the “fellaheen” as a

figure who resonated with their artistic instincts. The “fellaheen” were “unalert yet sometimes suffused through and through by an inward light... characteristic of the primitive and of the child (and also of those moments of religious and artistic inspiration that occur ever less and less often as a Culture grows older)” (Spengler, 167). Spengler’s text both celebrates and infantilizes tribal cultures, and figures them, in a homogenous fashion, as an antidote to the homogeneity of modern, urban culture (1712). In *The Yage Letters*, Lee also views South American postcolonial culture as an antidote to Western uniformity but not in the same patronising and reductive fashion as Spengler and Kerouac.

Lee’s musings on the postcolony in *The Yage Letters* implicitly suggest that its culture is a product of historical power relations: “In Bogota more than any other city I have seen in Latin America you feel the dead weight of Spain sombre and oppressive. Everything official bears the label Made in Spain” (*YL*, 13). While Lee is critical of Spain’s colonial influence, he sees revolutionary potential in the heterogeneous cultures of South America:

This is I think what the Colombian Civil War is basically about - the fundamental split between the South American Potential and the Repressive Spanish life fearing armadillos. I never felt myself so definitely on one side and unable to see any redeeming features in the other. South America is a mixture of strains all necessary to realize the potential form. They need white blood as they know - Myth of White God - and what did they get but the fucking Spaniards. Still they had the advantage of weakness. Never would have gotten the English out of here. They would have created that atrocity known as a White Man’s Country. (*YL*, 40-41)

Though Lee displays hatred for almost all of the individual cultures of South America – the *brujos*⁶¹ included – he admires the multicultural melting pot

⁶¹ Lee states that, “the most inveterate drunk, liar and loafer in the village is invariably the medicine man” (*YL*, 19).

that was created out of its colonial history. This passage contains contradictions that not only undermine Lee's racialized colonial vision but also the system of knowledge that consolidates colonial power:

Lee's detailed attempt to develop his own classification system for what he believes to be the South American race is laced with an ugly, prejudiced tone demonstrating how ignorant and absurd such a task is. For example, Lee declares the South American to be unique, but then promptly contradicts himself by asserting that the South American is inclusive of all other races. (Keomany, 3)

Lee places himself at the top of the racial hierarchy, as a "White God", yet he disparages the "Repressive Spanish life fearing armadillos" as he recognises their need for cultural and racial purity as the antithesis of the generative, evolutionary potential of postcolonial difference. Lee is both egalitarian and contradictory, criticising English tenacity as much as Spanish weakness in this section. It is clear that postcolonial South America, despite all the problems Lee mentions throughout "In Search of Yage", is preferable to that paragon of modern, white, colonial identity; the United States of America. The very lack of homogenous unity and normative states in *The Yage Letters'* description of South America marks the postcolony as an antidote to the modern, American mentality. If Lee needs to "leave right now" it is because of his engrained ideological disposition which places him in a compromised, contradictory state while in South America (49). Here Lee is caught between his admiration of postcolonial heterogeneity and tolerance and his ideological position as a subject and representative of the United States and neo-imperial capitalism.

Lee's need to leave South America as a result of this cognitive dissonance is epitomised in the section where he describes being misrecognised as a representative for Texas Oil:

This trip I was treated like visiting royalty under the misapprehension I was a representative of the Texas Oil Company travelling incognito. (Free boat rides, free plane rides, free chow; eating in officers' mess, sleeping in the

governor's house.) The Texas Oil Company surveyed the area a few years ago, found no oil and pulled out. But everyone in the Putumayo believes the Texas Company will return. Like the second coming of Christ. (YL, 22)

Lee is perfectly willing to adopt the role of being a representative for the “Texas Oil Company” who the natives believe will return like “the second coming of Christ”. Lee thus becomes the “White God” despite his knowledge that the Texas Oil Company’s return is a myth. The locals’ desire for the return of the Texas Oil Company represents their need for the “Myth of White God”. Despite the racial and ethnic diversity of South America, the white man, his imperial power and capitalist culture still remain at the apex of South America’s racial and cultural hierarchy. In *The Yage Letters*, “South Americans themselves seem to buy into the short-term thinking of exchanging natural resources for what they consider to be progress, even though the practice may be harmful in the long term” (Weidner, 115). Lee, “a psychotic Indiana Jones on drugs”, and *The Yage Letters* do not represent a break from imperialism but the historical continuity that exists between the periods of European imperialism and American neo-imperialism in Latin America (Campbell, “Beat Mexico”, 216). Furthermore, Latin Americans can be seen in the above section embodying the exploitative desires that had earlier been the preserve of their colonizers. Lee, while criticising the naïve desires of the Putumayons, continues to exploit his position of power within the racial and economic hierarchies that remain a feature of the postcolony. The cognitive dissonance and exploitative instincts evident in Lee’s behaviour is emblematic of America’s compromised state as an anti-imperial, neo-imperial nation. Despite his championing of postcolonial difference, Lee remains an ugly American.

Regardless of Lee’s outsider status as homosexual and drug addict, he remains white, Anglo-Saxon, wealthy and American and thus, by the contingent details of his birth, the privileged oppressor. This relates directly to Burroughs’s compromised position as both diagnostician and sufferer of the disease of “Control”. This willingness to be the colonial oppressor heightens Lee’s critique of colonial reality. If Lee is racist, exploitative and

predatory he is only being faithful to the predilections of his race. Alain Badiou declares that, “[the] oppressed peoples of the earth are not objects for the exquisite turmoil of European consciences. They are subjects from which to learn how to exercise political intelligence and action. Obviously, colonial arrogance is a long time dying” (*Cinema*, 57). While Lee might not perfectly adhere to Badiou’s dictates, he does not engage in colonial hand wringing. In *The Yage Letters* Lee refuses to make a fetish of the native cultures of the Putamayo, instead he embraces the chaotic postcolonial reality of South America. Oliver Harris discusses Lee’s *yagé* experiences in similar terms:

The metamorphosis experienced in Pucallpa breaks apart the colonial authority of white maleness, while the full upshot of such radical illumination is a larger breakdown still, a larger *breakthrough*. In absolute contrast to the fantasized power of *yagé* in *Queer*, in “Yage” the horizon opened by the drug for Lee is not a self-protective, narcissistic assimilation or consumption of the other but a dissolution of the self, a dispossession of the very basis to the will-to-possess. This is a vision of self-overcoming without the lacerating masochism of abject self-humiliation, an apparently *desirous* rather than disastrous disintegration of identity. (*Secret*, 168)

Yet it appears here that *yagé* merely aestheticizes the unresolvable differences of postcolonial reality as part of its effects. The danger with celebrating the disruptive power of the “yage” cult is that it turns into precisely the kind of cultural appropriation that takes place with contemporary ayahuasca tourism. Further to this, the elevation of the “yage” cult to the status of being an antidote to modernity engages in the same Spenglerian atavism that can only result in a valorisation of racial and cultural purity; something that is merely an extension or inversion of the violence and racism inherent in all forms of colonialism and imperialism.

The postcolony is more modern in its cosmopolitan heterogeneity, than the metropolitan centre, which is the arrested image of “modernity” that Lee and his fellow ayahuasca tourists are trying to escape. The postcolony is the unacknowledged Real of modernity, its anarchic, cultural, material and racial wellspring: The First World “is literally the creation of the Third World”, but the First World frantically turns the Third World into products to be consumed, much as *yagé* has come to be consumed in the 21st century (Fanon, 102). Daniel Pinchbeck writes of how “[the] plants that produce visions can function – for those of us who have inherited the New World Order of barren materialism, cut off from our spiritual heritage by a spiteful culture that gives us nothing but ashes – as the talismans of recognition that awaken our minds to reality” (136). However, the process of consuming and commodifying these “plants that produce visions” is a symptom of, rather than a cure for, the “barren materialism” Pinchbeck describes. Those who seek spiritual panacea in *yagé* or other entheogens are agents for the cultural disease they are attempting to escape, implicitly adopting the compromised position Lee makes explicit throughout *The Yage Letters*. The postcolony however offers a radically different image of modernity that speaks of a social, cultural, artistic, racial and sexual potency beyond that of sterile western modernity. What “yage” represents, rather than contains, is the dissolution of Lee’s self as it corresponds with the postcolonial reality of the Other. “Yage” is the objectification of postcolonial difference, and in *The Yage Letters* it marks the point at which Lee, as the “Ugly American”, can no longer hold together. “Yage” accelerates, rather than occasions, the desirous “dissolution of the self” Lee undergoes in South America.

The demarcation of modern, Western identity leads to a narrowing down of subjective and artistic potential which is undone, in *The Yage Letters*, by the powerful cocktail of the postcolony and “yage”. This is highlighted by Burroughs’s most famous description of “yage” intoxication, first seen in *Naked Lunch* and not included in *The Yage Letters* until its 1975 publication:

The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain

Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian – races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants grow out of genitals, vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of body) across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market. (*Yage Redux*, 50, *NL*, 106)

This fascinating description of the postcolony under the influence of *yagé* bears little resemblance to *Junky's* description of junk neighbourhoods: "If junk were gone from the earth, there might still be junkies standing around in junk neighborhoods feeling the lack, vague and persistent, a pale ghost of junk sickness" (*J*, 93). Being in New York, New Orleans or any other major western city, is tantamount to being an addict, while in South America "all human potentials" have value in the "silent market". "The 'difference' of South America, its proximate alterity for Burroughs, would continue to exercise its fascination in recurrent dreams of returning to the site of his 'real destiny' throughout the decade" (Harris, *Secret*, 161). "Yage" offers Lee and Burroughs a line of escape because it is situated in, and approximate to, the experience of being in postcolonial South America. Hence, "yage" and Latin America's postcolonial cultures offer a revolutionary aesthetic which provides Burroughs with a vision of a subject position outside the rigidity of modern, white, American culture, the homogeneity of heroin addiction and the realism of his earlier novels. South America and the variety of identities of its subjects are condensed into Burroughs's "yage" experience and it is this postcolonial insight that furnishes the author with many of the heterogeneous images of *Naked Lunch*. Yet "yage" plays only a supplemental role here: the true author of these insights is South America. "Yage" and its intoxicating, hallucinogenic effects merely reflect the potency of South America with its postcolonial penchant for both extending and transcending cultural and racial difference.

Lee's need to "leave right now" at end of *The Yage Letters* (49) is an inexplicable compulsion akin to his heroin addiction. Lee's need to consolidate or reinforce his identity comes from the same place: being a modern westerner or, more specifically an 'ugly American'. Foucault suggests, "Maybe the target is not to discover who we are but to refuse who we are" (qtd. in Morelyle, 74). However, Lee seems to be a proxy for both Burroughs's self-discovery and self-transcendence. The ambiguity in Burroughs's works relates to the difficulty of separating Lee's subversive potential from the historically determined subject often figured as the 'ugly American'. This lack of resolution, which is a key component in many of Burroughs's works, resonates with his oft obfuscated scepticism regarding the potential for subjective freedom. Timothy Melley misidentifies a "humanist retreat" (59) in Burroughs's work that is more often a refusal to conform or comply absolutely with humanist or postmodern conceptions of subjectivity. Burroughs's purpose as an author, particularly in his early works, is to undermine rather than affirm anything approaching a consistent theoretical or ethical position. As suggested by Burroughs's writing of his *yagé* experience above, the author champions South American postcolonial culture and its opposition to cultural and racial purity because it implicitly critiques any imagined pure form of being or subject position. His use of the terms "White Man's Country" and "life fearing armadillos" suggests that the epidermal limits of the self are reductive, since identity is not static or essential, but fluid and relational. A critical function of Burroughs's illiterature is to undermine one of language's functions, which is to categorise and limit a disruptive and boundless world. Burroughs embodies this in his willingness to become a contradictory author. Subjectivity is not an essence but at once the existential quest to be devoid of ideological determinism. This is at odds completely with Timothy S. Murphy who, in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* states that subjectivity "'itself is a form of addiction to language, to the 'I' of self-consciousness and identity as an instrument of control, both of the phenomenal world by the 'I' and of the 'I' itself by the ideological structure of its socius" (58). For Burroughs, the subjective "I" is, like language, always the site of both political and cultural

determinism and a potential authenticity. Burroughs's liberation from linguistic essentialism does not lead to an egalitarian utopia, rather it forges new and unimagined possibilities for being that are both terrifying and inspirational, much like postcolonial South America is for Lee and taking "yage" is for Ginsberg (YL, 49-59).

"Whose 'Normal Consciousness'? Why return to?" asks Burroughs of Ginsberg, and indeed a return seems impossible (YL, 60). The difficulty arises when, with the help of "yage", the author recognises that the experience of intoxication bears a close relationship to reality and that 'Normal Consciousness' or realism is a kind of addiction. The quest in *The Yage Letters* ends in failure for Lee, the subjective "I", but only as it is rendered in the realist world, for at another level of reality this failure is the opening out of the individual to a panoply of subject positions: "an apparently *desirous* rather than disastrous disintegration of identity" (Harris, *Secret*, 168). This is what the letter dated June 21st, 1960 and the "cut-up" text "I AM DYING MEESTER?" suggest; that the failure of "In Search for Yage" leads to another kind of success that involves the death of the subject, Lee, and his subject-orientated form of literature: realism. Similarly, Brion Gysin described the "cut-up method" as "A Project for Disastrous Success" and this is also true of Burroughs's vision for the subject in his early works; that he ultimately triumphs in his own failure and destruction because a better form of subjectivity will arise from his ashes (*The Third Mind*, 2).

Burroughs vs. Lee

The Yage Letters is a text published out of time and set in an alien space, both geographically and neurochemically, where we find clear evidence of Lee moving away from being Burroughs's literary representative or fictional alter-ego. Oliver Harris provides key evidence in regards to the disparities between *The Yage Letters* and the actual letters sent to Allen Ginsberg at that time, indicating that while Lee can be closely identified with Burroughs, they are not identical (*Secret*, 157-160). Lee can instead be regarded as a scapegoat for the "Ugly Spirit" or a way of channelling negative psychological impulses into an apprehensible literary form. Lee, for Burroughs, is a means

towards writing, and thus erasing those unwanted elements of his character: “writing as inoculation”. This is not writing as memory aid or means of survival, but rather as a form of treatment for an inconspicuous illness.

On the other hand, *The Yage Letters* is the first text where Lee explicitly becomes a writer, albeit a writer of letters: “Yage’ departs dramatically from the first-person narrator Lee of *Junkie* and, for the first time, ties voice and agency directly to the activity of writing and the identity of Lee as a writer” (Harris, *Secret*, 160). Yet specifically, Lee is a writer of letters, not fiction, and as Harris has pointed out, many of Lee’s letters were originally part of Burroughs’s “ur-manuscript” on “yage” (*Secret*, 176). Furthermore, in the original publication of *The Yage Letters*, Lee did not achieve the profound intoxication described in “The Market” section of *Naked Lunch*, instead he nearly dies when he takes “yage” and his experiences of the drug, while interesting, lack the uniqueness and literary merit of Burroughs’s description of the “composite city” in *Naked Lunch*.

In *The Yage Letters*, Lee becomes less a reflection of Burroughs and more a form of immunity from the confusion and supernatural possession that threaten the author. Lee as the ugly American embraces his parasitic “Ugly Spirit”, unlike Burroughs whose entire aim with his quest for *yagé* intoxication is to be rid of that specific demon. This resonates with what Michael Taussig writes in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*: “In attempting to appropriate [*yagé*’s] power, we see how the colonists reified their mythology of the pagan savage, became subject to its power, and in so doing sought salvation from the civilization that tormented them as much as the primitive onto whom they projected their antiselves” (168). Lee denigrates many of the natives of Latin America in *The Yage Letters*, not to make them “antiselves” but to become the “antiself” of Burroughs. Lee is a modern, tormented colonialist and Burroughs is using Lee to purge this acquired illness from his psyche. *The Yage Letters* suggests that the cure does not exist in drugs but in writing as a means towards splitting or cutting up the Burroughs/Lee genealogy.

The dissolution of Lee's identity in *The Yage Letters* betrays a general lack of certainty about identity in general and Lee's identity in particular. This becomes apparent as Lee's identity and voice become disembodied and start to infect the speech and behaviour of others. Lee's huckster persona is projected onto the unlikely figure of Doctor Schindler, a character based on the famous Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes who helped Burroughs locate sources of *yagé* in the Putamayo. In a manner unbecoming a respected academic, Doctor Schultes says the following:

"Bill, I haven't been 15 years in this sonoabitch country and lost all my teeth in the service without picking up a few angles. Now down yonder in Puerto Leguisomo - they got like military planes and I happen to know the commandante is Latah.' (Latah is a condition occurring in South East Asia. Otherwise normal, the Latah cannot help doing whatever anyone tells him to do once his attention has been attracted by touching him or calling his name)". (YL, 33)

While Doctor Schultes speaks of his ability to control "the commandante [who] is Latah", it is ironic that Schultes speaks in Lee's voice and is in turn spoken for by Lee's text. It seems that Schultes is like Lee in *Queer* being controlled by his need for "Control". The figure of the *Latah* is also mentioned in *Naked Lunch* where he is both a representative of ideological control and sly mimicry: "Smart young Latah keep his eye on the ball..." (NL, 43). This "Smart young Latah" turns the table on his master who tried to kill him. The episode is similar to Lee's experience in *Queer*, where he attempts to psychically control Allerton but is made subordinate in the relationship. "What makes the *latah*—a condition actually associated with Southeast Asia—so central a figure for Burroughs is that it reproduces *yagé's* fantasized promise of total telepathic control" (Harris, 161). The reversible and viral potential of the *Latah* seems evident in *The Yage Letters* where Lee is Burroughs's imitator or *Latah* while Doc Schultes starts speaking using Lee's vernacular. The *latah's* function is to undermine identity, as, for Burroughs,

identity results from the colonization of the subject by language. The *Latah* is controlled by verbal cues, such as his name, which make him subordinate to the speaker. “*Latah* is seen as a by-product of rapid ‘social change, particularly colonialization,’ and is a response *in extremis* to the ‘imposition of the customs and goods of powerful Western nations upon peoples of the Third World’” (John G. Kennedy qtd. in Harris, 161-162). As Harris points out, the condition of *latah* is a response to “forced cultural identity” and “what Anna Freud termed ‘identification with the aggressor’” (162). However, as evidenced by the “Smart young Latah” in *Naked Lunch*, his compulsive imitations can become a form of radical subversion and personal empowerment. As Homi Bhabha outlines, the slippage of identity “produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixed the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence... mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123). A major component of Burroughs’s critical strategy in his early works of illiterature involves overidentifying with the excessive and contradictory aspects of ideology. As such the “latah”, as a figure of sly colonial mimicry, is a “latah” for Burroughs’s critical position throughout his works of illiterature which most vividly represent the disease rather than the cure. Lee is a “latah” for ugly, American neo-colonialism: “Lee speaks in the master’s voice precisely in order to hear an alien colonial language talking—one that, like a *latah*, he is forced to reproduce in order to ‘be’ himself” (Harris, *Secret*, 162). Lee in *Queer* is a dislocated subject but in *The Yage Letters* his identity has become disembodied and displaced, to the point where his speech starts to infiltrate characters like Doc Schultes. Doc Schultes’s strangely familiar patter anticipates the grotesque physical transformations and metonymic identities of *Naked Lunch*. Like the “Divisionists” of that text who “cut off tiny bits of their flesh and grow exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly” (81), Lee’s identity is viral and parasitic because he is both a product and producer of a virulent language.

With Burroughs later declaring war on the word and representation

(YL, 60-62), Lee, as Burroughs's literary voice, must also be sacrificed. Ian MacFadyen writes that, in *Naked Lunch*, "Lee is not Burroughs's 'alter ego' as so often presumed – he is the repudiated one, the abandoned lost soul, an oblivion sign. If Lee is the old ghost self, then Burroughs the writer of *Naked Lunch* is something quite other" ("Dosier Two", 38). I would argue that the process of separation between Lee and Burroughs begins with the composition of *The Yage Letters* and that the difference between author and protagonist is more explicit and obvious in this realist, composite and protracted novella. As Lee is always merely a product of language, and language is a producer of 'reality', Burroughs must individuate from him to move beyond realism. *The Yage Letters* is a document of this becoming wherein Burroughs develops into, "a master of space time, free to travel, to enter and go out, he has a privileged, panoramic view of space time and the mutations and metamorphoses of life – beautiful, hideous, terrifying, and blissful. He has become writer as seer" (MacFadyen, 38). Ian MacFadyen suggests that the separation between Lee and Burroughs begins with *Naked Lunch*, but I would argue that it is recounted most forcefully in *The Yage Letters*, a text that also reveals the epistolary origins of *Naked Lunch*, the South American origins of "Interzone" and the transcendence of space-time through the medium of writing.

In *The Yage Letters* Burroughs no longer uses Lee as an accurate representation of himself and his experiences, but as a harbinger of a new writerly approach. This new relationship to writing marks Burroughs out from his Beat peers as he sets about constructing texts, not as a means towards describing things that have happened, but as means of "making things happen"⁶². It is no accident that this begins in *The Yage Letters*, a text anticipated in *Junky* as the resolution or antidote to junk and the predetermined lifestyle of addiction. *The Yage Letters* is thus a transitional

⁶² "It is to be remembered that all art is magical in origin—music, sculpture, writing, painting—and by magical I mean intended to produce very definite results. Writing and painting were one in cave paintings, which were formulae to ensure good hunting. Art is not an end in itself, any more than Einstein's matter-into-energy formula is an end in itself. Like all formulae, art was originally *functional*, intended to make things happen, the way an atom bomb happens from Einstein's formulae." (Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, 32)

text, moving from junk realism to *yagé's* supersession of space-time. "Yage" vision forgoes the narrowing down of heroin addiction to give way to total intoxication and its aesthetic logic of heterogeneity and miscegenation. This stimulation of the senses involves encountering things that cannot be explained in terms of everyday experience. Lee too partakes of this transformation and becomes akin to the being of the poet described by Arthur Rimbaud. In "Yage" Lee undergoes:

[unspeakable] torment, where he will need the greatest faith, a superhuman strength, where he becomes all men the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the Supreme Scientist! For he attains the unknown! Because he has cultivated his soul, already rich, more than anyone! He attains the unknown, and if, demented, he finally loses the understanding of his visions, he will at least have seen them! So what if he is destroyed in his ecstatic flight through things unheard of, unnameable: other horrible workers will come; they will begin at the horizons where the first one has fallen! (Rimbaud, 307)

Lee has been subsumed by Rimbaud's world of anti-knowledge, and, although he will return in different guises throughout Burroughs's career, he will cease to be Burroughs's autobiographical alter-ego and literary persona. Lee has taken "yage", the "vine of the dead", and passed on along with Burroughs's realism (Banco, 53). Burroughs's writing now takes on an explicitly magical power where it becomes a means to "change fact"⁶³ (*L*, 127). Throughout Burroughs's early work, "yage" was always spoken of in terms of its specific occult power, yet it is in *The Yage Letters* that writing literature is imbued with specifically magical capabilities.

⁶³ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated May 23rd, 1952.

The Occult and the “Yage” Cult

In *The Yage Letters*, Burroughs’s writing evolves into a spell or ritual for making things happen. This is evidenced in *The Yage Letters*’ Billy Bradshinkel “routine”. At the close of this “routine” Burroughs writes:

Another routine: A man who manufactures memories to order. Any kind you want and he guarantees you’ll believe they happened just that way - (As a matter of fact I have just about sold myself Billy Bradshinkel). A line from the Japanese Sandman provides theme song of story, ‘Just an old second hand man trading new dreams for old.’ (YL, 11)

Burroughs leaves the reader unsure as to whether the events described in the “routine” actually occurred, or whether he is attempting to write this fantasy into his or Lee’s personal history: that is to “change fact”. The purpose of the “routine” is twofold: it is cathartic, helping to eliminate negative psychic energies, but the “routine” also allows fantasies to manifest in reality.

In *The Yage Letters* Lee has become a kind of psychic sandbox or means through which Burroughs can experiment with subject positions, adopting ones he finds useful and disengaging from ones that have become redundant or damaging. Literature for Burroughs then is a form of performance or ritual and the author’s mythic persona is a product of this approach to his life and work. Ginsberg identified in Burroughs’s “routines” an attempt, “to work black magic” (qtd. in Harris, 146), to which Burroughs responds, “[of] course I am working black magic”⁶⁴ (L, 128). By using writing and literature in an occult fashion Burroughs ascertains the magical potential of language to alter reality. Later he will also assert the negative, manipulative and limiting effects of language ⁶⁵, but this is simply a universalization of what he is attempting to perform here for his own ends. Burroughs’s later attempts to “rub out the word forever” using the “cut-up

⁶⁴ June 4th, 1952.

⁶⁵ “It is precisely these automatic reactions to words themselves that enable those who manipulate words to control thought on a mass scale” (*The Job*, 59).

method” occurs only after seeking to seize the occult power of language as a means to personal power, as well as a means to escape “Control” (*Nova Express*, 12). Roland Barthes tells us “[how] to repulse a demon (an old problem)... The demons, especially if they are demons of language (and what else could they be?) are fought by language” (*Lovers*, 81). Burroughs perceives the “cut-up” as possessing a similar, occult-like power and thus functions as a literal vaccine for the “word virus”. It is precisely in his own wish to dominate others that Burroughs comes in contact with the “word virus”, a disease that resides in him and spreads through his writing and his speech. For Burroughs language will become, like the “Ugly Spirit”, an enemy within: “Every man has inside himself a parasitic being who is acting not at all to his advantage” (Burroughs qtd. in Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 51).

For Burroughs desire and “Control” are other parasites that possess the individual. In *Queer* it is made obvious how Lee’s desire for power over Allerton disempowers the protagonist. Oliver Harris recognises Burroughs’s insider status within the structures he criticises, stating that “[nothing] could more denude or falsify his writing than to put him outside the very systems against which he is forced to work from their insides” (*Secret*, 148). Burroughs perceives the occult and viral power of language precisely because he is subject to it and because he seeks to wield its magical power. Burroughs’s magical and viral view of language, while originating from the experience of being possessed by a desire to control others, is insightful in terms of language’s ability to alter cognition and, by turns, reality. *The Yage Letters* presents a correlation between the consciousness-altering and reality-augmenting power of “yage” and that of letters which becomes central to Burroughs’s evolution as a writer who is moving beyond drugs.

Burroughs’s observation of the potential for “yage” to “change fact” (*L*, 127) bears close resemblance to Michael Taussig’s writing on *yagé*, where he states that “history is made malleable through Indian magic” (Taussig, 185). When Lee identifies as a “factualist” in *Naked Lunch*, he is referring to the malleable quality of reality and the ability of the viewer, like that of the observer in quantum mechanics, to influence or affect the production of truth (146). Burroughs’s belief in the fluid nature of reality means that there is very

little of his writing that is of an allegorical or metaphorical bent because reality in his fiction instead becomes a metaphor for the determining power of the observer and also for the power of those who control the “reality studio” (*Nova Express*, 14). Burroughs’s personal philosophy of liberation comes to found itself on the author’s sceptical view of “reality” and his desire to alter the facts of his personal history. This is a philosophical and aesthetic perspective that in part results from his childhood trauma and his responsibility for Joan Vollmer’s death. The only way he can deal with or overcome these facts is through separating himself from reality. This too is bound up with his use of heroin as a means of psychological escape. The search for “yage” is a direct attempt to appropriate magical potions in order to break the spell of language, to “stop the chain of discourse” and its correlatives; history, time, truth and reality (Lacan, *Ego*, 89).

It is important to emphasise how literal Burroughs is being in regards to his occult beliefs. Lee’s ugliness in *The Yage Letters* is concomitant with Burroughs’s troubled history, while “yage” represents a wholehearted and perhaps naïve belief in the power of myth and mythic substances to overcome fact and disengage from the ugly past that Lee represents. Just as Ginsberg must let go of his “Normal Consciousness”, Burroughs must abandon the ugly American Lee and make way for “the *nagual*”.

Burroughs borrows the terms tonal and *nagual* from Carlos Castaneda who wrote of the shamanic teachings of Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Mexican spiritual guide. The *nagual* is the unknowable, occult world, while the tonal is the phenomenal world that can be contained in language and is open to instrumental knowledge and reason. The *nagual* “can be witnessed, but it cannot be talked about. The *nagual* is there, surrounding the island of the *tonal*. There, where power hovers” (Castaneda, 72). Burroughs suggests that “‘genius’ is the *nagual*: the uncontrollable - unknown and so unpredictable - spontaneous and alive. You could say the magical” (qtd. in Levi Stevens, 21). For Burroughs “the tonal” – the realm of language and knowledge – is pre-recorded and is directly tied to the realist mode of literature. The “*nagual*” is the means for disrupting this determined realm. As Deleuze and Guattari outline:

The nagual, on the contrary, dismantles the strata... No longer are there acts to explain, dreams or phantasies to interpret, childhood memories to recall, words to make signify; instead, there are colors and sounds, becomings and intensities... (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 162)

The call of “the *nagual*” is the desire for the magical, mythic and mysterious elements that have been all but erased in the modern world. This erasure is another kind of anti-knowledge but one which resides under the name ‘knowledge’. *The Yage Letters*, in its realist but composite form, represents the incorporation of the *nagual* as a process that still retains some elements of “the tonal”. This is necessary as Don Juan warns in *Tales of Power*, “The tonal must be protected at any cost” (Castaneda, 91) for “the *nagual*” is destructive; if you give way to it completely it “turns immediately into a body of nothingness, pure self-destruction whose only outcome is death” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 162).

Burroughs’s “cut-up” works may be regarded as an attempt to completely leave behind the world of the tonal by breaking apart language to reveal and give power to the obscured *nagual*, but this involves bisecting the world, separating tonal from *nagual*, when these realms must exist in correspondence with each other. Burroughs’s early works of illiterature are superior in how they maintain the messy co-dependency of these realms, where the *nagual* can only be glimpsed askance. The *nagual*, or Lacanian Real, cannot be viewed directly or represented in language, rather the *nagual* appears as a rupture in reality, an eruption of the Real. What disrupts “reality” disrupts the forces that created “reality”, thus between these two realms “power hovers,” a power Burroughs is seeking to develop and instil in his writing. This is the post or non-ideological power that illiterature seeks to imbue in the reader. The interstitial realm, between the tonal and the *nagual*, is the realm where new myths and realities are formed.

While *Junky* foregrounds the realist, pared down, anti-theoretical world of addiction, and *Queer*, the danger of giving way to desire, *The Yage Letters* implicitly illustrates the mythic lack at the heart of modernity that makes addiction attractive. The realism of these works suggests a subjective

and cultural limit directly tied to the realist mode where addiction functions as both a symptom and a metaphor. Lee's fascistic, cruel and colonialist outpourings in *The Yage Letters* attempt to reveal what the language of realism hides: that it too is a cruel and fascistic coloniser. Lee's realist language seeks to capture South America just as much as "yage", and this predatory attitude is most evident in his perusal of South America's vice trade: "Ecuador is really on the skids. Let Peru take over and civilize the place so a man can score for the amenities. I never yet lay a boy in Ecuador and you can't buy any form of junk." (38-39). Lee's identity as 'ugly American' in *Queer* and addict in *Junky* are directly tied to the realist mode of those texts. Realism packages and consumes the world in a similar colonial manner to how Lee consumes the bodies and substances of South America.

In *The Yage Letters*, colonialism and realism are connected by the manner in which they strip the world of its chaotic and uncontrollable essence: the *nagual*. At the end of *The Yage Letters* Burroughs decries the ability of "THE WORD" to limit the individual – "WHAT SCARED YOU INTO TIME? INTO BODY? INTO SHIT? I WILL TELL YOU. THE WORD" (YL, 61) – while the "cut-up method" is venerated as an antidote to the destructive and restrictive powers of language. Realism, by proxy, is the literary mode that most firmly establishes language's pre-eminent power to create "reality". Furthermore, as Burroughs's early novels progress, realism is recognised as modernity's mode of organising and seeing the world. Nietzsche recognised a problem with modernity's obsession with realism: "with our current veneration for the natural and the real, we have arrived at the opposite pole to all idealism, and have landed in the region of the waxworks" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 60). Realism, as a form of literature, engenders a mode of perception where, instead of perceiving reality, readers consume simulations of reality – "waxworks" – thereby becoming possessed by the rigid, ideological mode of "reality" fostered by realism. The trajectory of Burroughs's early career shows the author slowly abandoning the junk realism of *Junky* in order to resist the powerful ideological forces that formed his perceptions, consciousness and "reality". Burroughs will later declare, "I am reality and I

am hooked, on, reality”, but his early literature consistently struggles with this addiction (*The Burroughs File*, 62).

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, Burroughs developed his own criticism of “Control” out of his desire for “Control”. Similarly, the author moves on from realism because he recognises how realism creates a specific kind of “reality”; realism is an agent of “Control”. While writing may be a means to “Control”, writing realism is another form of being controlled by the need to “Control” where the author, in his desire for “Control,” becomes a proxy for “THE WORD”. Burroughs’s early novels are thus illustrative of the addictive and controlling nature of realism and “reality,” or what Carlos Castaneda and his mentor Don Juan would call “the tonal”. What Burroughs’s early novels illustrate – from the junk realism of *Junky*, to the desire for a telepathic form of control in *Queer*, to the perception of the chaotic and indescribable realms of “yage” and postcolonial South America in *The Yage Letters* – is a movement away from the everyday, grey tonalities of “reality” towards the magical potential of the unknowable dimension of the *nagual*, where “Nothing is true [and everything] is permitted” (*YL*, 60). As Burroughs’s early works are transitional, they become conduits between the realms of the tonal and *nagual*. Burroughs’s early novels retain a connection between both realms, and this allows him to take on the aura of the artist as seer or shaman. Lee’s failure to transcend addiction, desire and “reality” in *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Yage Letters* respectively are important components that infuse these works with a potentially visionary quality. Burroughs’s early works preserve a connection to the tonal world of realism and thus have the potential to become antidotes to “the very systems against which [Burroughs] is forced to work from their insides” (Harris, *Secret*, 148).

Realism and the Aesthetics of Failure

Lee’s quest in “In Search of Yage” ends in paranoid disappointment – “Suddenly I have to leave right now” (46) – but this failure equates with literary or artistic success in terms of furthering Burroughs’s separation from addiction, literary realism and their proxy, Lee. While Lee’s search for “yage”

is doomed to disappointment and paranoia, Burroughs's letter dated June 21st, 1960 suggests that the author has found in writing something approximate to the spiritual authenticity promised by "yage". Literary realism, addiction, "Control" and its literary representative, Lee, need to fail in order to give way to the occult power of writing to "change fact" and "make things happen".

Burroughs's early works attempt to reveal the impersonal, deterministic forces that create "reality". Similarly, the occult suggests that belief can overpower reality, illustrating the power myth has over matter and consciousness over "reality". In *Naked Lunch*, characters such as "Bradley the Buyer" and "The Vigilante" have their identities usurped by the fictional roles they play, but that novel concludes with reality itself being subsumed by myth: "I had been occluded from space-time... The Heat was off me from here on out... Far side of the world's mirror..." (217). With the intervention of the mythic, addiction and the realist world of *Junky* are "relegated to a landlocked junk past where heroin is always twenty-eight dollars an ounce" (217). Conversely, drugs illustrate how the material substratum can rupture the structures of consciousness and its correlative: subjectivity. The interstitial space between mind and matter is the realm "where power hovers", which Burroughs is attempting to commune with.

In Burroughs's first three novels, Lee is represented by three different modes of realist subjectivity⁶⁶ that are forms of false consciousness, albeit ones which are revelatory of the microfascism that is present in language, desire and everyday life. In *The Yage Letters*, Lee's mode of literary representation has become didactic and its disintegration represents the cultural and spiritual poverty of modernity and its globalised form: imperialism. Lee's addiction is not merely incidental but a symptom of an underlying cultural, aesthetic and spiritual malaise. At the same time, Burroughs in *The Yage Letters* is coming to recognise the holistic nature of his craft; that literary style is fundamental to his identity and how he perceives "reality". Burroughs is moving beyond the realms of the orthodox

⁶⁶ First person realism in *Junky*, third person realism in *Queer* and epistolary realism in *The Yage Letters*.

novel, and this becomes a source of anxiety: “I tell you the novel form is completely inadequate to express what I have to say. I don’t know if I can find a form. I am very gloomy as to prospects of publication”⁶⁷ (*L*, 227). Yet this misery is a necessary stage in leaving behind forms of literary representation that have become “completely inadequate”. The naturalism of his earlier works only hints towards the mythic structure obscured by realism. In *The Yage Letters* it becomes apparent by the end of the novella that Burroughs’s writing will no longer seek to describe “reality” but to challenge the literary structures that maintain it.

It is evident throughout Burroughs’s works that modern, western culture is sick: “sick unto death”⁶⁸ (*L*, 255). Against Timothy S. Murphy, who claims that Burroughs’s literary project rejects the centrality of myth (*Wising*, 2), I can affirm that Burroughs consistently engages with various forms of mythology, such as those of ancient Egypt, shamanic tradition, scientology and the Mayans (*The Job*, 103, 190). What Burroughs rejects are the myths that underlie Western culture and its version of “reality”. Burroughs’s continued interest in the occult and the religious practices of non-western cultures suggests a modernist desire to return to the world of myth. Much like his fellow St. Louisian T.S. Eliot, Burroughs craves myth as a remedy for the modern, western cultural condition. Eliot explains that, “myth.... is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Instead of narrative method we must use the mythical method” (qtd. in Murphy, 17). Yuval Noah Harari claims that myth making is at the very core of what makes us human: “You could never convince a monkey to give you a banana by promising him limitless bananas after death in monkey heaven” (*Sapiens*, 19-20). At the same time myths are the primary means of interpellation and one of their main functions is to situate the subject of ideology within their specific symbolic realm. Myth underlies the structure of knowledge, telling the subject: “Look, you can see for yourself how things are!”. ‘Let the facts speak for themselves’ is perhaps the arch-statement of

⁶⁷ Letter to Jack Kerouac dated August 18th, 1954.

⁶⁸ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated January 12th, 1955.

ideology – the point being, precisely, that facts *never* ‘speak for themselves’ but are always *made to speak* by a network of discursive devices” (Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, 35). It is from language “that Truth receives the mark that establishes it in a fictional structure” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 233). Ideology consists in denying its discursive basis and the blind faith that underlies it.

Realism similarly heralds a historical subject of ideology: “Classic realism tends to offer as the ‘obvious’ basis of its intelligibility the assumption that character, unified and coherent, is the source of action. Subjectivity is a major – perhaps the major – theme of classic realism” (Belsey, 73). As such, literary realism interpellates a “unified and coherent” subject who corresponds with a consistent, self-evident social reality. The structure of realist texts is not generally regarded as mythic, but combining the views of Harari and Žižek we can regard the subject of realism as an ideological fiction: the subject of a thoroughgoing modern mythology.

For Burroughs “yage” becomes a means to escape the restrictive worlds of realism and ideology and its corresponding form of subjectivity: “Yes Yage is the final kick and you are not the same after you have taken it. I mean literally”⁶⁹ (*L*, 184). With *The Yage Letters* Burroughs’s fiction becomes an attempt to break out of the confines of an interpellated subjectivity formed out of a modern, western mythology which founds its “reality” on appeals to “knowledge” and “truth”. The modern world’s claim to have superseded myth is modern culture’s mythic core, where modern life appears stripped of all the mythic comfort Eliot describes. Meanwhile myth continues its ideological work in modernity unabated. Capitalism functions to provide the psycho-spiritual comfort that is not directly forthcoming in a modern, secular society. The modern subject’s image of *logos* is capitalism’s totality. In this respect, modern citizens are not just capitalist subjects but capitalist souls. The mythic longing implied in *The Yage Letters* is not the desire for the mythology of the Other – Lee explicitly rejects the spiritual wisdom of the *brujos* – but a yearning for modernity to recognise its mythic foundations.

⁶⁹ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 10th, 1953.

Nietzsche asks “What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 62). *The Yage Letters* details this mythic lack but also the desire for the recognition of the genetic centrality of myth in western culture. While Burroughs’s interest in non-western belief systems suggests otherwise, what Lee’s need to “leave right now” at the end of *The Yage Letters* implies is that a transcultural mythic return is impossible. Rather western culture must remedy its mythic lack through reimagining its own cultural forms. Much as drugs function for Benjamin as a means for recognising the intoxicated basis of modern, western culture⁷⁰, an engagement with the myths of the Other should enable subjects of modernity to recognise the mythic substratum on which the rational, western worldview stands. The structures of myth reveal the contours of knowledge and power that define a particular culture. In capitalist societies, “[knowledge] is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production...” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 25). Burroughs has faith in the power of myth to subvert and reconstitute power/knowledge but it must be stressed that this confidence is based upon a genuine belief in the occult power of writing and its ability to augment reality.

If western society and its power structures are sick, in *The Yage Letters* the cure is to be found in the “cut-up method” as it stands against western realism and its quintessential view of language and the world. However, Burroughs’s view of the “cut-up”, detailed near the end of *The Yage Letters*, takes on a metaphysical power that can be regarded as another form of “Control” or addiction. While expounding the paradigm shifting power of the “cut-up” in the letter dated June 21st, 1960, Burroughs’s attitude is cruel and messianic (60-62). Unfortunately, the “cut-up”, like “yage”, will not be the

⁷⁰ “In the world’s structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication” (*One Way Street*, 226).

final fix but will represent a blind alley in Burroughs's career, one which he will come to lament (Acker, "Interviews William S. Burroughs"). Burroughs's fanatical belief in the "cut-up" is evidence of an addicted mind-set, but also an attempt to move beyond drugs and addiction. Burroughs suggests that "consciousness is a cut-up" (*The Adding Machine*, 61) and similarly believes that literature can become "a nonchemical method of expanding consciousness and increasing awareness" ("Sedative and Consciousness Expanding Drugs", 444). In this regard, *The Yage Letters* demonstrates that doing drugs or performing traditional Amerindian rituals will not solve the problems of addiction and modernity. Rather *yagé* forced Burroughs to aestheticize his hallucinogenic experience. If Burroughs is successful and the drug experience is achieved through language, "reality" reveals its basis in consciousness, while the drug experience reveals that consciousness is formed out of material reality. This is precisely the occult crossroads that Burroughs is attempting to find, between mind and matter, "where power hovers". *Yagé* allowed Burroughs to catch sight of this interstitial realm:

I glimpsed a new state of being. I must give up the attempts to explain, to seek any answer in terms of cause and effect and prediction, leave behind the entire structure of pragmatic, result seeking, use seeking, question asking Western thought. I must change my whole method of conceiving fact. ("Yage Article", *The Yage Letters Redux*, 95-96)

This "new state of being" triggered the stylistic innovations evident in *Naked Lunch* and the "cut-up" novels, but the "cut-up" strayed into a fantasy of communicating the purely *nagual*. By preserving the connections between mind and matter as well as the tonal and the *nagual*, "yage" in Burroughs's early novels represents the possibility of new ways of "conceiving fact" rather than fleeing it entirely. "Yage" is thus not a means to escape reality, like heroin addiction, but a way to reimagine it. Towards this end, *The Yage Letters* reveals the primary importance of writing as Burroughs's tool for reimagining reality.

“A New State of Being”

While “yage” is a ubiquitous subject in Burroughs’s early novels, Lee anticipated different functions for the mythical substance throughout these texts. In *Junky*, he foresaw “yage” as the “final fix” or cure for his heroin addiction, whereas in *Queer* he imagines its potential for mind control and telepathy, particularly in regards to his young paramour, Eugene Allerton. *The Yage Letters* sees Lee in a more exploratory and ambiguous mode in regards to his conception of “yage”. It seems that the product of “yage” here is primarily *The Yage Letters*, as any foreseen personal or spiritual development on Lee’s part is not clearly evident. This is important as it indicates that the writer no longer views “yage” as a means towards transcendence or “the final fix”, but rather as a creative tool or a means to create literature. In Burroughs’s career this new “method of conceiving fact” involves a whole other type of writing that evolved out of Burroughs’s *yagé* experience, helping him to form the embryonic seed of *Naked Lunch*.

The Yage Letters attempts to forge a new type of narrative or what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a new chronotope. For Bakhtin, the narrative and its subject matter are primarily structured by a text’s “spatial-temporal” relationship (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 94). The mosaic-like structure of *Naked Lunch* and the aleatory approach of the “cut-up method” lend themselves to creating new “spatial-temporal” relationships through textual re-arrangement, and this seems to have been inspired in no small part by Burroughs’s “yage” experience. Burroughs states that “yage is space time travel” (*Yage Redux*, 50): “This in turn became Burroughs’ definition of *writing* and the rest of his *oeuvre* is governed by this understanding” (Harris, “Introduction”, *Yage Redux*, xxiv). *The Yage Letters* is illustrative of this progression, not just in regards to its content but also in its formal and stylistic developments. The novella appears to terminate at the grand literary development of the “cut-up”, but it is the overall structure of the text, which pulls styles from across Burroughs’s career, that consistently represents the ability of writing to transcend “space time” throughout the novella. Furthermore, *The Yage Letters*’ “cut-up” text “I AM DYING MEEESTER?” succeeds precisely because of its semantic relationship with the text that

precedes it. The resonances of “I AM DYING MEESTER?” are shaped by the entire novella and therefore demand that the reader defy the spatiotemporal orthodoxy of the epistolary form and return to different sections of the text in an unpredictable, non-linear manner that is an approximation of reading as misreading. The “cut-up” in this context is a textual representation of *yagé*'s ability to defy the structure of “space time” fundamental to realism and “reality”.

Burroughs's *yagé* episode involved a recalibration of the relationship between language and the experience of space and time which helped him form a new chronotope. Mikhail Bakhtin defines a chronotope as such:

In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from the emotions and values that attach to them. But living artistic perception (which also of course involves thought, but not abstract thought) makes no such divisions... Art and literature are shot through with chronotopic values of various degree and scope. (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 243)

Deleuze glosses the same idea: “The spatial/temporal frame of a narrative plays a key role in the production of meaning, as the matrix of situated meaning-making, roles, identities, values, boundaries and crossings, cultural classes of discourse and tools” (“Cinema and Thought”). Henri Lefebvre also describes this phenomenon:

In nature, time is apprehended within space – the hour of the day, the season, the elevation of the sun above the horizon, the position of the moon and the stars ... the cold and heat, the age of each natural being and so on...natural space was merely the lyrical and tragic script of natural time. Time was thus inscribed in space. (qtd. in Ming, 126)

“Yage” allowed Burroughs to see that time is produced out of material relations. Time, in effect, results from particular modes of perception, hence psychoactive substances have the ability to augment a user’s perception of time. This new insight on the relationship between time and space will prompt Burroughs to cryptically write, “COME OUT OF THE TIME WORD THE FOREVER... ALL OUT OF TIME AND INTO SPACE” (YL, 61). While Burroughs here is discussing his later “cut-up method”, the ability of reimagined spatial or formal relationships to transcend or break “OUT OF TIME” was first realised in a published form with *Naked Lunch*, a text that lacks anything approaching temporal unity.

The description of “yage” intoxication, in “The Market” section of *Naked Lunch*, was seminal in terms of Burroughs’s new literary method. It is *yagé’s* ability to reorganise cognition and thereby to completely alter Burroughs’s perception of time that inaugurated this new, non-realist approach to literary production. It seems as if *yagé* allowed Burroughs to step outside of *chronos* and into “*kairos*, or ‘occasion’... [*Kairos* is] the ascendancy of vertical over horizontal temporality. It is as if time were liquid rather than solid, forming itself around the interaction between mind and objects rather than enforcing or scheduling the form of that relationship” (Lenson, 148). In artistic terms *yagé* allowed Burroughs to transcend the realm of time bound realism and form a new kind of text, what would become *Naked Lunch*. “All the novel’s abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 250). The experience of *yagé* allowed Burroughs to create a new chronotope, and out of this new “philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect... take on flesh and blood”. In reshaping the relationship between time and space, *yagé* reset Burroughs’s addicted view of drugs and the world, helping him regain a more playful view of intoxication:

what began as a *kairos*—a special occasion or privileged moment—through repetition assumes the role of *chronos* or horizontal time. What characterizes the

condition of addiction is above all else the atomization of time, the replacement of conventionally measured seconds, minutes, hours, and days with a different chronometry based on the tempo of administration. As a result, the drug's reordering of consciousness loses, over time, the elements of play and pleasure. It becomes as compulsory as a clock. (Lenson, 35)

However, *yagé* not only helped Burroughs to re-identify *kairos* and overcome the clockwork of addiction, but also to divorce himself from drugs as such. Conversely, *The Yage Letters* attempts to reveal not only why Burroughs profoundly changed his literary style, but also how he evolved beyond realism to create another kind of text, more analogous to the hallucinogenic experience, but less concerned with drugs as such. *The Yage Letters* details the author's segue away from writing directly about his experiences of drugs and addiction, towards creating a drug-text in order to move beyond drug use:

The use of consciousness-expanding drugs could show the way to obtain the useful aspects of hallucinogenic experience, without any chemical agent. Anything that can be done chemically can be done in other ways, with sufficient knowledge of the mechanisms involved. (Burroughs, *The Job*, 131)

As Burroughs reports, “[*yagé*] is not a transportable kick”⁷¹ (*L*, 180), but writing allows intoxication to take another form that is not only transportable but transmittable. *Yagé* offered Burroughs an introductory lesson on the power of consciousness to transcend “reality” and also helped him develop a literary form beyond realism. With *yagé* “the very grounds of representation itself are raked over” by the “nonhomogeneous, fragmentedness of the montage” so that it “breaks up any attempt at narrative ordering” (Taussig, 441). Oliver Harris relates the effect of the drug to the overall structure of *The Yage Letters*: “If the sensual derangement of

⁷¹ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 8th, 1953.

the *yagé* experience could not be described in words, it is here rendered verbally, not in terms of image content but through structural rearrangement and formal recombination" (*Secret*, 171). The texts that Burroughs conceives of after *The Yage Letters* attempt to directly achieve intoxication through literature. Robert Palmer comments that, "[Burroughs is] trying to reproduce in the reader's mind a certain experience, and if he were completely successful in that, the reproduction of the experience would be complete. Perhaps fortunately, they're not that successful" (Palmer, 49). Indeed, if Burroughs was successful, his "weakened virus" (*Q*, 128) might become an unstoppable epidemic. Fortunately all literature is obscured by the inevitability of misreading. Misreading functions as a form of immunity for the subject in a world encompassed by language.

Roland Barthes states that, "[if] we call freedom not only the capacity to escape power but also and especially the capacity to subjugate no one, then freedom can exist only outside language. Unfortunately, human language has no exterior: there is no exit" (*Reader*, 460). However, reading is a mode of cognition prone to failure. As Lacan suggests, "[reading] in no way obliges us to understand" (*On Feminine Sexuality*, 65). In *The Yage Letters* and the novels that follow it, Burroughs is attempting to cultivate a space for the "freedom [that] can exist outside language," but it is one that exists only in correspondence with language. By installing contradictory, ambiguous and antagonistic elements in his novels, Burroughs foregrounds the inevitability of misreading as the opportunity for freedom, where one's experience of a text becomes an opportunity to apprehend and alter the chronotopic frame from which one's conception of "reality" is derived. By observing the ability of language to reorganise and transcend temporospatial relationships, the reader may gain the ability to "Storm The Reality Studio" (*Nova Express*, 156). While Burroughs will, at the end of *The Yage Letters* and throughout his "cut-up" works, decry "THE WORD", literature remains his primary means to create an alternative, mythic "reality". This contradiction reflects the problem with the aesthetic and ethical structure that accompanies the "cut-up" texts: the opposition between the "cut-up method" and the "word virus". As its name implies, the "cut-up" divides the world into binary oppositions,

ones which are explicitly more entangled with each other in Burroughs's earlier works. The opposition between Burroughs's new literary imagination, derived from his experience of "yage", and that of "realism" will become the source of much of Burroughs's trouble with composing and organising *Naked Lunch*. In order for its critical work to continue, the dialectic between realism and its mythic Other cannot be transcended, and this is another reason why Burroughs's early works, which maintain a link with the world of realism, are more successful than the "cut-up" texts.

While Burroughs's "cut-up" novels attempt to sever their relationship with "reality", Burroughs's writing on the "cut-up" offers new ways of conceiving of the relationship between perception and "reality". Raw perception is analogous to the experience of hallucinogenic intoxication but it is counteracted by the sobering effects of cognitive structures, and this is evidenced in Burroughs's description of the "cut-up method":

That would be actually closer to the facts of perception than would, say, a sequential narrative. For example, you walk down the street. You see it and you put it on canvas. That's what they did first. But that's not how you really see it or remember it. It's more jumbled. There are the street signs and the vendors and the houses and people walking. You don't see them like a photograph. You look at diverse images. Painting it that way is montage. I merely applied it to writing. So there's nothing very new there. (qtd. in Kramer, 96)

Using the "cut-up method", Burroughs is attempting to present the experience of raw perception outside of the cognitive ordering of experience. A child must learn to see reality and become an adult by filtering out the Real or that which cannot be explained by language, i.e. that which has no utilitarian function in the child's society and culture. For Aldous Huxley powerful intoxicants like mescaline offer us the chance to experience, "something more than, and above all something different from, the carefully selected utilitarian material which our narrowed, individual minds regard as a complete, or at least sufficient, picture of reality" (*The Doors of Perception*,

27). This “sufficient... picture of reality” is itself a kind of addiction which narrows down the potential of the individual and their experience of reality. Specific modes of cognition, which are derived from modes of knowledge/power, become misrecognised as “my self”. Stepping beyond addiction and “reality” must also entail stepping away from what Walter Benjamin calls “that most terrible drug ‘ourselves’” (Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 237).

Beyond Drugs

While heroin may offer temporary relief from pain and addiction presents insights into the modern cultural condition, opiates also rigidly fix the subject within the modern, addicted economy. Hallucinogens like *yagé* do not anaesthetize and tranquilize the individual like heroin, but rather they remove cognitive filters and reveal something of the mythic and noumenal that is glossed over by modern modes of cognition such as capitalist-realism. Mark Fisher writes that, “what counts as ‘realistic’, what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations” (*Capitalist Realism*, 16). The prohibition of drugs attempts to narrow the range of consciousness of the general population and thus interferes with potential becomings: Deleuze and Guattari state that it is their “belief that the issue of drugs can be understood only at the level where desire directly invests perception, and perception becomes molecular at the same time as the imperceptible is perceived. Drugs then appear as the agent of this becoming” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 283). Lee is attempting to avail of “yage” as an agent of becoming but it is clear that his perception remains entirely limited. Lee is too much a product of historical determinants to gain full advantage from the drug. What Burroughs says to Ginsberg could also be directed towards Lee, “I tried more than once to tell you, to communicate what I know. You did not or could not listen. You can not show to anyone what he has not seen” (*YL*, 60). In the first edition of *The Yage Letters* it is structurally important that the most profound description of “yage” intoxication, which is included in “The Market” of *Naked Lunch*, is omitted. Because Lee remains thoroughly a subject of realism, he is occluded from the

“yage” experience. Further to this, Burroughs explicitly individuates himself from Lee in his letter of June 21st, 1960 by signing off as “William Burroughs” (YL, 62). While Lee is an initiate of “yage,” he cannot assimilate the experience because he only exists at this point as a subject of realism. The new chronotopic form of *Naked Lunch* allows Burroughs to integrate his experience of *yagé* intoxication into a new aesthetic mode and step outside the bounds of “reality” without the use of drugs. However, the relationship between “reality” and its intoxicated foundation must not be severed or transcended as this is the source of Burroughs’s critical power. Lee persists throughout *Naked Lunch* as a means to tether that text to “reality”, while further expanding its exploration of a realm beyond realism.

Benjamin writes, “It is a cardinal error to believe that, of ‘surrealist experiences’, we know only the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs... the true creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in the profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which, hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (*One Way Street*, 227). For Benjamin what drugs teach us is how to step outside the narcotising realm of modernity and see how it functions at a “materialistic, anthropological” level . Drug use, in its ideal form, should involve an engagement with, rather than an escape from modern reality. Burroughs’s contribution to *The Yage Letters*, which, in its original published form, contained little by way of description of Lee’s drug experiences, instead foregrounds the intoxicated and impenetrable aspects of his experience of everyday Latin American life. Lee’s unvarnished observations of his time in Latin America lack deep insight; instead the reader is left to draw their own conclusions from his raw, disjointed descriptions. As such, Lee’s letters foreground Burroughs’s “materialist, anthropological inspiration”. In *The Yage Letters* Burroughs comes to recognise the disordered and intoxicated nature of realism and “reality,” an insight for which drugs gave him “an introductory lesson”. What becomes evident in Burroughs’s work is that drugs and addiction are not revolutionary in and of themselves, despite popular perceptions of Burroughs as a drugs

advocate. *The Yage Letters* seems to resonate with Walter Benjamin's sentiments:

[It] is not enough that, as we know, an ecstatic component lives in every revolutionary act. This component is identical with the anarchic. But to place the accent exclusively on it would subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance." (*One Way Street*, 236)

Jennie Skerl, writing of "In Search of Yage", states that "[the] same unending quest is followed with yage as the impetus rather than morphine; the same organic pattern of yearning, frustration, and flight is presented" (*Burroughs*, 31). In his obsessive pursuit of "yage", Lee seems to be engaging in "fitness exercises" while his wish at the end of *Junky* – that "Yage may be the final fix" (*J*, 128) – appears to be "celebration in advance". Lee's obsessive-compulsive fervour, his contradictory opinions and persona and his consistent dislocation and dissatisfaction stand out in Burroughs's early novels and these features mark him as a subject of illiterature. Lee, as a drug-addled, near psychotic character, is not an inherently subversive character; rather Lee is a thoroughgoing modern, realist subject who is enchained to the system he must oppose from the insides. Lee's character is sick, but his illness is aestheticized in Burroughs's writing, suggesting the possibility of redemption for the critically-minded reader. As such, Lee's drug use is not a marker of his liberation but the very opposite.

Taking drugs in the context of political oppression is not only a fruitless venture but, to paraphrase Benjamin, steals the power of intoxication from the revolution (*One Way Street*, 236). Similarly, *Naked Lunch* reveals drug-addled modernity to be more of an "anarchic", dystopian nightmare than an ideal cultural condition. It is a central task of Burroughs's fiction to not just describe drugs and addiction, but to attempt to understand the complex, colourful and contradictory effects that drugs have on the individual and modern culture. Henri Michaux writes that "[those] who have taken a powder with quasi-magical effects and consider themselves quite

unfettered, entirely liberated, and out of this world perhaps, are still running on tracks" (*The Major Ordeals*, 105). Burroughs's transcendent experience of "the composite city" – described in the letter of July 10th 1953 (*Yage Redux*, 50-53) – has as much to do with his immersion in the cultural reality of South America and his recognition of the intoxicated limits of Western thought as it does with his direct experience of "yage" intoxication. The call for revolution in that text – "What we need is a new Bolivar who will really get the job done" (*YL*, 40) – is an articulation of a genuinely progressive desire, and Burroughs's most profound "yage" vision is an artistic rendering of that self-same desire:

The blood and substance of many races...Migrations,
incredible journeys... The Composite City where all
human potentials are spread out in a vast, silent market.
(*Yage Redux*, 50)

However, there is a danger that the hallucinations of the *yagé* state become pale substitutes for genuine emancipation. Drugs, in all their forms, are so often a worthless distraction while capitalist-realism continues its work unabated.

From Benjamin's perspective, Lee's frank realism and flâneur like approach to his search for "yage", which rarely involves descriptions of hallucinogenic intoxication, may offer us more than the merely subjective descriptions of "yage" provided by Allen Ginsberg. Benjamin writes:

Histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of
the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the
mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the
everyday world and by virtue of a dialectical optic that
perceives the everyday as impenetrable and the
impenetrable as everyday. (*One Way Street*, 236)

While Lee's letters seem to offer a superficial appraisal of the cultural reality of South America in general and of the Putamayo in particular, his observations offer a certain amount of historical insight. While Lee is frequently cruel, crude and violent, he draws a connection between the

“impenetrable” everyday and his fascistic mode of speech and writing. Allen Ginsberg’s more culturally appreciative and esoterically charged letters, on the other hand, offer the reader much less in comparison⁷². Ginsberg’s paranoia – “this almost schizophrenic alteration of consciousness is fearful” – is largely based on his desire to return to “normal consciousness” (YL, 56). Burroughs implores him to recognise that, “Your AYUASKA consciousness is more valid than ‘Normal Consciousness’” and embrace the altered state as a means to break free of the process whereby language ensnares us in the modern, realist world (YL, 61). This demand is perhaps unreasonable, and no doubt callous, but it portrays Burroughs’s recognition of the intoxicated basis of “the everyday”, something Ginsberg seems incapable of, as his letter focuses almost exclusively on “the mysterious side of the mysterious”. Burroughs’s illiterature evolves to become a critique of “the everyday” that highlights its “impenetrable” and mysterious aspects.

For Burroughs, Ginsberg’s resistance to “yage” consciousness resides in ideology. Jason Morelyle suggests that “‘realities’ alternative to those imposed by control... can be generated by alternative subjectivities” (“Speculating Freedom”, 75). As pointed out earlier, *The Yage Letters* draws implicit connections between addiction, realism and western culture. Avital Ronell explains that addiction as a “structure... is philosophically and metaphysically at the basis of our culture” (*Crack Wars*, 13). Addiction has everything to do with a style of cognition that ignores mythic and depersonalising realities, only recognizing the superficial “reality” of *chronos*, common sense and subjective truth. “Addiction”, Avital Ronell claims, “has everything to do with the bad conscience of our era” (3). This bad conscience is founded upon an interpellated mode of reading, seeing and describing the world. Modernity as such is a form of captivity. Nietzsche declares that,

⁷² The following is a sample from Ginsberg’s first letter – dated June 10th, 1960 – from *The Yage Letters*: “Drank a cup - slightly old stuff, several days old and slightly fermented also - lay back and after an hour (in bamboo hut outside his shack, where he cooks) – began seeing or feeling what I thought was the Great Being, or some sense of It, approaching my mind like a big wet vagina – lay back in that for a while – only image I can come up with is of a big black hole of God-Nose thru which I peered into a mystery – and the black hole surrounded by all creation – particularly colored snakes – all real” (YL, 45).

“[men] need play and danger. Civilization gives them work and safety” (qtd. in Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 182). Drugs promise “play and danger,” but addiction turns them into another form of “work and safety”, that is another reflection of “Civilization”. However, Burroughs’s early works, as they progress, reveal the intoxicated basis of the modern world and the corresponding cognitive and linguistic structures that maintain this collective hallucination.

The Death of God and the God of Death

Burroughs’s letter dated June 21st, 1960 affirms both a belief in the power of myth and an absolute faith in the radical capabilities of the “cut-up”. These twin philosophies combine in Hassan I Sabbah’s words: “Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.” (*YL*, 60). This quote – mentioned frequently throughout Burroughs’s middle and late career novels – appears similar to Ivan Karamazov’s sentiments in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* where it is suggested that if God is dead, everything is permitted (135). However, as we can see from the letter dated June 21st, 1960, which also suggests a belief in telepathy and has a certain mystical and somewhat messianic tenor, Burroughs lacks the spiritual scepticism of Ivan Karamazov; indeed, Hassan I Sabbah’s formula seems to be the very opposite of Ivan Karamazov’s. The religious import of Hassan I Sabbah is obvious in this section of Burroughs’s letter:

“AMIGOS MUCHACHOS A TRAVES DE TODOS SUS
CIELOS VEA LA ESCRITURA SILENCIOSA DE BRION
GYSIN HASSAN SABBAAH. LA ESCRITURA DE SILEN-CIO
LA ESCRITURA DE ESPACIO. ESO ES TODO TODO TODO
HASSAN SABBAAH VEA VEA VEA”⁷³. (*YL*, 62)

Rather than being the starting point for existentialism as the death of God is for Jean Paul Sartre⁷⁴, the death of truth and reality for Burroughs represents

⁷³ FRIENDS BOYS THROUGH ALL THE HEAVENS SEE THE SILENT SCRIPTURE OF BRION GYSIN HASSAN SABBAAH. THE SCRIPTURE OF SILENCE THE SCRIPTURE OF SPACE. THAT IS ALL EVERYTHING ALL HASSAN SABBAAH. SEE SEE SEE (My translation).

⁷⁴ The existentialist...finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no

the starting point of a direct engagement with the mythic and a movement away from the kind of phenomenological engagement with “reality” presented in *Junky, Queer* and “In Search of Yage”. Contradicting Ivan Karamazov, Lacan states that, “if God does not exist, then nothing at all is permitted” (qtd. in Žižek, *Lacan*, 91). “The true formula of atheism is not God is dead – even by basing the origin of the function of the father upon his murder, Freud protects the father – the true formula of atheism is God is unconscious” (Žižek, *Lacan*, 91). With his belief in the “Ugly Spirit”, his valorisation of the “cut-up method” and his suggestion that “Your AYUASKA consciousness is more valid than ‘Normal Consciousness’”, Burroughs seems to be somewhat aware of the unconsciousness’s godlike power. Where Lacan and Burroughs differ is in regards to Burroughs’s belief that the “cut-up method” allows him to break free of the chain of signification that provides the unconscious with its supernatural power, thereby escaping the clutches of the “word virus” or “Ugly Spirit” and achieving an authentic agency. While Albert Camus writes, “If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance” (*The Rebel*, 7), Burroughs’s view is completely opposite. Atheism, nihilism and the aleatory power of the “cut-up method” allow for the possibility of mythic belief becoming a radical form of self-creation which in turn involves forging new realities. However, “reality” remains as an important component in *The Yage Letters* despite the presence of the “cut-up method”. The “cut-up” text “I AM DYING MEESTER?” fuses new

longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote “if God did not exist, everything would be permitted”; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism — man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. — We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does (Sartre, “Existentialism is Humanism”).

semantic assemblages making reference to both the previous content of *The Yage Letters*, the history of Latin America and other, intertextual sources. This particular “cut-up” functions in the context of the novel, not as a way to completely break from reality, but to reveal its grammatical structure.

Conclusion: “I AM DYING MEESTER?”

For Burroughs, the “cut-up” was a textual simulation of intoxication, and in the final section of *The Yage Letters* – “I AM DYING MEESTER?” – the author relates the “yage” experience and his travels in South America by applying the “cut-up method” to the text of *The Yage Letters*. Both the “cut-up method” and “yage” involve dismantling normative modes of cognition, thus opening up the possibility of augmenting subjectivity and its correlative: “reality”.

Experienced by many users of powerful hallucinogens, “ego death” describes the process of depersonalisation that occurs when consciousness can no longer maintain normal “subjective self-identity” (Johnson et al, “Human Hallucinogen Research”, 613). In ego death, relations of time-space, mind-matter and self and Other become augmented or break down completely. Lee, describing a “yage” experience, complains that, “‘All I want is out of here.’ An uncontrollable mechanical silliness took possession of me. Hebrephrenic meaningless repetitions. Larval beings passed before my eyes in a blue haze, each one giving an obscene, mocking squawk” (YL, 29-30). This desire to be out of here is ambiguous: does Lee want to escape “yage” intoxication, South America or his own addicted subjectivity? “Yage” seems to create a war in Lee’s psyche, between the becoming of intoxication and the consistency of his ego. As Oliver Harris observes, “[the] identity that desires, desires exit from itself, from its location in time and the body. But what happens is that Lee’s very repetition of the words brings about exhaustion of the verbal and brings on visions of life-forms in the early stages of metamorphosis” (*Secret*, 167). Lee’s feelings of pain and ambiguity on taking “yage” suggest that his being is a product of power that is undone by the conscious altering effects of the drug. Profound hallucinogenic intoxication will often involve a splitting of the subject between the ego’s addiction to its “reality” and the intoxicated impulse to move beyond it.

The phrase “All I want is out of here” is repeated again in the final section of the novel, in the “cut-up” piece entitled “I AM DYING, MEEESTER?”⁷⁵. The title of this section plays on the confusing and painful experience of ego death in hallucinogenic depersonalisation and is a reference to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*⁷⁶ and T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”. *Heart of Darkness* bears a close relationship with *The Yage Letters* where Ginsberg can be considered Marlow to Lee’s Kurtz. The terror of “yage” is a synecdoche of the horror of colonialism and also the death of the western, rational colonial spirit. Lee and the realist mode die in “yage”, and Burroughs and the “cut-up” mark a resurrection in *The Yage Letters*. This “cut-up” text corresponds with T.S. Eliot’s poetry in multiple ways. Burroughs called “*The Waste Land*... the first great cut-up collage” (qtd. in Ambrose, 310). *The Waste Land* was one of the first pieces of literature that Burroughs cut up and there are traces of it in “I AM DYING MEEESTER”. Both *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men” sketch the descent of modern man into the pit of uncertainty that followed the First World War. “I AM DYING MEEESTER” is a postcolonial “cut-up” that relates the pain and confusion of “yage” intoxication to the United States’ neo-imperial influence⁷⁷ in South America:

The brujo began crooning a special case – It was like
going under ether into the eyes of a shrunken head –
Numb, covered with layers of cotton – Don’t know if you
got my hints trying to break out of this numb dizziness
with Chinese characters – All I want is out of here –
Hurry up mad – Scenic railways – I am dying cross wine

⁷⁵ While it is argued here that “dying” refers to ego-death, Barry Miles points out that Burroughs very nearly died when he first took “yage”: “It turned out that the *brujo* had given a similar dose to a man just a month before; the man ran into the jungle and they found him in convulsions. He died. The *brujo* had given Bill an overdose that, had he not puked it up within twenty seconds, could well have been fatal” (622-623).

⁷⁶ “Mistah Kurtz-he dead” (Conrad, 187). This is quote also forms part of the epigraph to Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”.

⁷⁷ While the United States is explicitly an anti-imperial nation, it has frequently used economic, cultural and military means to exercise control over postcolonial nations, especially those of Latin America. Lee in *The Yage Letters* is an apt representative for America’s confused colonial status where he both admires South America’s postcolonial status while using his privilege as a wealthy American to exploit the bodies and raw materials of South Americans.

dizziness lease – Took possession of me – How many plots have a botanical expedition like this before they could take I was saying over and over ‘shifted commissions where the awning flaps’ Flashes in front of my eyes your voice and end of the line. (YL, 67-68)

The “scenic railways” and “shifted commissions where the awning flaps” connect the tourist trade and “yage” intoxication with the business of empire building. The mention of “a botanical expedition” reminds the reader that Lee is committing biopiracy – the act of appropriating the botanical knowledge and resources of other cultures for personal gain – by co-opting the sacred “yage” preparation of the *brujos* (Weidner, 116). Greg Mullins writes of how “Burroughs parodically staged himself in the role of the European explorer/scientist, a kind of modern von Humboldt, wearing a pith helmet and collecting samples for laboratory analysis” (*Colonial Affairs*, 67). Burroughs as such adopts a position akin to what Mary Louise Pratt calls “the herborizer”:

In the second half of the eighteenth century, whether or not an expedition was primarily scientific, or the traveler a scientist, natural history played a part in it ... Alongside the frontier figures of the seafarer, the conqueror, the captive, the diplomat, there began to appear everywhere the benign, decidedly literate figure of the ‘herborizer’ ... desiring nothing more than a few hours alone with the bugs and flowers. Travel narratives of all kinds began to develop leisurely pauses filled with gentlemanly ‘naturalizing’.
(*Imperial Eyes*, 26)

However, Lee, if anything, is an affront to this history of gentlemanly “naturalising”, suggesting that, at its heart, the civilised pursuit of knowledge is just the pursuit of another kick and another cog in the machine of “Control”. “It becomes clear that Lee's quest for yagé is merely the latest in a long tradition of U.S. scientific expeditions in Latin America, most of them having to do with the mining of natural resources for profit” (Keomany, 4). *The Yage Letters*, by exposing the secrets of *brujos*, not only describes biopiracy but is,

as a piece of writing, an act of biopiracy that makes the reader complicit. In this sense *The Yage Letters* is a text that forces the reader to adopt not only colonial modes of cognition but neo-colonial modes of being. "I AM DYING MEESTER" does not break apart or cut-up these colonial modes of cognition but emphasises the cultural and intertextual relationship that exists between Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *The Yage Letters*. The modernist mode of Conrad's text is radically "cut-up" and chemically deranged in *The Yage Letters*, but the cultural difference, between European imperialism and American neo-imperialism, is purely a matter of style, while the exploitative and controlling impetus behind each remains markedly similar. Lee's choice to identify with the excesses of imperialism rather than explicitly condemn them is critically important, drawing parallels between his actions and those of neo-imperial corporations such as the Texas Oil Company and United Fruit. On the other hand, Lee at times is highly critical of America's colonial presence throughout the South American continent. He recalls meeting some American expatriates who tell him:

'They hate the sight of a foreigner down here. You know why? It's all this Point four and good nabor crap and financial aid. If you give these people anything they think "oh so he needs me". And the more you give the bastards the nastier they get.'

I heard this line from old timers all over S.A. It does not occur to them that something more basic is involved here than the activities of Point four. Like the U.S. Peeler fans say, 'The trouble is Unions.' They would still say it spitting blood from radiation sickness. Or in process of turning into crustaceans. (YL, 15)

"Point four" refers to what was occurring "[in] the early 1950s [when] the American empire was massively expanding and interfering in Latin America through companies like United Fruit and under the guise of assistance programmes" (Harris, "Introduction", *Yage Redux*, xxvi). As Edward Said states, "Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate

and liberate,” and America both adopts this ideological, neo-imperial, position, as well as practicing neo-colonialism – as described by Burroughs above – to further its economic and cultural power (Said, “Blind Imperial Arrogance”). Lee’s complaint against his countrymen’s neo-colonial myopia is, for him, a rare moment of anticolonial sentiment, but there are other instances where Lee takes anti-conservative and anti-imperial positions. He sides with the Columbian liberals over the conservatives throughout the novella: The conservatives being the party of the neo-fascist Lauréano Gómez, a puppet of the Washington government (Harris, “Introduction”, *Yage Redux*, xxvii).

If Lee appears to be on the right side of history at certain points in *The Yage Letters* he often betrays hopeless ignorance and blind privilege, in particular in regards to the rubber trade, which he reports as being “shot”: “As a matter of fact the whole of Putumayo region is on the down grade” (*YL*, 27). Lee is either unaware or lacks empathy for the terrible suffering endured by the Indians of the Putamayo who slaved, were tortured and died in the service of the rubber trade. Lee does however, on occasion empathise with Indian suffering:

An Indian was sitting at the next table fumbling in his pockets, his fingers numb with alcohol. It took him several minutes to pull out some crumpled bills – what my grandmother, a violent prohibitionist, used to describe as ‘dirty money’ – he caught my eye and smiled a twisted broken smile. ‘What else can I do?’ (*YL*, 18)

Lee recognises a fellow addict and his smile, which implies the question “What else can I do?” resonates with the question Burroughs has regarding addiction in *Naked Lunch*: “Wouldn’t you?” (xlv). Yet his sympathy is short lived and later he speaks of raping and killing natives:

On the boat I talked to a man who knows the Ecuador jungle like his own prick. It seems jungle traders periodically raid the Auca (a tribe of hostile Indians. Shell lost about twenty employees to the Auca in two years) and carry off women they keep penned up for

purposes of sex. Sounds interesting. Maybe I could capture an Auca boy. I have precise instructions for Auca raiding. It's quite simple. You cover both exits of Auca house and shoot everybody you don't wanna fuck. (YL, 37-38)

It is interesting that Lee envisions doing to the natives what Burroughs describes the native's drug, "yage", doing to him: "This is insane overwhelming rape of the senses"⁷⁸ (L, 180). Lee may be seeking to control, exploit and degrade the natives, but it is he who is controlled, exploited and degraded in the service of his desires, just as he was in *Queer*.

Lee has no problem being open about his status as a sex and narcotic tourist. Just as in *Queer*, libido often appears to be the driving force behind his colonial excesses. He amuses the hotel staff when he checks in with a barefooted Indian and the reader is left to assume that he has paid for this encounter (YL, 39). If Lee is only in search of selfish pleasures, then many South Americans take a similarly narrow view of him: All they want is his "yankee dollar" (39). There is some sense of justice that Lee is robbed at almost every turn, especially when he engages with rent boys: "The little bastards steal up a breeze though. Lost a watch and 15 dollars already" (39). Lee appears to be morally ambiguous, at best, and while he asserts some politically sensitive opinions, his actions often leave a lot to be desired. If "consciousness is a cut-up" then conscience is too (*The Adding Machine*, 61).

While Burroughs's letter, where he tells Ginsberg, "Your AYUASKA consciousness is more valid than 'Normal Consciousness'", suggests absolute faith in the power of "AYUASKA consciousness" and the "cut-up", the rest of *The Yage Letters* lacks anything approaching its moral, aesthetic and spiritual confidence (YL, 61). Indeed, Burroughs's validation of *nagual* "AYUASKA consciousness" over tonal "'Normal Consciousness'" suggests a philosophical and aesthetic certainty, present in the "cut-up" works but largely absent in Burroughs's early works of illiterature. However, "I AM DYING MEESTER?" is successful because of its ability to draw all of the textual strands of *The Yage*

⁷⁸ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 8th, 1953.

Letters together in a manner that does not denude them of their contextual relevance or their ambiguity. "I AM DYING MEESTER?" works in correspondence with, rather than as an antidote to, the previous text. As such "I AM DYING MEESTER?" offers a reading of *The Yage Letters* that is a kind of misreading; it is a provisional, *ad hoc*, arbitrary, intertextual and improvisatory response to the text, which highlights the unresolved, illegible and contradictory aspects of the preceding novella. With the "cut-up", reading takes on the productive power of writing. "I AM DYING MEESTER?", as an illegible text, demands that the reader produce truth themselves, but its "real revolutionary practice" is to highlight how reading, as a mode of cognition, produces truth. "I AM DYING MEESTER?" functions to heighten the contradictions and illegible aspects already present in the preceding text. This forces the reader to focus on the disintegration of sense that was always present but hidden in the preceding realist text.

"I AM DYING MEESTER?" is a fitting end for the novel as the "cut-up" calls back to all the features of the novel mentioned, especially the sexual, colonial and touristic exploitation of Latin America: "orgasm... bare feet ... boy's flesh naked...blood smells drowned voices... swept out by ceiling fan... where the awning flaps" (66-68). Appropriately, "I AM DYING MEESTER?" offers, by way of the "cut-up", a form of reading or misreading of the text that has gone before it. The "cut-up" reveals the modes of compression, suturing, misapprehension and intertextuality that take place as part of any reading, as well as the potential for a corresponding interpretative freedom. With "I AM DYING MEESTER?" Burroughs attempts to outline the empowering, consciousness-altering potential of reading and writing.

Although it is not a "cut-up" text, *Naked Lunch* is a composite of all that has come before in Burroughs's writing and an attempt to bring forth an emergent future through its stylistic and structural innovations. The relationship between *Naked Lunch* and *The Yage Letters* also challenges the temporal structure of Burroughs's *oeuvre*. *The Yage Letters* was published after *Naked Lunch*, but it features events which occurred before and after the composition and publication of that novel. *The Yage Letters* does not only feature disruptions of its own temporospatial narrative but dislocates the

structure of Burroughs's early literary history. The potential for writing and myth to augment and restructure reality becomes *Naked Lunch's* central organising strategy, revealing the limiting cognitive structure of addiction.

Chapter Four:

An Impossible Novel: William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*

"It was not divine," Goethe wrote about the daemonic, "for it seemed irrational; it was not human, for it had no reason; not devilish, for it was beneficent; not angelic, for it often allowed room for malice. It resembled the accidental, for it was without consequence; it looked like providence, for it hinted at hidden connections. Everything that restricts us seemed permeable by it; it seemed to arrange at will the necessary elements of our existence; it contracted time, it expanded space. It seemed at ease only in the impossible, and it thrust the possible from itself with contempt." (Lukács, 87)

This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life.
(Robert Louis Stevenson, 65)

Well, as you can plainly see, the possibilities are endless like meandering paths in a great big beautiful garden.
(*NL*, 28)

Confusion hath fuck his masterpiece.
(*NL*, 40)

Introduction

This chapter on William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* analyses the text's style and form and examines their relevance to the topics of addiction, ideology, reading and subject formation. While *Naked Lunch* appears to embrace pleasure and transgression, as well as adopting a dislocated, schizophrenic and hallucinatory aesthetic, it also undermines its own moral and aesthetic position consistently. In turn, the novel challenges the hermeneutic habits of its readership, implicating them in the moral, aesthetic and political riddles it presents but refuses to resolve. *Naked Lunch* is Burroughs's pre-eminent text of illiterature as it refuses to be hemmed in by moral, political, literary or aesthetic structures, rather it frequently engages in the forms of coercion it implicitly criticises and reveals how pleasure, transgression and psychological dislocation are modes that power utilises for its own ends. While revelling in the bacchanalian filth, *Naked Lunch* persistently denies narrative closure, thereby bestowing moral authority on its readership.

This chapter firstly examines the work of other scholars in regards to their reading of *Naked Lunch*. This section compares these readings to the argument of this chapter and thesis as a whole. *Naked Lunch* reveals a dialectic between the modern mode of political organisation and its obscene and violent underbelly. The reader, when faced with an impossible text and a pervasive political determinism, must formulate a means towards authenticity and agency, becoming the text's ideal reader: the subjectivity of the future.

This chapter analyses the material history of *Naked Lunch*'s production and how this informs its structure and reception. The history of the novel's composition reveals the text's origins in misreading, collaboration and anxiety over its lack of novelistic structure. These factors helped make the text a unique and defining example of Burroughs's illiterature. *Naked Lunch*'s lack of structure had historical implications which come to prominence with the novel's censorship trial. The novel's defense became the basis for the text's introduction or "Deposition", and thus the novel was defined as a didactic text that warned against the horrors of heroin addiction. The introduction functions as an external structuring device that instructs

the reader on how to interpret the text. The production of the novel is mythologised in Burroughs's introduction, entitled "Deposition on a Sickness", which sets up a dynamic relationship between the preface and the accompanying text. This "Deposition", itself a piece of fiction, supplements and structures the text, while the "Atrophied Preface", which closes the novel, denies the possibility of prefacing a text like *Naked Lunch*. The introduction thus sets in play one of the defining features of *Naked Lunch*: its antagonism of the reader. The introduction also installs addiction as a form of reading, thus the novel's external structure is much more illustrative of how addiction functions than the unruly and antagonistic text.

Addiction and its relationship with schizophrenia and psychological dislocation takes on complex political resonances in the novel. *Naked Lunch*'s most famous section, the "Talking Asshole routine", illustrates how embodied schemata can be reinscribed by ideological forces towards grotesque political ends. Tropes of disgust and hygiene mark the medicalisation and bureaucratisation of the public sphere in *Naked Lunch*. Dr. Benway plays a key role in the maintenance of taxonomies which support the political status quo. In *Naked Lunch* those who fall outside of socio-political norms undergo schizophrenic breakdowns. However, the text also details how those in power are addicted to the stereotypes they trade in and are vulnerable if the symbolic order is challenged. *Naked Lunch* thereby details how contradictions within the symbolic order gives rise to everyday relations, particularly to relations of dominance and control. *Naked Lunch* also outlines how the schizophrenic mode is imbricated in modern forms of political domination. *Naked Lunch* in effect pushes the schizophrenic model, theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, to the point where it ceases to oppose modern modes of social, economic and political organisation. The novel embraces all the contradictory modes that power takes in order to drain them of their seductive potency. The carnivalesque in *Naked Lunch*, while appearing to oppose orthodoxy, decency and morality merely reaffirms the status quo and functions to make the subjects of ideology desire their own subjugation. Transgression in *Naked Lunch* reveals itself, more often than not, as an illusion of freedom or the obscene and illusory substratum of modern modes

of ideology.

Despite the challenges *Naked Lunch* presents its readers, the text appears to be guided by a belief in the possibility of subjective agency. By revealing the determinism that appears to encroach on the individual's freedom from all sides, *Naked Lunch* obliquely outlines the possibility of escape. *Naked Lunch*, however, refuses to cede power to its author or its reader and antagonises and incriminates the reading process from its very outset. Misreading becomes inevitable in such a textual environment while the text's opening section outlines the dangers of misapprehension. However, misreading becomes the only means for escaping the determinism of language and identity that *Naked Lunch* consistently describes. As such, the reader or misreader of *Naked Lunch* becomes the potential for authentic agency but only by leaving behind the socio-political orthodoxy and the symbolic order which supports it. Presenting its readers with a text that they cannot master implicates them in the cruel and exploitative culture that *Naked Lunch* describes. At the same time, by denying the hermeneutic operations of its readership, *Naked Lunch* forces readers to forge their own response to an impossible text. Through the perverse habits of misreading, the reader may discover an authentic form of agency. This opens up the possibility that the reader may become something akin to a synthesis of existential subjectivity, Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs and Slavoj Žižek's theory of subjectivity as absence : a subjectivity of the future.

Rather than extolling the virtues of subversion as such, *Naked Lunch* reveals that transgression, like power is everywhere (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93). In this sense, *Naked Lunch* is an attempt to explore the limits and vagaries of subversion. *Naked Lunch*, as Burroughs's foremost document of illiterature, demonstrates that control is always partial and under negotiation, but also how transgression can be co-opted by conservative power structures. *Naked Lunch* does this by overidentifying with the obscene and excessive aspects of ideology. At the same time, any knowledge or accompanying schema of Burroughs's text is constantly under attack, because *Naked Lunch* is an "anti-novel", (Harris, *Secret*, 242). In response to such a disruptive and contradictory text, any reading, like "Control", remains

partial and provisional. Similarly, the material history of *Naked Lunch*'s production, along with the text's relationship with its extra-textual "Deposition" and "Atrophied Preface", evidence a futile desire for mastery that gives way to an acceptance of the text's lack of novelistic structure and refusal of hermeneutic closure.

As Burroughs's pre-eminent text of illiterature, *Naked Lunch* presents profound challenges to readers. The history of *Naked Lunch* reveals that misreading was central to the text's production. Furthermore, the difficulties of organisation and structure that Burroughs faced when writing and editing the text remain as distinct, antagonistic features of the text. While the "Deposition" attempts to interpellate a particular kind of reading, this is directly and immediately challenged by the text. While heroin addiction is explicitly presented as the primary illness under examination, *Naked Lunch* has many complex and far-ranging insights on the political, aesthetic and social conditions that afflict modern human beings.

Naked Lunch also prefigures the "word virus" described in the "cut-up" novels through its implicit criticism of language and identity, which both appear as hostile invaders who reduce human subjects to being containers for impersonal and arbitrary content. While many of *Naked Lunch*'s long list of characters appear as empty subjects of illiterature, the novel tacitly maintains Burroughs's faith in the possibility of authentic agency. *Naked Lunch* aestheticizes the extreme challenges to subjective agency as problems of reading. In effect, if the subject is controlled by the chain of signification, the only means of escape is through misreading. Through observing the determinism of language collapsing under its own contradictions, the reader may escape the clutches of the chain of signification and form a subjectivity of the future.

Critical Problems

All of *Naked Lunch*'s critics must engage with its unwieldy structure, violent imagery and wilful antagonism of the reading process. The first academic critique of *Naked Lunch* was offered by Ihab Hassan (1963). Writing of Burroughs and *Naked Lunch* Hassan states that, "[he] offers a deposition

against the human race, a testimony of outrage in the metallic voice of a subtracting machine” (53). Hassan identifies Burroughs, more generally, as a misanthropist and an inarticulate one at that (67). While Hassan’s comments are astute, his work is, nevertheless, largely descriptive. Eric Mottram dismisses the rather cold criticism of early commentators like Hassan, claiming that Burroughs’s writing is “comic and exuberant rather than admonitory and bleak” (qtd. in Harris, *Secret*, ix). Jennie Skerl’s assessment of *Naked Lunch* fits in more broadly with her book’s overall evaluation of Burroughs as a hipster and Beat author where *Naked Lunch* represents the maturation of his literary style. Skerl offers fine observations regarding Burroughs’s use of experimental forms and its effect on the reader, effectively describing how *Naked Lunch*’s use of montage and juxtaposition undermines the binary structure that rationalizes contemporary hierarchies (*Burroughs*, 44). Skerl suggests that *Naked Lunch* is largely autobiographical and impressionistic (36-37), while its experimental use of montage, creates “new mental associations as a form of expanded consciousness” (44). While Skerl offers a valuable aesthetic analysis of *Naked Lunch*, *William S. Burroughs* contains material errors in regards to *Naked Lunch*’s extratextual sections – including the introduction – which she claims are “factual, autobiographical sections” (44).

The autobiographical ploy of the introduction was first suggested by Carol Loranger in her pioneering work, “‘This Book Spill Off the Page in All Directions’: What Is the Text of *Naked Lunch*?” Loranger demonstrates how the “story of the novel’s production [intimated in the introduction] is so much a part of its initial reception and continuing apprehension that it forms part of the novel’s aura” (7). However, given Burroughs’s “career-long, semi-ironic self-identification as a huckster, one can never be certain about what actually happened” (7). Loranger provides the impetus for Oliver Harris’s peerless work, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (2003). Here Harris reveals the genetic and material history behind Burroughs’s first four novels. Harris offers factual evidence for what Loranger’s study intuited: that the compositional history offered by Burroughs in regards to his works in general, and provided by the introduction to *Naked Lunch* in particular, is

largely fictionalised. Harris's comprehensive archival study reveals *Naked Lunch's* epistolary origins, demonstrating that the "routines" that populate the novel were first written in letters to Allen Ginsberg, often when the author had abstained from opiates for a number of months. The purpose of Harris's work is to move scholarship away from the genetic history of *Naked Lunch* offered in Burroughs's introduction, towards reading the novel in terms of the material history discovered by Harris. His hope is to orientate future *Naked Lunch* scholarship in the direction of the text's queer, epistolary origins.

Building on Harris's scholarship, Alex Wermer-Colan seeks to examine not only what "Burroughs's extratextual claims are simply about, but rather what his extratextual claims do"; "by attaching a document tellingly titled 'Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness,' Burroughs ambivalently figures *Naked Lunch* as his confession of a series of drug-induced, surreal hallucinations" (Wermer-Colan, 494, 512). In terms of the introduction's 'hallucinogenetic' content, this chapter will demonstrate how the reader is interpellated by *Naked Lunch's* "Deposition" which formally installs addiction as a mode of cognitive behaviour, i.e. as a way of reading. Alex Wermer-Colan's essay "Implicating the Confessor" suggests that Burroughs's confession of addiction and amnesia at the beginning of *Naked Lunch*, in tandem with its unwieldy aesthetics and textual structure, undermines the forms of interpretation it seems to invite (512). For Wermer-Colan this becomes Burroughs's *modus operandi*, whereby his texts appear to overidentify with, rather than ironically distancing themselves from, the political and moral frameworks they are attacking (514). The irresolvable text, which is effectively disowned by the author, thus gestures towards the "word virus" and Roland Barthes's suggestion that "it is language which speaks, not the author" (qtd. in Wermer-Colan, 519). This theme, and its concomitant "birth of the reader," will be explored in the conclusion of this chapter, where the reader, or misreader, is considered as the potentially radical subjectivity of the future (Barthes, *Music, Image*, 148).

Robin Lydenberg's *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (1987) regards the author's work as a

prefiguring of the theories of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Julie Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. Lydenberg's work is ground-breaking in terms of the sophistication of its theoretical analysis, but her method of criticism is restrictive and frequently reductive. Discussing *Naked Lunch*, she claims that the text is merely a preamble towards the more radical "cut-up" novels; "in *Naked Lunch*, however, he is still engaged in laying bare the present conditions of word and body, in serving up the naked facts." (19). *Naked Lunch*, in her view is simply about "domination and destruction" (28). Lydenberg skilfully argues against reading *Naked Lunch* in terms of allegory or metaphor, as Burroughs is an aggressively metonymic author. This is somewhat ironic, given how the "word virus" makes itself apparent through the use of metaphors, tropes and other figures of speech. Lydenberg thus makes a critical error in regards to Burroughs's texts, separating the author from the structures he is attacking. If Burroughs's work is a study of how virulent language functions, it would involve incorporating such figures of speech as metaphor and allegory, which it does consistently. Also, to suggest that there is no scope for thinking about the topics raised in *Naked Lunch* in figurative ways goes against the playful, postmodern impetus of her study, as well as the intended wide-ranging resonances of terms like "the junk pyramid" and "The Algebra of Need" (*NL*, xl, xix). Burroughs's professed literalness is used by Lydenberg as a weapon against the interpretations of other critics, but this forges its own unhelpful metaphysics. Lydenberg is often guilty of reading Burroughs and *Naked Lunch* entirely on their own terms, all while claiming that his work anticipates Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" (49). Despite Lydenberg's deconstructive instincts, she still seems to valorise the literal over the figurative in tandem with pitting postmodern readings against moral, liberal humanist interpretations in a zero-sum game. This chapter will emphasise the importance of Burroughs's liminal and undecided status in regards to issues of postmodernization, particularly in relation to the schizophrenic model of Deleuze and Guattari and the problems of agency and subjectivity.

In his study, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997), Timothy S. Murphy raises similar concerns to mine. Of Lydenberg's

study he writes, “her analysis of Burroughs accounts reasonably well for the dialectical undecidability of the earlier works, but not so well for the irreducibly distinct social issues Burroughs addresses... Despite its [...] sensitivity, Lydenberg’s version of Burroughs performs reductive gestures of postmodernization” (73). Murphy’s “amodern” reading of *Naked Lunch*, while less reductive is similarly myopic. Murphy claims, “We need, therefore, an amodernist strategy, a modernism shorn of myth, if we are going to get Burroughs’s books off the shelf and back onto the streets” (73). I assert, instead, that addiction in *Naked Lunch* functions as a contemporary mythos, communicated by the introduction’s dramatization of the text’s production which ostensibly structures the text. Regarding his thesis, Murphy explains, “the purpose of amodernism: to further the production of subject-groups that can extend the differences that already fissure the capitalist socius into irreparable cracks” (74). He also claims that, “Burroughs’s work, including *Naked Lunch*, constitutes an exacting critique both of the social organization of late capital and of the logic of representation or textuality that abets it” (74). While Murphy’s reading of *Naked Lunch* is less restrictive than Lydenberg’s, it does however suggest that Burroughs is a Marx-esque critic⁷⁹. While this chapter asserts that there is an ideological critique present in *Naked Lunch*, this study is also faithful to Burroughs’s consistent apolitical stance.

Murphy’s study also regards the fragmentation and schizophrenia evident in *Naked Lunch* as an essentially radical trope, directly aligning it with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of a “Body without organs” (77, 98-99). I would contend that Murphy’s critique often misrecognises the fragmentary and schizophrenic in Burroughs’s work as markers of a radical potential, when in fact, more often than not they figure as a means to empower prevailing cultural and political authorities. The schizophrenic model is just

⁷⁹ Murphy states that, “Burroughs’s critique does, however, consistently maintain a relationship to Marxism, one that is best summed up in Louis Althusser’s description of the relation of art to knowledge: ‘This relationship is not one of identity but one of difference’... Difference is not nonrelation, nor is it contradiction or binary opposition; the opposite of knowledge is ideology rather than art, while the (traditional) opposite of Marxism is fascism rather than Burroughs’s libertarian-anarchist politics” (74).

as open to masterful control as the catatonic but more orderly mode of addiction.

This is certainly the contention of Jamie Russell in *Queer Burroughs* (2001). For Russell, schizophrenia marks the regulation of gay identity by mainstream, heterosexual power structures (2). I find Russell's critique of schizophrenic fragmentation in *Naked Lunch* compelling, particularly as it rejects the kind of rigid theoretical adherence found in Lydenberg's and Murphy's work; Russell does not suggest that Burroughs fits comfortably with queer theory and he is very much cognisant of the author's wilfully contrary nature.

Another radical reading of Burroughs in a political context is Chad Weidner's *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind*. Weidner reads *Naked Lunch* as a document of toxicity, where the addict is a "Toxic Human" symbolic of the poisoning of the entire human race by environmental pollution (65–104). In this regard I agree with Weidner's dark ecological reading of *Naked Lunch* as a document of a pervasive toxicity, although I frame my reading in terms of a more general form of cultural malaise.

Oliver Harris states "that the true source of fascination lies not in Burroughs' possession of a fabulous secret we lack but in his embodiment of some internal mystery from which we are all hopelessly barred" (245). However, *Naked Lunch's* mystery or secret is formed out of an oppressive and inescapable dialectic between "a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony, and its obscene, superegoic inverse" (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64). *Naked Lunch* does not proceed towards a tidy conclusion but rather forces the reader to recognise their complicity in this inescapable matrix of power. "*Naked Lunch's* fragmentary form and lack of a 'unified narrating consciousness' augments the degree to which the text neither valorises nor denounces the monstrousness depicted, maintaining thereby an indigestible and incriminating moral indeterminacy" (Whiting qtd. in Wermer-Colan, 518). The reader, as a subject always under attack in *Naked Lunch*, becomes subject to forces akin to those that permeate the ideological order. *Naked Lunch* seeks to represent what Slavoj Žižek calls "the

obscene fantasmatic kernel of an ideological edifice" (*The Universal Exception*, 65). By revealing contradictions within the "ideological edifice" but refusing to resolve them, *Naked Lunch* bestows moral authority on the reader who must distil her own response to an illegible text and the "incriminating moral indeterminacy" it produces. "*Naked Lunch* demands Silence from The Reader," and this subjective abyss might give way to a virtual and potentially radical subjectivity of the future, one which is capable of breaking out of the negative dialectic that exists between transgression and complicity in the ideological order.

A History of Naked Lunch

Naked Lunch, with its various editions, additions, introductions and appendices, does not lend itself to the idea of being definitively published, read or studied. Misreading began with the composition of the title, as Oliver Harris notes. "Naked Lunch" sprang from Allen Ginsberg's misreading of the original manuscript of "Queer": Ginsberg read the text aloud pronouncing "naked lunch" instead of the misspelled "nakedlust". Jack Kerouac recognised that "Naked Lunch" would be a fitting title for Burroughs's novel: "In other words, the title is a collaboratively authored, composite text, the simultaneously inspired and the mechanical product of chance circumstance and slips in conscious intention, clinched by Kerouac's suggestion they take it literally" (Harris, "The Beginnings", 18-19). The highly contingent and improvised origins of the title are testament to the spontaneous and provisory ethos of what would become *Naked Lunch*, a text that should be read in the spirit of its composition. *Naked Lunch's* origins and history of misreading demand a similarly contingent and cobbled together reading: it demands to be read as a work of illiterature.

In *The Secret of Fascination* Harris claims that *Naked Lunch* is not a novel at all, but a textual experiment, albeit one that seems to have come into being through automatic writing and a protracted process of editing (Harris, 218-222). The early revisions were carried out by William Burroughs and his collaborators, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Alan Ansen, Sinclair Beiles and Brion Gysin (Miles 822-832, 1424). However, "Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Alan

Ansen typed up a manuscript in early 1957 that was absolutely distinct from the final text; it was Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Sinclair Beiles who prepared the material for Olympia Press in July 1959; and Burroughs subsequently relocated at least one major section of text” (Harris, *Secret*, 187). This extensive editorial process was necessary because Burroughs agonized over the organisation of the text:

I am discouraged about my writing. It seems impossible for me to write anything saleable, or, in fact, anything that achieves artistic unity or wholeness. What I have written reads like the notes for a novel, not the novel itself. The act of creation needed to unify material into a finished work, seems beyond my power. All I can write is pieces of a novel, and the pieces don't fit together.⁸⁰

(*Letters to Allen Ginsberg*, 76)

It is apparent here that the kind of structural issues that make *Naked Lunch* unique were first regarded as problematic. “Burroughs describes his formal problem as a physical agony, on a par with the pains of addiction” (Harris, *Secret*, 211). Turning this text into a novel, or “saleable” writing as Burroughs terms it, was something the author clearly desired, but in Oliver Harris’s assessment this was a failure; indeed, literary and figurative failure seems to be central to Burroughs’s authorial *modus operandi*. “Failure is mystery”, Burroughs wrote; ‘A man does not mesh somehow with time-place” (*l*, 66). Burroughs’s failure to turn *Naked Lunch* into a novel is transferred into the text itself which maintains the mysterious, dislocated and bewildering aspects of the text’s production as stylistic and formal features. The history of its production and the text of *Naked Lunch* accurately reflects Burroughs’s feelings of failure, mystery and dislocation at the time. However, Burroughs will later embrace the dysfunction of *Naked Lunch* and insist that it represents a meaningful break from traditional novelistic standards:

How can I write a ‘novel’? I can’t and won’t. The ‘novel’ is a dead form, rigid and arbitrary. I can’t use it. The

⁸⁰ December 6th, 1954.

chapters form a mosaic, with the dream impact of juxtaposition, like objects abandoned in a hotel drawer, a form of still life. (*I*, 126)

Burroughs's sentiments here defend the materialist aesthetics of his work – “the chapters form a mosaic... like objects abandoned in a hotel drawer, a form of still life” – and celebrate its non-literary form. While this is not a succinct description of Burroughs's compositional methods (Harris, 207), it does give us some insight into his development as an author of illiterature.

Burroughs's declaration of the death of the novel marks his work as a historical document. Marshall McLuhan suggests that to judge *Naked Lunch* as a conventional novel, “is a little like trying to criticize the sartorial and verbal manifestations of a man who is knocking on the door to explain that flames are leaping from the roof of our home” (73). While *Naked Lunch* defies the aesthetic and structural conventions of the novel form, this is indicative of this text's place in history. For Georg Lukács, “[the] novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Novels “have to produce out of themselves all that was once simply accepted as given; in other words, before their own *a priori* effectiveness can begin to manifest itself, they must create by their own power alone the pre-conditions for such effectiveness – an object and its environment” (38). While *Naked Lunch* lacks traditional novelistic form, theories such as the “junk pyramid” and “The Algebra of Need” shape the novel's reception and guide the reader's interpretation (*NL*, xl, xix). *Naked Lunch's* “object and environment” is thoroughly shaped by its introduction, while the text itself appears shorn of both a unifying narrative voice and temporospatial consistency. *Naked Lunch's* violence, obscenity, ambivalence and lack of structure all lend themselves to the idea that it is not literature, and indeed this became the basis for its censorship trials. Afterwards, Burroughs's defence of the novel set out the terms for the text's introduction, which retroactively attempted to turn *Naked Lunch* into a novel.

***Naked Lunch* on Trial**

Naked Lunch's various censorship trials reminds us that literary suppression is itself a kind of criticism. In condemning the book, a Massachusetts judge

stated, “the author first collected the foulest and vilest phrases describing them indiscriminately” (qtd. In Goodman, 235). However, the novel was eventually freed from censorship after the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that “a text could only be suppressed if it was ‘utterly without redeeming social value’” (Glass, 180-181). Due to its didactic value as a document of addiction, the gratuitously violent and sexually explicit sections of the novel were deemed fit for public consumption. While this verdict essentially handed the power of censorship to literary critics, *Naked Lunch*’s “redeeming social value” is still open to debate. Despite the value of the novel being argued in courtrooms, academic studies and, famously, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Lydenberg and Skerl, 41-52), the question of *Naked Lunch*’s “social value” remains unresolved. Indeed, later readings celebrate the originality of the text’s irresolvable, enigmatic style and structure, thereby diminishing the liberal humanist reading of the text that freed it from censorship.

Naked Lunch seems to accomplish one of Antonin Artaud’s literary aims: “I would like to write a Book which would drive men mad, which would be like an open door leading them where they would never have consented to go, in short, a door that opens onto reality” (*Selected Writings*, 83). This illiterary aim is reported by Allen Ginsberg – one of the key defenders of *Naked Lunch* at the Boston Trial – in a personal dedication to William Burroughs that was included in the acknowledgements for *Howl*: “William Seward Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, an endless novel that will drive everybody mad” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 802). If one were to be more specific about the type of madness Ginsberg is referring to here, it would seem to be schizophrenia. Discussing Deleuze and Guattari, Timothy S. Murphy remarks that, “[t]he schizophrenic model of totalization is just as peripheral as the paranoid version, just as precariously situated, and likely to shift into the paranoid mode. It is a revolutionary mode of totalization, however, because it is conscious of itself as a process without end” and this endless madness is precisely what Ginsberg is referring to in his dedication to Burroughs’s novel (*Wising*, 38). It is perhaps merciful that Burroughs provides an explanation for *Naked Lunch* in “Deposition: Testimony

Concerning a Sickness” whereby the novel can be regarded as a description of addiction. This solution, however, creates further problems that supplement the book’s moral ambiguity. The “Deposition” is a direct articulation of *Naked Lunch*’s moral function– as a warning against heroin addiction – and this was the main argument for its redeeming social value at trial. The text is thus a composite of ‘ordered’ liberal humanist interpretation and ‘chaotic’ poststructural reading. *Naked Lunch*’s prevailing ambivalence, long regarded as an intellectual and aesthetic boon, unfortunately leads to some ill-fated misreadings.

“Deposition: Testimony on a Sickness” outlines many of Burroughs’s most famous ideas, including “the Algebra of Need”, “the junk pyramid” and “junk” as “the ultimate merchandise”. The text ostensibly serves as a warning against heroin addiction, but due to the ambivalence of *Naked Lunch*, it piqued many people’s interest in the drug. This moral ambiguity is outlined clearly by Marianne Faithfull: “I read *Naked Lunch* when I was very young and thought it was telling people to go out and get high. I’ve just reread it, though, and realised it’s the opposite” (“Marianne Faithfull on Her Friend William Burroughs”). Faithfull became an addict after reading *Naked Lunch* and, in an article where she discusses *Naked Lunch*, credits heroin with saving her life (Hawksley, “Marianne Faithfull: ‘Heroin Saved My Life’”).

From Faithfull’s experience it is clear that Burroughs’s authorial intentions are obscure at the very least; if we can say he had intentions given the “Deposition” denies that the author has any memory of writing the text that would comprise *Naked Lunch* (*NL*, xxxvii). The “Deposition”, despite its explicit didactic message, implicitly suggests heroin addiction is a dark and subversive activity, while the text makes it even more attractive, describing the experience in lurid, nightmarish and poetic tones. Certainly heroin was Burroughs’ *bête noire*, but the drug seems to have frequently sharpened and redoubled his critical and artistic faculties, despite, or perhaps because of, any depersonalization and memory loss suffered. As such, the success of *Naked Lunch*, as a unique text and work of art, works against the explicit didactic function of the “Deposition” which unambiguously warns readers of the perils of heroin addiction. *Naked Lunch* maintains a moral ambiguity in

regards to heroin addiction that was evident in *Junkie's* subtitle: "Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict".

Despite *Naked Lunch's* moral ambiguity around the subject of heroin, the novel's censorship trial in Boston never criticised the discussion of illegal drugs in the text but rather took issue with the graphic depictions of strange and sadistic sex acts, many of a homosexual nature. *Naked Lunch's* more lurid sections were defended on the grounds of them being a warning against the horrors of heroin addiction, with Norman Mailer stating that the novel painted a picture of addiction that was the secular equivalent of Hieronymus Bosch's hell (*NL*, xvii). *Naked Lunch's* didactic function, as a warning against drug use, functions to occlude its sexual content, much as heroin does for the addict.

Naked Lunch's introduction suggests that "[the] orgasm has no function in the junky," and it appears that one of the powers of junk is its ability to erase the sexual inclinations of its user (23). It is interesting to note that this erasure of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, by addiction takes place at the Boston trial and throughout *Naked Lunch's* introduction. It must also be noted that, in the ethical standards explicitly outlined by the prosecution in the trial of *Naked Lunch*, addiction is accepted as an understandable position to end up in, while homosexuality is not. *Naked Lunch's* graphic depictions of mostly homosexual sex, often detailed with monstrous, violent and sadistic imagery, function at once to shock the reader and parody the perceived perversity of homosexuality. *Naked Lunch's* introduction mentions nothing of the novel's homosexual scenes, and the sex acts involving hanging are said to be a satire of capital punishment, something along the lines of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (xliv). Oliver Harris writes, "as junk overwrote the queerness of *Naked Lunch*, so it displaced the productive relation between sexuality and textuality so evident in its epistolary-driven routines" (*Secret*, 201). It is strange to imagine, but Burroughs suffers from a kind of prudishness in regards to *Naked Lunch*, something that is also evident in the large-scale absence of descriptive sex scenes in *Queer*. In this sense, the introduction is a kind of straight drag act, which covers over the explicitly queer and monstrous content of the text,

along with its epistolary origins as grotesque love letters to Allen Ginsberg. *Junk*, as it did in *Junky*, represents an attempt to erase errant desires or corral them into an orderly whole; but while *Junky's* absence of libido is telling, *Naked Lunch* contains countless descriptions of violent and grotesque sex acts. *Naked Lunch* thus forms a dialectic between the orderly articulation of addiction set out in the introduction and the disorderly, sexually explicit text. With the addition of its introduction, *Naked Lunch* becomes a palimpsest, which, like addiction, functions to obscure disruptive, traumatic voices. Addiction thus organises the text, making sense of it, in a manner similar to how addiction orders the cognition and lifestyle of the addict. Burroughs's mythologised introduction organises the disruptive and unruly text, reflecting addiction's ordering of cognition.

A Mythic Novel

While the ancient myths of Western culture provided narrative structures for certain modernist works, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Burroughs supplied his own mythology through rewriting *Naked Lunch's* genetic origins in "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness". Here Burroughs claims he has, "no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title *Naked Lunch*" due to his addiction to opiates (*NL*, xxxvii). *Naked Lunch's* lack of form is supplemented by the introduction's appeal to addiction as a structuring device. Despite Oliver Harris's claim that Burroughs "rejects the need for novelistic unities because he has begun to turn structural problems into a creative solution" (*Secret*, 241-242), addiction provides a unity for a text that defies novelistic conventions. As Jennie Skerl writes, "The 'Introduction' and the 'Atrophied Preface' (last section) frame the novel... and instruct the reader in how to read the book" (Skerl, *Burroughs*, 36). This obsessive supplementarity points towards a certain anxiety about language elucidated by Jacques Derrida:

In certain respects, the theme of supplementarity... describes the chain itself, the being-chain of a textual chain, the structure of substitution, the articulation of desire and of language, the logic of all conceptual oppositions... It tells us in a text what a

text is... an indefinitely multiplied structure – *en abyme* [in an abyss] – to employ the current phrase”. (*Of Grammatology*, 163)

The abyss of the text of *Naked Lunch* is countered by the semantic fullness of the supplementary “Deposition”. The ability of the introduction to speak for the text, along with the popular perception of *Naked Lunch* as a novel written in the throes of addiction, speaks to the power of this supplement. Discussing how prefaces attempt to speak for texts, Derrida writes:

A *preface* would retrace and presage here a *general* theory and practice of deconstruction, that strategy without which the possibility of a critique could exist only in fragmentary, empiricist surges that amount in effect to a non-equivocal confirmation of metaphysics. The preface would announce in the future tense (“this is what you are going to read”) the conceptual content or significance (here, that strange strategy without finality, the debility or failure that organizes the *telos* or the *eschaton*, which reinscribes restricted economy within general economy) of what will *already* have been *written*. And thus sufficiently *read* to be gathered up in its semantic tenor and proposed in advance. From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written – a past – which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future. Here is what I wrote, then read, and what I am writing that you are going to read. After which you will again be able to take possession of this preface which in sum you have not yet begun to read, even though, once having read it, you will already have anticipated everything that follows and thus you might just as well dispense with reading the rest. The *pre* of the preface makes the future present, represents it, draws it closer, breathes it

in, and in going ahead of it puts it ahead. The *pre* reduces the future to the form of manifest presence. (*Dissemination*, 7)

The preface attempts to make the author and his text a “manifest presence”, yet it also functions in an opposite, deconstructive sense to signify the impossibility of writing making anything a “manifest presence”, least of all itself. The preface is a nascent form of the “cut-up” which disorders the temporal structure of the text, while functioning superficially to ground the text in the normative temporal structures of past, present and future. Written afterword, but presented as the “fore-word”, the preface both stabilises and destabilises the chronotopic structure of a text. *Naked Lunch*’s “Atrophied Preface” arrives after the main body of the text and is, if anything, even more chaotic and irrational than what has preceded it; thus it implicitly reveals the deconstructive character of all prefaces, that is, the impossibility of a text to speak for another text. The “Atrophied Preface” formally announces the structural lack that the introduction attempts to remedy: “You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point. . . . I have written many prefaces. They atrophy and amputate spontaneous like the little toe amputates in a West African disease” (*NL*, 224).

Naked Lunch’s introduction, or “Deposition: A Testimony Concerning a Sickness”, formally installs addiction as both the origin and destination of the text, while also being the only text of *Naked Lunch* that Burroughs explicitly takes authorship of, as he has “no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title *Naked Lunch*” (xxxvii). Alex Wermer-Colan notes, “Burroughs’s extratextual claims interpellate the unsuspecting reader to play the role of the confessor who analyzes the text in order to discover and judge the ‘deviant’ desires of the author” (494). In the case of *Naked Lunch* these “deviant” desires are described in the introduction as addiction, thereby interpellating the reader of *Naked Lunch* as a reader of addiction. As Lenson stated earlier, addiction “points to *addictus*—the past participle of the Latin verb *addicere* (to say or pronounce, to decree or bind)—which suggests that the user has lost active control of language and thus of consciousness itself, that she or he is already ‘spoken for’, bound and decreed. Instead of *saying*, one *is said*” (35). Just as Burroughs in *Queer* was possessed

by the language of his “routines”, the introduction to *Naked Lunch* attempts to possess and speak for the body of text that follows. However, the text that follows the main body of *Naked Lunch*, the “Atrophied Preface”, deconstructs the possibility of the “fore-word”. As such the “Deposition” employs the limiting power of addiction and *addictus*, in order to supply *Naked Lunch* with an external structure: “This is an essential and ludicrous operation... because, in pointing out a single thematic nucleus or a single guiding thesis, it would cancel out the textual displacement that is at work ‘here’” (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 7). *Naked Lunch*’s “Introduction” formally instates addiction as the logical centre of the text that cancels out “textual displacement” making the text a “manifest presence”, as both a product of, and signifier for, addiction. The circularity of *Naked Lunch*’s thesis of addiction, from alpha to omega, becomes the mythic core that, god-like, attempts to control an impossible text and circumvent its inevitable dissemination. The Burroughsian “turns on the textual politics manifest in *Naked Lunch*... Control and its terrors are *present* rather than represented in this writing, *produced by* as much as reproduced in it. We grasp these terrors by the experience of being grasped by them” (Harris, *Secret*, 37). “In the schemata of *Naked Lunch* the reader, the ‘real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions’” (Debord qtd. in Harris, *Secret*, 52). If readers choose to believe the addictive monomania of the “Deposition”, they become like addicts, cognitively restricted to seeing the text as articulating a singular worldview and not the “three novel themes running at once and merging together”⁸¹ (L, 372).

The introduction, as the only section of *Naked Lunch* that Burroughs takes explicit authorship of, represents both the author’s voice and his authorial intention. Further to this, the introduction clarifies the author’s relationship and identity in terms of the mysterious text that he has produced. While its introduction represents the “message of the Author-God”, *Naked Lunch* appears to be “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 146). *Naked Lunch* provides its readers with an image of a chaotic abyss and constructs

⁸¹ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated October 19th, 1957.

“entire textual landscapes that seem to exist prior to and independent of an author” (Wermer-Colan, 519). However, it is only when the text is regarded as a personal document of addiction that it becomes a novel, i.e. a self-contained and organised body of text representative of an author/subject. Carl Jung writes that “[addiction is] the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness” (qtd. in Calonne, 79). Addiction not only provides the addicted subject with a simulacrum of wholeness but is incorporated by *Naked Lunch* as a means to novelistic and authorial unity.

The impossibility of this quest for subjective and aesthetic wholeness is illustrated in *Naked Lunch* by images of fragmented, monstrous bodies:

The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black chunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines.... In his place of total darkness mouth and eyes are one organ that leaps forward to snap with transparent teeth... but no organ is constant as regards either function or position... sex organs sprout anywhere... rectums open, defecate and close... the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments.... (NL, 12)

Of this passage, Christopher Breu writes, “[such] transformations are variously produced by addiction, sexual exploitation, and economic exploitation, but most notable is how the biopolitical economy impacts the body directly, reshaping its substance and producing radically new forms of embodiment that elude symbolic fixity. These forms are in continuous transformation, and the bodily and political-economic in constant interchange” (206-207). While such a reading may be useful in fixing *Naked Lunch* within a political and historical context, it ignores how addiction in the text functions not only as a rupture or transformation of the subject but as a means towards textual and subjective unity. Addiction provides an artificial subjective unity for the dislocated organs described above. The artificial unity of addiction counterbalances *Naked Lunch*'s chaotic lack of form. Oliver Harris writes that the “refusal of commercial finish and narrative closure is essentially a refusal of the philosophical category of the whole: in this view, the part isn't monstrous, except in terms of a totalizing rage for order”

(*Secret*, 213). This impulse towards order and totality is foundational of neurosis and, by proxy, addiction. Donald E. Hall writes, “the Lacanian recognition of the fragmented undercurrent to subjectivity helps explain the tenacity with which many people cling to rigid ideologies, religion, and structures of nationalism and fascism” (83), and to this list I would add addiction. Reminiscent of Norman Mailer’s description of *Naked Lunch*, Lacan suggests that, “[w]e must turn to the works of Hieronymus Bosch for an atlas of all the aggressive images that torment mankind” (*Écrits: A Selection*, 11):

This fragmented body . . . usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions – the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, in the ascent from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man. (*Écrits: A Selection*, 4–5)

In *Naked Lunch*, the subjective unity of addiction is confronted by the Lacanian fragmented body. The text suggests that addicts, craving subjective consistency, are doomed to failure. Instead the subject must accept his partial and contingent being: “You were not there for the beginning. You will not be there for the end. Your knowledge of what is going on can only be superficial and relative” (*NL*, 110). Underlying this statement is a critique of the artificial unity of the subject represented by addiction. *Naked Lunch* is, by the suggestion of its very title, attempting to reveal the Lacanian Real occluded by everyday reality. The text is “a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (*NL*, 3). “In such a frozen moment, the symbolic breaks down, the familiar becomes strange, and the uncoded stuff we consume becomes visible” (Breu, 205). As in Slavoj Žižek’s description of the Lacanian “Monstrous”, the world rendered in *Naked Lunch*, exists as “a pre-ontological universe of the ‘night of the world’ in which partial objects

wander in a state preceding any synthesis, like that in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (which are strictly correlative to the emergence of modern subjectivity)" (*The Ticklish Subject*, 49-50). The phantasmagoria of *Naked Lunch* describes a return to the pre-modern, fragmented world that existed outside *logos*:

Does not Hegel's brief description – 'here shoots a bloody head, there another white ghastly apparition' – chime perfectly with Lacan's notion of the 'dismembered body' ... What Hegel calls the 'night of the world' (the phantasmagorical, pre-symbolic domain of partial drives) is an undeniable component of the subject's most radical self-experience, exemplified, among others, by Hieronymus Bosch's celebrated paintings. In a way, the entire psychoanalytic experience focuses on the traces of the traumatic passage from this 'night of the world' into our 'daily' universe of *logos*. The tension between the narrative form and the 'death drive', as the withdrawal-into-self constitutive of the subject, is thus the missing link that has to be presupposed if we are to account for the passage from 'natural' to 'symbolic' surroundings. (*The Ticklish Subject*, 35)

Naked Lunch is an image of Hegel's "night of the world' (the phantasmagorical, pre-symbolic domain of partial drives)" and in turn a simulacrum of that "undeniable component of the subject's most radical self-experience". The addict's desire to return to the pre-symbolic realm of unadulterated pleasure and an imaginary egoic unity is a manifestation of the cyclical death drive, which seeks to abandon modern subjectivity, along with its "narrative form" and "'symbolic' surroundings". However, addiction involves a perpetual return to the symbolic order, as addiction, as a manifestation of the death drive, "is only the mask of the symbolic order" (Lacan, *Ego*, 326). The last line of *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text* reflects the

connection between the death drive, addiction and the inevitable return to symbolic surroundings. The text asks, "O death where is thy sting?", and answers with, "The man is never on time..." (289). The repetitive, undead aspect of the death drive, with its constant return to "symbolic surroundings", means that the addict, despite his intentions, must always return to the realm of the symbolic order, rendered here as the drug dealer who is never on time. Being in the arms of Morpheus and throes of the cyclical death drive does not overcome the symbolic world, but rather necessitates a perpetual vacillation between the intoxicated stupor and mediated reality. In maintaining this link between the "pre-ontological universe" and "natural", "'symbolic' surroundings", *Naked Lunch* retains its interstitial status as illiterature. However, *Naked Lunch* does not represent a "tension between the narrative form and the 'death drive'", because *Naked Lunch's* narrative form is addiction: the contemporary death drive *par excellence*.

Naked Lunch's narrative form is the cyclical death drive and this explains the text's lack of artistic totality. This is underlined by Norman Mailer's comments on the text's structure and its relationship to addiction: "what is fascinating to me is that there is a structure to the book, you see, which is doubtless imperfect. I think one reason we can't call it a great book like *Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses*, the imperfection of this structure. There is no doubt as to the man's talent while it was, perhaps, excited and inflamed by drug addiction, it was also hurt" (*NL*, xiv). While the text that Mailer is referring to lacked the "Deposition" that was added after *Naked Lunch's* trial, he still views the text in terms of addiction, as this was the basis of its defense at trial. For Mailer, *Naked Lunch's* structure is the cyclical death drive of addiction, not the narrative form evident in "*Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses*", hence its imperfection. However, with addiction as its structure or "*logos*", *Naked Lunch* moves away from being a fragmented body of text that describes a "pre-ontological universe" and becomes a novel.

The "Deposition" insists that *Naked Lunch* articulates the experience and logic of addiction, while also explicitly stating that the text was written in the throes of the junk habit. With addiction being both the origin and destination of *Naked Lunch*, the meaning of the text is made tautological and

the text's fictionalised origins adopt a cyclical, though no doubt mythic, power: "one takes refuge in tautology... when one is at a loss for an explanation" (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 153). "This repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist, it allows him to decipher the myth: it is the insistence of a kind of behaviour which reveals its intention" (119). *Naked Lunch's* mythos of addiction has far more in kind with the modern, ideological myths discussed in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* than those that structure modernist works like Joyce's *Ulysses*. The intention of *Naked Lunch's* mythologised introduction is to order a text where "one is at a loss for an explanation", but also to illustrate how addiction, like ideology, organises and interpellates a certain mode of cognition.

The "Deposition" not only introduces the concepts of the "junk pyramid" and "The Algebra of Need" but allows their external, mathematical, structures to control the text: "As a discourse external to the concept and to the thing itself, as a machine devoid of meaning or life, as an anatomical structure, the preface always has some affinity with the procedure of mathematics" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 13). The "Atrophied Preface" glosses the same idea: "Abstract concepts, bare as algebra, narrow down to a black turd or a pair of aging cajones" (*NL*, 224). Burroughs's use of the mathematical term "Algebra" is telling, since both prefaces and addictions deal in supplements, substitutions and abstractions: external "anatomical" structures, "devoid of meaning or life," that attempt to erase or subtract the disruptive, organic life which they speak for. *Naked Lunch* obsessively denies the consistency of abstract concepts – be they political, scientific, psychological or aesthetic; rather the text seeks to encourage certain modes of reading and interpretation only to deny their reliability. In a calculated manner, *Naked Lunch's* introduction pre-emptively forges a hermeneutic desire in the reader, to read the text as a text of addiction, which the impossible text actively resists: "And to implicate and undermine even the reader's most elementary hermeneutic authority, *Naked Lunch* resists the interpretation of the text as confessional that it also seems to invite" (Wermer-Colan, 512). *Naked Lunch* both produces and undermines the ideological conditions of its own reading. The challenge of reading this

contradictory text is formed out of the relationship between its self-evident content, as an account of addiction, and the wilfully enigmatic design of the novel. Oliver Harris suggests that “the novel is not just ambiguous but antagonistic” (*Secret*, 218). Similarly, Robin Lydenberg writes, “Burroughs’s texts undermine the very forms they use, the very interpretations they invite” (34). Burroughs describes his own text in terms of it being a sexual encounter and horrific assault: “It leaps in bed with you, and performs unmentionable acts. Then it thrusts a long cold needle deep into your spine and gives you an injection of ice water”⁸² (*L*, 255). This experience is in part produced by a text that initially interpellates and then attacks a certain kind of reading. Jennie Skerl writes, “*Naked Lunch* is presented as ‘revelation and prophecy’... It is not only a record of one individual’s vision, but an attempt to re-create that vision in the reader” (*Burroughs*, 44)”. *Naked Lunch*’s introduction produces an addicted way of reading that is also a way of seeing and a way of being. It is the mythic and ideological form of *Naked Lunch*, rather than its deranged and explicit content, that best illustrates how addiction functions. Addiction is thus rendered as a mode of cognitive behaviour. *Naked Lunch*’s strange ethics and aesthetics stand on its drug-like ability to change consciousness, most specifically the introduction’s ability to augment the reader’s perception of the text.

The myth of *Naked Lunch*, revealed in its own introductory account of its origins, is a trope borrowed from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”. *Naked Lunch*’s myth is provided by a text which Jennie Skerl incorrectly labels, “the factual and autobiographical introduction” (*Burroughs*, 43). However as Oliver Harris’s material research reveals, “the ‘Deposition’... mimics and belongs to that Romantic tradition of false prefaces perfected by Coleridge” (*Secret*, 187). The disjointed structure and hallucinatory aesthetics of *Naked Lunch* necessitated a device that would provide it with unity and meaning, or what Burroughs referred to earlier as “saleable writing”. “Junk is the ideal product” but also the ideal producer of *Naked Lunch*. With junk as “the ultimate merchandise”, addiction, as a source of

⁸² Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated January 12th, 1955.

readerly fascination, becomes the saleable product that *Naked Lunch* is offering, with “[no] sales talk necessary” (*NL*, xxxix). Junk addiction makes *Naked Lunch*, a text that lacks “artistic unity or wholeness”, a marketable, unified novel. Further to this, the dynamic between the straightforward, ideological “Introduction” and the incomprehensible text sets in motion *Naked Lunch*’s criticism of addiction.

In its structure *Naked Lunch* maps a division between a logocentric account of language, evidenced in the introduction and the disruptive play of signification that occurs in the text: “*Naked Lunch* is written out of such a struggle for mastery” (Harris, *Secret*, 190). The apparently unruly schizophrenia of the text does not mean, however, that it overcomes the dominance of the “factual” introduction. Rather, as Jamie Russell writes in regards to *Naked Lunch*, “an association can be drawn between possession and schizophrenia” (50). As such, the introduction can be seen as an attempt to possess and control the schizophrenic text. The schizophrenic text of *Naked Lunch* cannot represent itself, it must be represented by the “Deposition”. Out of the miasma of intoxication and dissemination, addiction and logocentrism re-organise and reterritorialize the world. *Naked Lunch* embodies the ideological structure of modernity in the asymmetrical relationship that exists between its logocentric introduction and the schizophrenic text. Thus, *Naked Lunch* does not just reflect the cognitive structure of addiction but also the structure of modern forms of political coercion.

Modern modes of political domination exist because, and not in spite of, the confusion and uncertainty they engender. This is what Naomi Klein calls, in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, “shock therapy”. Klein writes “extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interests it serves” (327). Horkheimer and Adorno similarly recognise that, “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (3). *Naked Lunch* functions in a similar but opposite way, alerting us to the aesthetic style and dispersed, illusory form of modern ideology which is supported by grotesque and contradictory fantasies (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64). As Burroughs writes in his essay “The Limits of Control”, “All modern control

systems are riddled with contradictions” (*The Adding Machine*, 119). *Naked Lunch* does not reject these contradictions but embraces them. In *Naked Lunch*, the clean, rational sobriety of Freeland is countered by the hybridity, anarchy and intoxication of “Interzone”, yet both are violent, contradictory societies. Burroughs offers no solution to this political impasse: “Control, bureaucracy, regimentation, these are merely symptoms of a deeper sickness that no political or economic program can touch. What is the sickness itself?” (*I*, 69). Rather, *Naked Lunch* bestows moral and authorial power on the reader who is denied hermeneutic satisfaction: “Encouraged to interpret the text as the author’s confessions, the reader, unable to identify the confessant’s moral stance within a morally ambiguous text, must determine his or her own moral stance in regards to what amount to the most disgraceful aspects of American ideology” (Wermer-Colan, 512).

Naked Lunch’s political indeterminacy is couched in an ambiguous textual economy. Writing of Burroughs’s organisational struggles with *Naked Lunch’s* disorder, Oliver Harris states, “what is true at a social level also applies at the artistic level; namely, that it is the normalizing pressure for unity and order that manufactures fragmentation and abnormality, so that Burroughs’ insistent search for principles of coherence and control can only enlarge the field of the disorderly” (*Secret*, 211). As such Burroughs’s difficulty in regards to organising *Naked Lunch* became one of its central tropes and ethical imperatives: the resistance of “[abstract] concepts bare as algebra” that “narrow down”. Instead the text advises “giving up control... [and] letting things happen in their own way without interference” (215). Following this, it would seem that disorder results from attempts to implement order, at the political, aesthetic and subjective level, and this is clearly evident in *Naked Lunch’s* “talking asshole routine”.

Disgust Discussed

The section of *Naked Lunch* that has received by far the most critical attention is the “talking asshole routine”. In this scene Doctor Benway tells the story of a vaudeville performer whose act involves making his asshole talk: “His whole abdomen would move up and down you dig farting out the words. It

was unlike anything I ever heard" (*NL*, 132). However, this performance has a dire outcome for the performer. Eventually the asshole starts to talk on its own:

Then it developed sort of teeth-like little raspy in – curving hooks and started eating. He thought this was cute at first and built an act around it, but the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth. Finally it talked all the time day and night, you could hear him for blocks screaming at it to shut up, and beating it with his fist, and sticking candles up it, but nothing did any good and the asshole said to him: 'It's you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don't need you around here any more. I can talk and eat *and shit*'. (*NL*, 132 - 133)

Finally, the asshole subsumes the identity of the performer. The performer's brain eventually dies and only his dead eyes remain as a cold reminder of his existence.

Critics' readings of this scene vary. Robin Lydenberg suggests that this scene offers "a history of voice and body... language and materiality". She argues that the body is organised by language into a hierarchical structure which this "routine" parodies (22-23). Christopher Breu adopts a similar stance to Lydenberg, but the outcomes of each of their arguments are different. Breu believes this return of materiality will result in the possibility of a radical politics (220), while Lydenberg believes the "talking asshole routine" is a "repetition of [the] scenario of domination and destruction... a blueprint for understanding the radical nature of Burroughs' fiction" (28). For Wayne Pounds the "talking asshole" is a "postmodern anus" that speaks of, but not for, the third world: "Through the anal orifice Burroughs gives voice to the silent and excluded. To paraphrase Marx, heretofore the anal had

been unable to represent itself; it could only be represented" (149). Breu and Pounds's arguments agree somewhat, although Pounds is more specific in describing the radical politics the "talking asshole" speaks of.

Oliver Harris decries the amount of critical attention given to the "talking asshole routine". He discusses how the sketch has functioned for critics as a means for defining the text as a whole and it is precisely this reductive allegorical process that Harris believes is the target of the "talking asshole" (*Secret*, 232-238). Jamie Russell offers a compelling reading of the scene that relates it to other "routines" from the novel: "Like the agent who is made to believe his cover story, the carny man's ventriloquy leaves him in a compromised situation of psychic disintegration in which his original identity is overwhelmed by the secondary identity he assumes" (48). I concur with Russell's identification of this central process in Burroughs's fiction – where "original identity is overwhelmed by... ventriloquy secondary identity" – but I believe the "talking asshole" sketch has an even deeper resonance.

All of the above readings relate the "talking asshole" to the division of mind and body, "language and materiality" or identity and performance but they somewhat ignore how this "routine" intersects the mind/body relationship in a critically and politically important way. Harris comes closest to identifying this when he discusses the famous *Times Literary Supplement* correspondence that occurred in response to John Willet's review of Burroughs's work. *Naked Lunch* came in for some significant criticism: "The responses to *Naked Lunch* of the notorious 'UGH...' reviewer... were entirely proper, in the sense that they reacted physically to what we, busy contriving our analysis, now tend to swallow without blinking" (Harris, *Secret*, 230). This is an extremely important insight. Critics attempt to fit this "routine" within conceptual frameworks, often ignoring the effects of the piece on its readership. As John Willet reports in his review of *Naked Lunch*, "[the] first shock effects are strong as the rash reader plunges in, then a steady nausea follows which hangs around him long after he has fought his way into the fresh air" ("Ugh...", 41). Edith Sitwell's response to Willet's review details a similar reaction: "I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with my nose

nailed to other people's lavatories. I prefer Chanel Number 5" (qtd. in Skerl and Lydenberg, 49). Harris suggests that, while these responses are appropriately visceral, they lack the sense of humour that pervades the piece (230). But perhaps this sense of humour performs the role of Chanel Number 5 for Harris.

It is precisely the unthinkingly physical response of disgust that the "talking asshole routine" not only demands, but performs. As Benway describes:

This ass talk had a sort of gut frequency. It hit you right down there like you gotta go. You know when the old colon gives you the elbow and it feels sorta cold inside, and you know all you have to do is turn loose? Well this talking hit you right down there, a bubbly, thick stagnant sound, a sound you could smell. (*NL*, 132)

A "sound you can smell" is the kind of language that causes the subject to respond in a manner that overrides more rational, empathetic responses. Disgust changes consciousness: It has been demonstrated that disgust operates in a discrete neurological section of the brain, that bypasses conscious thinking but interacts with the subject's sense of morality (Haidt, Rozin et al, 107-131):

There are threats that one cannot simply run away from or fight off. Some of these threats, such as oral contamination, may be an inescapable aspect of the human bodily experience... Disgust or some subset of its embodied schemata, is the emotional response to this heterogeneous class of threats. Disgust makes us step back, push away, or otherwise draw a protective line between the self and the threat... In conclusion, socio-moral disgust is not a quirk of the English language. People in all cultures have bodies which provide them with rich sets of embodied schemata. Each culture draws

from these schemata to spin its own particular ‘webs of significance’, upon which its social and moral life is based. (127-128)

It is this conception of disgust that allows the “talking asshole” sketch to be read in ways that are politically radical. By way of comparison I include a section from *Hitler’s Table Talk*, a collection that transcribes the *Führer’s* after dinner monologues:

I don't see much future for the Americans ... it's a decayed country. And they have their racial problem, and the problem of social inequalities ... my feelings against Americanism are feelings of hatred and deep repugnance ... everything about the behaviour of American society reveals that it's half Judaised, and the other half negrified. How can one expect a State like that to hold together? (Hitler, 188)

Hitler communicates using the language of disgust: speaking of America as “a decayed country” as well as mentioning his feelings of “hatred and deep repugnance” towards the nation. America, as a “decayed” repugnant country, cannot “hold together”, but the politicisation of disgust interpellates and unifies a body politic. It is the ability of the language of disgust to usurp the higher offices of the mind that makes it a powerful political tool. Illustrating, defusing and thereby effectively countering the power of disgust is the “talking asshole” section’s didactic function. Disgust is a means of communication that is a form of mind control: that is a means of making things happen. To emphasise this, Benway offers this addendum to his tale of the “talking asshole”:

That’s the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between bureaus, because there’s always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils, throwing out globs of that un-D.T. to fall

anywhere and grow into some degenerate cancerous life-form, reproducing a hideous random image. Some would be entirely made of penis-like erectile tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of 3 and 4 eyes together, criss-cross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell. (*NL*, 133-134)

Disgust passes the censor because it is the censor. While disgust functions to repress “desiring machines”, such as sexual desire, it also reterritorializes “embodied schemata” towards manifesting its own political desires. This reterritorialization forms “degenerate cancerous [lifeforms]... Some would be entirely made of penis-like erectile tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of 3 and 4 eyes together, criss-cross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell.” This section emphasises how disgust can re-organise the body, forming cancerous bodies without organs that enable microfascism, where “desire desires its own repression” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 163, 215). Via the moral and aesthetic dictates of censorship, such as the Hays Code⁸³, disgust embedded itself in the general population, where it remains in “a space between” waiting to be called to action whenever power requires it. In the language of contemporary Hollywood cinema, the representations of sex were heavily codified: “Precisely because it must never take place, everything centers on copulation” (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 140–41). Through the repression of representations of sex and bodily functions, disgust is weaponised, thereby forming “degenerate cancerous” lifeforms: subjects of disgust, who are themselves disgusting. Fascist political movements disseminate a political aesthetic of disgust, project it onto their enemies and then present themselves as the cure, or the means towards creating social and cultural hygiene: thereby genocide becomes ethnic

⁸³ “[The] 1927 List of Don’ts and Be Carefuls (a list of eleven subjects that could never appear in films and twenty five themes that should be handled with care... implemented by Hays through the MPPDA)” (Lewis, 138).

cleansing. In *Naked Lunch*, Benway's "Freeland" demonstrates how the obscene and fascistic underbelly of modernity is sanitized and put to work under the name of healthcare, progress and liberty. It is the simultaneous bureaucratization and medicalisation of society that enables violence and intolerance to be carried out under the façade of being modern, democratic and, above all, hygienic.

"Freeland", *Naked Lunch's* synecdoche of the various social democracies of Scandinavia, is ironically named, given how the population are cruelly coerced into leading hygienic lives. Despite Freeland being "a welfare state", "[the] threat implicit in this enveloping benevolence stifled the concept of rebellion" (186).

Dr. Benway had been called in as advisor to the Freeland Republic, a place given over to free love and continual bathing. The citizens are well adjusted, cooperative, honest, tolerant and above all clean. But the invoking of Benway indicates all is not well behind that hygienic facade: Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control. (17)

The dialectic between disease and health is intimated by the suggestion that the invocation "of Benway indicates all is not well behind that hygienic façade" and suggests a direct connection between the administration of health and "interrogation, brainwashing and control". All not being "well behind the hygienic façade" resonates with Žižek's description of the dialectic of ideology: "The field of Law is thus split into... a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony, and its obscene, superegoic inverse" (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64). "Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems" and is thus representative of the symbolic order, but he uses this ability for the purposes of "brainwashing and control". Benway symbolises the supreme power of "the Law" as he is master of both "a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony, and its obscene, superegoic inverse". It is Benway's ability to combine symbolic

authority with the “obscene, superegoic” power of disgust that makes him a truly formidable and malevolent figure.

Psychological torture, as opposed to physical violence, is the means through which the status quo is maintained in Freeland: “‘I deplore brutality,’ he said. ‘It’s not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence, gives rise, when skilfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt’” (17). Benway’s methods are sanitized forms of violence and control, making them more effective and palatable for a modern, “free” society. Benway’s power is derived from him being “a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems”; more specifically, the language systems of science and medicine. Benway’s authority is founded upon the scientific register of his speech, making him an effective figure of knowledge/power. Timothy S. Murphy explains that “[control] is based on knowledge, on the accumulation and manipulation of knowledge of a certain kind: Horkheimer and Adorno call this ‘instrumental’ knowledge, reason that is subordinated like a tool to whatever end it is expected to serve” (*Wising*, 80). Benway establishes his epistemic power by consistently adopting the language of “instrumental” knowledge towards his own ends, usually in the name of making the human body and society more efficient. This process reaches its apotheosis with his image of the human body being converted into an “all-purpose blob” (*NL*, 131).

Freeland is a society subject to Benway’s utilitarian desires and represents “a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action, to the complete parasitism of a virus” (134). Benway is director of the “Reconditioning Centre” which houses Freeland’s undesirable “Others”: schizophrenics, addicts and foreigners (37). The repression of these “Others” eventually leads to a revolution in Freeland, when “the electronic brain” that controls Freeland’s Reconditioning Centre “went berserk” (23). However, Benway’s epistemic power seems to be re-established later in *Naked Lunch* when he deals with a suspected homosexual and destroys his psyche using psychological manipulation and the language of disgust.

Despite Freeland’s ostensibly liberal and progressive political values

– “If a citizen wanted anything from a load of bone meal to a sexual partner some department was ready to offer effective aid” – homosexuality is viewed as an illness in need of a cure (NL, 186). In the section entitled “The Examination”, Carl Peterson is called to attend with Dr. Benway at Freeland’s “Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis”: “‘What on earth could they want with me?’ he thought irritably.... ‘A mistake most likely.’ But he knew they didn’t make mistakes.... Certainly not mistakes of identity” (NL, 186). Homosexuality, while apparently legal in “Freeland” is still a “*sexual deviation*” and implicitly psychotic, unhygienic and foreign, given the name of the government agency that deals with it: “Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis” (186). When interviewing Carl, Dr. Benway discusses homosexuality purely in terms of medical science, but he also adopts the language of disgust:

“We regard it as a misfortune... a sickness... certainly nothing to be censored or uh sanctioned anymore than say... tuberculosis.... Yes,” he repeated firmly as if Carl had raised an objection.... “Tuberculosis. On the other hand you can readily see that *any* illness imposes certain, should we say *obligations*, certain *necessities* of a prophylactic nature on the authorities concerned with public health, such necessities to be imposed, needless to say, with a minimum of inconvenience and hardship to the unfortunate individual, who has, through no fault of his own, become uh infected.... That is to say, of course, the minimum hardship compatible with adequate protection of other individuals who are not so infected... We do not find obligatory vaccination for smallpox an unreasonable measure.... Nor isolation for certain contagious diseases.... I am sure you will agree that individuals infected with hurumph what the French call ‘Les Maladies galantes’ heh heh heh should be compelled to undergo treatment if they do not report voluntarily.”

The doctor went on chuckling and rocking in his chair like a mechanical toy.... Carl realized that he was expected to say something.

“That seems reasonable,” he said. (*NL*, 188)

Benway’s sinister medical language pathologizes homosexuality while valorising the political institutions of “Freeland”, of which he is an integral part. As Foucault outlines, “The first task of the doctor is ... political” (*Birth of the Clinic*, 39) and the political task of the doctor and psychoanalyst, Dr. Benway, is enforcing Freeland’s rigid, hierarchical taxonomies. Benway as “[the] psychoanalyst, tasked with bringing the patient back into line with normative society, produces violence and despair precisely through reducing the patient’s options to arbitrary binary positions of sane/insane, normal/abnormal” and heterosexual/homosexual (Jarvis, 186). Carla Kaplan discusses America’s “taxonomie fever” and “mania for category-making” which involves a “passion for creating and identifying human types, rooting out undesirables, marking the limits of national desirability” (151). Pathologizing homosexuality leads to what Oliver Harris calls “the self-disciplining of consciousness” along with “the voluntary border-patrolling of sexual identity” (*Secret*, 86); this becomes a key strategy in furthering Benway’s political goal: “A functioning police state [that] needs no police” (*NL*, 36).

The pathologization of subject positions leads to a “self-disciplining of consciousness”, where power’s “success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 86). Dr. Benway declares that homosexuality is a “sickness... certainly something not to be censored”. It is like “tuberculosis”, requiring “*obligations*, certain *necessities* of a prophylactic nature”, but causing “a minimum of inconvenience and hardship to the unfortunate individual, who has, through no fault of his own, become uh infected [...] We do not find obligatory vaccination for smallpox an unreasonable measure.... Nor isolation for certain contagious diseases.... I am sure you will agree that individuals infected with [homosexuality] should be

compelled to undergo treatment if they do not report voluntarily". Benway's medical authority appears irrefutable and Carl can only acquiesce to the good doctor: "That seems reasonable". The medical language of disease and disgust is a powerful yet subtle political force and Benway wields it with condescending malevolence.

After this interview, Dr. Benway tests Carl for homosexuality. The process is highly invasive and degrading: Carl is forced to provide a semen sample and the nurse who assists him treats him with contempt. The test that Benway carries out on Carl's semen sample proves negative, but by applying psychological forms of coercion, Benway gets Carl to admit that he is a homosexual (*NL*, 191-197). Jamie Russell writes that, "Carl's recognition of the state's power leads him to confess everything to Benway with very little prompting. The examination is as psychical as it is physical: Benway simultaneously plays the role of psychoanalyst, policeman, and priest" (45). Yet it is primarily Benway's power as a medical authority that allows him to manipulate Carl. Benway regards homosexuality specifically as a disease rather than a moral failing. While this pathological view of politically maligned identities may be regarded by some as progressive – in regards to addiction specifically⁸⁴ – in *Naked Lunch* it is represented as a more potent and dangerous form of coercion than traditional, moral forms of social demarcation. Carl has a girlfriend, yet he admits that during his time in the army he slept with other men when he was short of money. Towards the end of "The Examination" the reader learns that Carl had an amorous relationship with a fellow officer, a detail which is then followed by the description of him falling into a state of schizoid psychosis:

A green flare exploded in Carl's brain. He saw Hans' lean brown body – twisting towards him, quick breath on his shoulder. The flare went out. Some huge insect was squirming in his hand.

⁸⁴ Towards the end of "The Examination" the scene briefly lapses into a police interview where a junky is being asked to set-up a drug peddler (*NL*, 195-196).

His whole being jerked away in an electric spasm of revulsion. Carl got to his feet shaking with rage. "What are you writing there?" he demanded. "you often doze off like that?? in the middle of a conversation...?" "I wasn't asleep that is." "You weren't?" "It's just that the *whole thing* is unreal.... I'm going now. I don't care. You can't force me to stay." He was walking across the room towards the door. He had been walking a long time. A creeping numbness dragged his legs. The door seemed to recede. "Where can you go, Carl?" The doctor's voice reached him from a great distance. "Out... Away... Through the door..." "The Green Door, Carl?" The doctor's voice was barely audible. The whole room was exploding out into space. (NL, 197)

Here we can see the psychological destruction wrought by the rigid classification and pathologization of identity, in this case homosexual identity. This leads to the creation of a fragmented and schizophrenic subject who will no doubt become a fixture at Freeland's reconditioning centre. As Jamie Russell writes, "this schizophrenic fragmentation is the very mark of the regulation of the gay subject by the heterosexual dominant" (13).

One of Burroughs's key cultural contributions – which is echoed in Deleuze's "Societies of Control" – is the observation that control in the modern age is "partial and not complete" (*The Adding Machine*, 117). In *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), Burroughs begins to concede that the "cut-up method", itself a literary approximation of the schizophrenic experience, could be used, in tandem with drugs, to achieve "partial and incomplete" but no less powerful forms of mass media control (16). "Remember that when the human nervous system unscrambles a scrambled message this will seem to the subject like his very own ideas which just occurred to him, which indeed it did" (16). Benway recognises drugs as an effective means of control: "Pending more precise knowledge of brain electronics, drugs remain an essential tool of the interrogator in his assault on the subject's personal

identity" (*NL*, 25). Benway's discussion of mind control drugs recalls Lee's discussion of "yage" being researched by Cold War superpowers. In *Queer*, Lee, discussing "yage" intoxication, suggests that the schizophrenic is open to control, that the schizoid is highly telepathic but strictly a receiver. "Automatic obedience, synthetic schizophrenia, mass-produced to order. That is the Russian dream, and America is not far behind" (*Q*, 81). The schizophrenic text, like the schizoid, is also open to masterful regulation and we can see this in the controlling relationship that exists between *Naked Lunch's* introduction and the text. However, like the relationship between the "Latah" and his master (*NL*, 79-80), the relationship between the schizoid Other and normative political identities is always in danger of reversal or collapse, as the latter proves itself to be addicted to the maligned image of the former.

In one section of *Naked Lunch*, the American president is seen engaging in strange sex acts with a drug addict. Without contact with Lee, his "recharge connection", the president – as an "oblique addict" (67-68) – suffers from the same schizoid psychosis as Carl does when he is faced with accepting homosexual identity. The deployment of stereotypes signifies the master's dependence on such arrested images as they maintain his normative identity. The president is as dependent as the drug addict, his powerful persona addicted to the maligned identity of drug addicts and homosexuals.

In the normal run of things, the normative identity of the president is maintained while non-normative and peripheral identities, such as those of the addict and homosexual, are in danger of collapsing into schizophrenic fragmentation. This is a product of disruptions that occur within the symbolic order. The dissemination or infinite deferral that occurs as a product of signification is problematic. Derrida discusses this in "Plato's Pharmacy" in relation to the term "*pharmakon*" which can mean both poison and cure, amongst other things: "For example, 'pharmakon' is already in communication with all the words from the same family, with all the significations constructed out of the same root, and these communications do not stop there" (*Dissemination*, 130). As Derrida outlines, writing is a "pharmakon" or drug which is deemed responsible for the disruption that

occurs within language: "Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws" (70). Writing thus becomes the scapegoat for the problems that exist within any system of signification: "The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city-these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual" (130). Similarly, in Freeland addicts, homosexuals, schizophrenics and other undesirable subjects are sacrificed in order to maintain the symbolic order and its concurrent power structure.

The schizophrenic, infinitely disseminating aspects of language are foisted onto society's Others in order to maintain the social and symbolic status quo. In this regard Timothy S. Murphy is completely mistaken when he states that "[the] schizophrenic model seeks, not to maximize profit by minimizing change, but to maximize change, to push the flows that capitalism tries to manage to the point at which they overflow and make the extraction of profit and the exercise of control impossible" (Murphy, *Wising*, 38). *Naked Lunch* consistently represents how the "schizophrenic model" is not an intrinsically radical form that makes "control impossible" but, rather, the schizophrenic model is regularly transformed into what Žižek calls "the obscene, superegoic inverse" of "a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony". Thus the schizophrenic model is often used as a means to alienate political Others in order to maintain control and "the field of Law" (*The Universal Exception*, 64).

Naked Lunch's rejection of novelistic structure draws lines between the literary and the schizophrenic. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs operates in a fashion akin to the "great author" described by Deleuze and Guattari:

he cannot prevent himself from tracing flows and causing them to circulate, flows that split asunder the catholic and despotic signifier of his work, and that necessarily nourish a revolutionary machine on the horizon. That's what style is, or rather the absence of style – asyntactic, agramatical: the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a signifying thing, but what causes

it to move to flow, and to explode – desire. For Literature is like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression. (*Anti-Oedipus*, 145)

However, *Naked Lunch* traces these schizophrenic flows to the point where schizophrenia becomes a tool for unifying and totalising “Control,” that is, the point where schizophrenia and the “despotic signifier” no longer oppose but abet each other. Schizophrenia is both a means to “Control” and to build the “revolutionary machine on the horizon”. While Burroughs may be an author of a schizophrenic illiterature, he also recognises how this involves being of a piece with systems of profit and control. As such Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* articulates “a morally ambiguous over-identification with the bigoted, chauvinist, and phobic side of Cold War America's ruling ideology” (Wermer-Colan, 511-512). Unlike Murphy, who believes the schizophrenic model makes “the extraction of profit and the exercise of control impossible”, Burroughs recognises that such faith denies the contradictory form of schizophrenia in and of itself and therefore represents another one of the “[abstract] concepts, bare as algebra” that attempt to narrow down and limit the schizophrenic model, while it is a model that denies all limitations, being “a process without end” (Murphy, 38). While *Naked Lunch* rejects abstract concepts, it also explicitly embraces and identifies with “the obscene secret” that supports conservative social orthodoxy (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, xviii). This ethical imperative, to reject abstractions, reaches its ethical conclusion, not by aligning itself with a schizophrenic model that opposes “Control”, but rather by identifying with the schizophrenic aspects of “Control”, suggesting that the deterritorializing power of schizophrenia is a component of “Control”.

Schizophrenia, as a mode that deterritorializes, will, after that work is done, prompt a recoding of unmediated, schizophrenic desire. “Indeed, the struggle between decoding and recoding can be considered the central drama of capitalism, according to Deleuze and Guattari, even though they suggest that the basic historical tendency of capitalism is to decode and free desiring-production from social order” (Holland, “Desire”, 58). Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* appears to recognise that those who own the means to schizophrenic

deterritorialisation and unifying reterritorialization own the means to create reality: “desire produces, its product is real” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 145). The structure of *Naked Lunch* embodies the interplay that exists between deterritorialisation and reterritorialization as it contains a deterritorializing, schizophrenic text and a reterritorializing, unifying preface. Hence the text is not interested in championing the schizophrenic model *per se* but in detailing how it is used to forge “Control” and “reality”.

Claire Colebrook argues that Deleuze and Guattari’s “‘schizo’ is not a psychological type (not a schizophrenic), but a way of thinking a life not governed by any fixed norm or image of self – a self in flux and becoming, rather than a self that has submitted to law. The schizo is a challenge to the way we think and write” (Colebrook, 7). However, the ‘schizo’s’ revolutionary practice of deterritorialisation will, if it is socially and culturally successful, necessitate a future reterritorialization, that is a new orthodoxy. Furthermore, those who are regarded as ‘schizo’ by the social dominant, that is those who are pathologized for not being “governed by any fixed norm or image of self”, those who are “in flux” rather than “submitted to law”, are, like Carl, still subject to an often entirely unwanted fragmentation of their identity when they recognise their own dislocation within a system of “reality” which views their behaviours and desires as deviant and disgusting. Being both within and outside of the political order frequently leads to cognitive dissonance and, by proxy, the dissolution of a consciousness that was in large part formed by that political “reality”.

Disgust is a means towards producing and maintaining particular forms of “reality”. The politicization of disgust reterritorializes biological responses in order to malign the subjectivity of Others thereby establishing a political totality: the creation of a literal body politic. The political and moral transfiguration of disgust forms a fascistic body without organs, repurposing bodily responses as political reactions. This modification of the body aligns neatly with Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisation of the BwO: “Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly... Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It’s a question of life and death... It is where everything is played out” (*A Thousand*

Plateaus, 151). The schizophrenic image of the BwO “is where everything is played out”, not just “a self in flux and becoming” but also “a self that has submitted to law”. *Naked Lunch*, rather than rejecting the political modification of bodily disgust, embraces it and pushes it to its logical extreme. *Naked Lunch*’s graphic and violent images of homosexual acts exaggerate conservative views on homosexuality to the point of parody. While in *Queer*, Burroughs presents an image of a homosexual who subversively refuses to “to conform to type or class”, in *Naked Lunch* homosexuality is almost invariably presented as monstrous, violent and depraved (Harris, *Secret*, 94). In so doing, *Naked Lunch* explicitly represents homophobic morality as “the obscene ‘nightly’ law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the ‘public’ Law” (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 63).

Naked Lunch aims “[to] win the energies of intoxication for the revolution”, but this involves intimately interfacing with the intoxicating and obscene ideological kernel of contemporary political reality (Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 236). What Žižek describes as the “obscene, superegoic inverse” fundamental to the “field of Law” is a precise and succinct summation of the political adoption of disgust (*The Universal Exception*, 64). By identifying with the disgusting underbelly of ideology, *Naked Lunch* returns the gaze of disgust back onto political orthodoxy. “Freeland... where citizens are well adjusted, co-operatives, honest, tolerant and above all clean”, quickly deteriorates into orgiastic violence, as political “Others” – foreigners, addicts and homosexuals – return as extreme versions of their maligned identities: “Gentle reader, the ugliness of that spectacle buggers description” (21, 39). The pinnacle of enlightenment values, “Freeland”, is founded upon the “Reconditioning” of schizophrenics, homosexuals, foreigners and other undesirables, but this leads to a reappearance of what is suppressed by the political order: its own participation in, and enjoyment of the obscene, violent, fantasmatic and contradictory underbelly of ideology (*NL*, 28). The collapse of “Freeland” at the end of the “Benway” chapter illustrates how “the normalizing pressure for unity and order... manufactures fragmentation and abnormality” (*Secret*, 211). Unity and order are always in danger of being

torn apart by the monsters they create. The “Benway” chapter in *Naked Lunch* excavates the monstrosities that are obscured by “a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony”, with the symbolic order here rendered as “the electronic brain” that maintains public order in Freeland (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64, *NL*, 23). However, Freeland’s “electronic brain” going “berserk” is perhaps no accident, as when the reader is returned to Freeland in a later section – “The Examination” – order has clearly been re-established.

The return of the repressed, described in the “Benway” section, represents a Bakhtinian carnivalesque event in Freeland: “carnival... does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it... subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7-8). Freeland’s temporary collapse involves the participation of all, including “tourists” who participate in and are subject to the transgressions of the escaped ‘Others’ (*NL*, 37). “Latahs” also appear in this scene as representatives of the Bakhtinian blurring of actors and spectators: “Latahs imitate the passers-by with monkey-like obscenity” (*NL*, 37). The reader is also pulled into the carnivalesque spectacle with the text’s address to the “Gentle reader”. Even the symbolic order is forced to participate in an obscene spectacle that “buggers description”. As Lydenberg points out, “Burroughs stresses the same merging of audience and performer (reader and narrator), the same reversals and permutations of established order and discourse which Bakhtin associates with the carnival spirit” (147). However, Burroughs’s adoption of the “carnival spirit” is designed to reveal its fundamental role in the maintenance of political and social orthodoxy: “As numerous analyses from Bakhtin onward have shown, periodic transgressions are inherent to the social order; they function as a condition of the latter's stability. (The mistake of Bakhtin – or, rather, of some of his followers – was to present an idealized image of these 'transgressions', to pass in silence over lynching parties, and so forth, as the crucial form of the

‘carnavalesque suspension of social hierarchy’)” (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 28). As Mary McCarthy points out “‘the folk-custom of burning a Negro recurs throughout [*Naked Lunch*] as a sort of Fourth-of-July carnival with fireworks” (McCarthy, *The Writing on the Wall*, 36). Public burnings, lynching’s and hangings are repetitive features in *Naked Lunch*, indicative of the violent and obscene enjoyment fundamental to law and order: “Giggling rioters copulate to the screams of a burning Nigra... Signal flares of orgasm burst over the world” (208). The carnivalesque in *Naked Lunch* more often serves the ruling order which has stolen the power of intoxication from the revolution. The violent excesses of the carnivalesque and its obscene enjoyment represents the transformation of transgressive desire into microfascism, where “desire desires its own repression” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). Descriptions of carnivalesque transgressions in *Naked Lunch* not only function as a cathartic form of public enjoyment but almost invariably celebrate their society’s cruel and hierarchical structure. Thus such excessive displays are representative of “the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (Foucault qtd. in Miller, *Passion*, 369).

The Queer Carnival

In *Naked Lunch*’s introduction, Burroughs speaks of one key section: the hanging scenes in “Hassan’s Rumpus Room”. Here, the billionaire Hassan O’Leary, who sponsors this carnivalesque event, screams, “Freedom Hall here folks!” as hundreds of boys from every corner of the globe are ceremonially hanged for his and his audience’s pleasure (42-43). “The boys hang at different levels, some near the ceiling and others a few inches off the floor. Exquisite Balinese and Malays, Mexican Indians with fierce innocent faces and bright red gums... sneering German youths with bright blue eyes scream ‘Heil Hitler!’ as the trap falls under them” (43). In the “Deposition” Burroughs describes his intention for this scene:

Certain passages in the book that have been called
pornographic were written as a tract against Capital

Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*. These sections are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is. As always the lunch is naked. If civilized countries want to return to Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and feed their Gods with blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they actually eat and drink. Let them see what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon. (*NL*, xliv)

Burroughs here is clearly outlining that the carnivalesque is an unacknowledged component of law and order, specifically in relation to "Capital Punishment". Mentions of "Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove" and drinking "blood with the Aztecs" emphasize capital punishment's carnivalesque spirit. However, in keeping with the spirit of all prefaces, this reading places a limit on the reader's interpretation of "Hassan's Rumpus Room" and sanitises it.

The execution of boys by the billionaire Hassan O'Leary as part of a transgressive, celebratory spectacle does not so much break with the power dynamics of the ruling order but merely accentuates the cruel, hierarchical structure of everyday life. Furthermore, the violent, orgiastic and carnivalesque scenes described in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" detail not only the obscene and fantasmatic underside of the Law but also the co-option of what Lee Edelman describes as the socially pervasive trope of the queer death drive. For Lee Edelman, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). Rather than rejecting this stereotype, Edelman suggests that queers should identify with it, as the death drive represents their opposition to the social viability of a symbolic system that makes them Other:

Pope John Paul II returned to this theme, condemning state-recognized same-sex unions as parodic versions of authentic families, “based on individual egoism” rather than genuine love. Justifying that condemnation, he observed, “Such a ‘caricature’ has no future and cannot give future to any society”. Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations not only by insisting on our equal right to the social order’s prerogatives, not only by avowing our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and small ls; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop. (29)

The hanging of hundreds of “boys” in “Hassan’s Rumpus Room”, and the homosexual orgy that follows, is an artistic rendering of Edelman’s queer death drive. However, as Timothy S. Murphy points out, “Burroughs parodies the commodification of homosexuality in ‘Hassan’s Rumpus Room’” (76). Hassan O’Leary’s sponsoring of this event and his “suit of banknotes” suggest that this performance of the queer death drive is in fact the co-option of its subversive energies by capitalism (*NL*, 42). At the end of the section, A.J. “poops [Hassan’s] party” by revealing that it is not a subversive event, celebrating the queer death drive, but a codified form of a heterosexual fertility rite; in other words, the continuation of the dominant cultural order in another, ostensibly transgressive, form. Into the liquefactionist’s “Rumpus Room”, the factualist, A.J. introduces:

A horde of lust-mad American women [...] Dripping cunts, from farm and dude ranch, factory, brothel, country club, penthouse and suburb, motel and yacht and cocktail bar, strip off riding clothes, ski togs, evening dresses, levis, tea gowns, print dresses, slacks, bathing suits and kimonos. They scream and yipe and howl, leap on the guests like bitch dogs in heat with rabies. They claw at the hanged boys shrieking: "You fairy! You bastard! Fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me!" (NL, 44)

When these women become dangerously out of hand:

A.J., surrounded and fighting against overwhelming odds, throws back his head and makes with the hog-call. Immediately a thousand rutting Eskimos pour in grunting and squealing, faces tumescent, eyes hot and red, lips purple, fall on the American women.

(Eskimos have a rutting season when the tribes meet in short Summer to disport themselves in orgies. Their faces swell and lips turn purple.) (NL, 44)

Burroughs's misogyny is well documented. For Burroughs, women are the physical embodiment of societal control. Burroughs wrote of women, "I think they were a basic mistake, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error" (*The Job*, 116). In this scene the appearance of women and heterosexual sex represent the continuation of the heterosexual dominant. A.J. subverts Hassan's performance of homosexual transgression, showing that it is an exciting and violent form of acquiescence to the symbolic and cultural order. Hassan and A.J. appear as markedly similar carnivalesque, trickster figures. Only "the results of their actions reveal that Hassan uses tricks to profit and control, and A.J. uses jokes to expose and liberate" (Skerl, *Burroughs*, 41). A.J.'s position is markedly similar to Burroughs's as both overidentify with the dominant social order in order to reveal its obscene, fantasmatic foundation. The illusion being upended by A.J. in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" pertains to the assumption that transgression naturally opposes the dominant social order. Rather, late capitalism "is the ultimate

power of ‘deterritorialisation’ which undermines every fixed social identity” (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 216). Late capitalism is “the epoch in which the traditional fixity of ideological positions (patriarchal authority, fixed sexual roles, etc.) becomes an obstacle to the unbridled commodification of everyday life” (216). However, the aim of *Naked Lunch* is certainly not to champion “the traditional fixity of ideological positions” or “unity and order” over the deterritorializing model, but to show how they are concomitant with each other in the formation of the schizophrenic mode of late capitalism (216).

This refusal to consistently champion the schizophrenic model is what differentiates *Naked Lunch* and Burroughs’s other works of illiterature from the later “cut-up” texts. The “cut-ups” are accompanied by a schema where the “cut-up method” opposes “Control” and the “word virus”, and thus the “cut-up” texts more readily adhere to the pure, abstract model of schizophrenia that Murphy describes as making “the extraction of profit and the exercise of control impossible” (Murphy, *Wising*, 38). *Naked Lunch* instead maintains a link between what Carlos Castaneda calls the tonal and *nagual*, where “power hovers”. At the same time, *Naked Lunch* allows no means of escape from the “field of Law” it describes. Readers are forced to participate in the violent orgies of Interzone and the sanitised fascism of Freeland. Enjoyment and transgression figure here not as markers of an independent, self-authoring subject but as those conditions necessary to create the illusion of subjective freedom in “Freeland” and “Freedom Hall”.

The Way Out

Naked Lunch obsessively pursues transgression, the schizophrenic model and deterritorializing desire to the point where they transform into their opposites. However, Burroughs throughout his early works appears to maintain a belief in the possibility of an authentic mode of subjectivity. At the same time there remains a great degree of ambiguity towards the prospects of freedom and agency in Burroughs’s *oeuvre*. This tension, between determinism and freewill, is never attenuated and remains as a central

dialectic throughout his career. Exploring the limits of control, Burroughs's work often discovers risks and opportunities in the same place. As such, "Control" remains partial, provisional and under negotiation, while problems for controlling agents present new opportunities for extending their power. The subject's desire for agency is both a stumbling block for power and an opportunity to invent more advanced forms of control.

The underlying problem with Freeland's rational and socially democratic mode of totalitarianism is succinctly articulated in *Naked Lunch* by a dialogue that takes place between Doctor Benway's equally malevolent colleague Doctor Berger and an unnamed "Technician". The latter says, "What I'm getting at, Doc, is how can you expect a body to be healthy with its brains washed out?... Or put it another way. Can a subject be healthy *in absentia* [sic] by proxy already?" (69). In "The Limits of Control", Burroughs writes, "[when] there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless proposition." (*The Adding Machine*, 117). "The Limits of Control" suggests that control systems are vulnerable and that "the more completely hermetic and seemingly successful a control system is, the more vulnerable it becomes" (117). However, the essay also articulates Burroughs's fear that technological and psychological advancements, particularly if they remain secret and the preserve of the rich and powerful, could achieve heretofore unimaginable levels of societal control (118-120). The salient point to take from this essay is that "Control" requires the wilful participation of ostensibly free subjects. "Control" functions like Lacanian *jouissance* as it must always ask "the Other what he desires" (Lacan, *My Teaching*, 38). However, if control systems can construct and interpellate the desire of the subject, "Control" may become complete control. Slavoj Žižek discusses a similar idea in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

[Malebranche's] point is that the knowledge of the true order of things (of divine causality) contradicts our sensible experience: if divine causality were to become directly observable, this would make us slaves of God and change God into a horrifying tyrant (this idea was later taken up by Kant, in his notion that it is only our epistemological limitation - our

ignorance of noumenal causality - which makes us free moral beings). (103-104)

Our “epistemological limitation” becomes the potential, “which makes us free moral beings”, but this “limitation” recalls the plight of the cyborg outlined previously by Sadie Plant: “[what] makes this figure so tragic is the extent to which he has been programmed to believe in his own autonomy” (Plant, *Zeros and Ones*, 99). The cyborg’s unenviable and naive position mirrors our own as:

one can never experience the symbolic 'big Other' as such either - in our 'normal' everyday life - we are oblivious to the way in which it overdetermines our acts; or - in psychotic experience - we became aware of the big Other's massive presence, yet in a 'reified' way - not as a virtual Other, but as the materialized, obscene, superego Other (the God who bombards us with excessive *jouissance*, controls us in the Real). The only way to experience the big Other in the Real is thus to experience it as the superegoic agency, the horrible obscene Thing. (Žižek, *Plague*, 104)

Throughout Burroughs’s fiction the author adopts different tropes, including the “Ugly Spirit” and the “word virus”, to represent this “superegoic agency, the horrible obscene thing”. The central struggle in Burroughs’s works is between the determinism of this “horrible obscene thing” – often rendered as a possessing, hostile force – and the agency of the individual subject.

For Burroughs, a healthy subject retains its subjectivity, but as Timothy Melley notes, the author frequently suffers from “agency panic”, where control is viewed as a zero-sum game played between the individual and malevolent external forces (39). Burroughs regards addictive drugs, desire and language as a means towards infecting and subjugating the individual. According to Melley, Burroughs’s parasitic aesthetic occupies a mid-point between liberal humanist and poststructuralist concepts of interiority and exteriority. “If one accepts the assumptions of liberal humanism, the parasite must be regarded as an external invader of an

integral self. By contrast, poststructuralist approaches... have held that parasites occupy a complex position between inside and out, neither wholly supplementary nor essential to the subject" (47). Melley is troubled by Burroughs's refusal to fully embrace the radical, posthumanist leanings of his novels: "On the one hand, Burroughs exhibits a radical, posthumanist tendency to question whether humans are self-governing agents. On the other hand, he exhibits a humanist refusal to modify the traditional model of the agent, which he applies to other, non-human entities" (51). While this outlines Burroughs's liminal cultural status, it also indicates how he constructs his worldview, and, by proxy, his subjectivity in a probing, provisional and *ad hoc* fashion; he is neither a subject of the posthumanist or liberal humanist imagination. Melley will later complain of Burroughs's cultural promiscuity and ambivalence, stating "Burroughs finds himself so deeply enamored of liberal humanism that his own attacks on it continually propel him into a state of panic" (60).

The "Ugly Spirit" is the most central cypher for this anxiety over possession and "Control" in Burroughs's early works, with the agency-destroying power of the "Ugly Spirit" later being attributed to the "word virus" in the "cut-up" novels. These malevolent forces only differ in scope, with the "Ugly Spirit" being a personal demon, while the "word virus" is a pervasive, almost omnipotent entity. The strange, liminal status afforded to the "Ugly Spirit" in Burroughs's early works, especially in regards to its role in the production of *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, suggests that it is necessary to engage with and give space to "the demons of language" who must be "fought by language" (Barthes, *Lovers*, 81). While Žižek points out how, "if divine causality were to become directly observable, this would make us slaves of God and change God into a horrifying tyrant", Burroughs takes up almost the opposite position: by making the supernatural "causality" of the "horrifying tyrant" observable, one may gain the knowledge and agency required to escape its clutches. The "Ugly Spirit" thus becomes "the materialized, obscene, superego Other (the God who bombards us with excessive *jouissance*, controls us in the Real)... the superegoic agency, the horrible obscene Thing". By engaging with this god-become demon, one may come to

a position of psychoanalytic atheism, where God is not dead, but rather, “God is unconscious” (Žižek, *Lacan*, 91).

In the introduction to *Queer*, Burroughs spoke of banishing the “Ugly Spirit” through the medium of his writing (128). However, the “Ugly Spirit” seems ever more pervasive in *Naked Lunch*. Like *Queer*, the production of *Naked Lunch* was also regarded by Burroughs as a form of exorcism. In *Desolation Angels*, Burroughs’s character, Bull Hubbard, comments on the process of writing what will become *Naked Lunch*: “I’m shitting out my educated Midwest background for once and for all. It’s a matter of catharsis where I say the most horrible thing I can think of. [...] By the time I finish this book I’ll be pure as an angel, my dear” (Kerouac, 315). It is interesting to note how Bull becoming “pure as an angel” involves both cathartically expelling the “excessive *jouissance*” offered by “the superegoic agency” and excreting the conservative, symbolic order represented by his “educated Midwest background”. Possession and “Control” reside, like “the field of Law”, between two poles: “a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony, and its obscene, superegoic inverse” (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64). The “routine” as such represents “Control” as a two-headed, multifaceted beast. By revealing control’s “obscene superegoic inverse”, the “routine” aims to break apart the contradiction or negative dialectic of “Control”.

However, the “routine”, as a performance of ideological possession, requires an audience. The external, alien voice of the “routine” signifies how Burroughs is strictly a receiver for the text he is forced to perform. Burroughs spoke of his need of an audience for his “routines”: “If there is no one there to receive it, routine turns back on me like homeless curse and tears me apart, grows more and more insane (literal growth like cancer)”⁸⁵ (*L*, 201). Without a spectator, there is the danger that Burroughs will be overcome by the unconscious chain of signification, and the “routine” will cease to be a performance, like it does for the carny man who teaches his ass to talk and like the Vigilante who “earned his moniker” (9). Burroughs cannot bear the

⁸⁵ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated April 7th, 1954.

brunt of his own ugly “routines”; he needs the reader to dispel their destructive power. “Burroughs finds himself, to recall the situation of Lee in *Queer*, condemned to transmit the discourse transmitted to him, forced to pass it on like a curse. This is one reason why the routine must have a receiver. Or perhaps the receiver is necessary because it takes an other out there to unlock the secret other in here” (Harris, *Secret*, 198). By refusing narrative closure and logical coherence, the “routine”, as an impossible text, requires a reader or spectator to “stop the chain of discourse” and respond in “Silence” (Lacan, *Ego*, 89, *NL*, 224).

Up until his fervent adoption of the “cut-up”, the answers to the questions posed by Burroughs’s work were obscure to say the least and, as Alex Wermer-Colan points out, this is particularly evident in *Naked Lunch*: “By refusing to take a moral stance, *Naked Lunch* presents a confession as much the reader’s as the writer’s that not only challenges the arrogant predilection for self-righteous moralizing among the most bigoted and phobic, but also turns the tables on the reader. For the reader addresses *Naked Lunch* and, by proxy, the author, with a question, even though *Naked Lunch*... ‘does not function as an answer but a question’” (516). It is this “function [not] as an answer but a question” that separates Burroughs’s early works of illiterature from his “cut-up” texts. “Cut-up” works such as *Nova Express* consistently suggest that the “cut-up” technique is a remedy, like apomorphine⁸⁶, for the “word virus” and can combat “parasite invasion by stimulating the regulatory centers to normalize metabolism—A powerful variation of this drug could deactivate all verbal units and blanket the earth in silence” (*Nova Express*, 128). With the earlier novels, the separation of disease and cure is much less clear cut, especially in *Naked Lunch*, where “[the] production of indeterminacy... is both the sign of the disease and the

⁸⁶ “The compound apomorphine is formed by boiling morphine with hydrochloric acid... [and] has no narcotic or pain-killing properties (*NL*, xli). The apomorphine cure for opiate addiction was discovered and administered by Dr. John Yerbury Dent. Throughout *Naked Lunch* and later novels Burroughs extols the efficacy of apomorphine treatment: “I saw the apomorphine treatment really work” (*NL*, 5). “*Naked Lunch* would never have been written without Doctor Dent’s treatment” (*The Adding Machine*, 11).

method of its cure" (Lydenberg, 27). Unlike the "cut-up" technique, which is "for everyone" (*The Third Mind*, 31) and explicitly involves the creator of the text adopting the role of reader in a reversal of the process "axiomatic to mimesis, so that the sign creates its referent" (Harris, "Cutting Up Politics", 178), works of illiterature demand a reader, "an other out there to unlock the secret other in here" (Harris, *Secret*, 198). However, the aesthetic structure of *Naked Lunch* refuses resolution for author and reader alike; what is illegible remains illegible. As Timothy Murphy points out, this is a necessary quality for a work which challenges a form of "reality" dependent on relations of power/knowledge, and thereby the work reveals what the symbolic order obscures: the paradoxical dialectic of control.

The narrator's impasse reveals that the world of *Naked Lunch* has closed in on itself, has occupied all of the available logical space with its contradictory determinations. Its paradoxes, generated by reason, cannot be resolved or made productive, but can only be negated by reason. The dialectic of control, like the dialectic of Enlightenment, is, finally, a negative dialectic between whose opposing terms all of society is laid out as on a lunch plate or an assembly line. The only escape hatch, as Adorno would agree, is open to the artist who can negate the system, not in material reality, but in the structure of his work. The artist himself cannot resist or escape, but the work can. (*Wising*, 100)

The "normalizing pressure for unity and order that manufactures fragmentation and abnormality" is an image of this inescapable dialectic of control (Harris, *Secret*, 211). *Naked Lunch's* paradoxes, which oppose reason, are "generated by reason", hence the text maintains its involvement in what it opposes; the text thus does not function as a cure or answer, like the "cut-up" texts, but operates instead as "a question" (Žižek, *Universal Exception*, 65). Jennie Skerl identifies how "[Burroughs] is unable to free himself from his personal and cultural past; nor can he escape the very mental constructs of fiction and reality that allow him to create. He can only show the way for others" (Skerl, *Burroughs*, 80). As the reader, like

Burroughs, is trapped in the dialectic of “Control”, her only means of escape is through engaging with an impossible work, where the inevitability of misreading becomes a means to discover her agency. By giving voice to the “obscene superegoic inverse” that supports rather than opposes the dialectic of “Control”, *Naked Lunch* reveals the structure of, rather than the solution to, the sickness of “Control”. Instead *Naked Lunch* performs “Control” by stubbornly refusing to cede control, either to its reader or its author.

Hot Shot

In a letter to Ginsberg, in a statement that appears after the reproduction of a “routine” that would appear in *Naked Lunch*⁸⁷, Burroughs writes, “This is my saleable product. Do you dig what happens? It’s almost like automatic writing produced by a hostile, independent entity who is saying in effect, ‘I will write what I please’”⁸⁸ (*L*, 262). Since Burroughs has chosen to distance himself from the text’s production, assigning responsibility to “a hostile, independent entity”, it is perhaps unsurprising that we should find evidence of the text’s antagonism towards the author at the very beginning of the novel. While it is clear in the opening section of *Naked Lunch* that the most obvious subject of resentment is the advertising executive Lee meets on the subway, it is also apparent that the author and reader are both victims of the text’s multivalent antagonism. The text alienates its reader and author here: all are victims of its hostility. We can see the author being slyly obliterated at the very beginning of the novel:

I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making
their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons,
crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at
Washington Square Station, vault a turnstile and two
flights down the iron stairs, catch an uptown A train...
Young, good looking, crew cut, Ivy League, advertising

⁸⁷ “The boy who teaches his ass to play the flute” (*NL*, 67-68).

⁸⁸ February 7th, 1955.

exec type fruit holds the door back for me. I am evidently his idea of a character. You know the type comes on with bartenders and cab drivers, talking about right hooks and the Dodgers, call the counterman in Nedick's by his first name. A real asshole. And right on time this narcotics dick in a white trench coat (imagine tailing somebody in a white trench coat – trying to pass as a fag I guess) hit the platform. I can hear the way he would say it holding my outfit in his left hand, right hand on his piece: “I think you dropped something, fella”

But the subway is moving.

“So long flatfoot!” I yell, giving the fruit his B production. I look into the fruit's eyes, take in the white teeth, the Florida tan, the two hundred dollar sharkskin suit, the button-down Brooks Brothers shirt and carrying *The News* as a prop. “ (NL, 9)

Much of Lee's ire here is directed towards “the heat” or “narcotics dick” but it is clear that, while the “advertising exec” is relatively benign – he is a square lost in this subterranean subculture, he is also a figure of ridicule. Timothy Murphy suggests that the “fruit is clearly a surrogate for the reader of *Naked Lunch* whose familiarity with the means and ends of pulp fiction is the hook that draws him into the novel's vast confidence game” (“Random Insect Doom”, 223). The suggestion here is that “fruit” and reader alike are attempting to be made hip to the underworld of addiction: that is to say the reader who is interpellated by *Naked Lunch*'s introduction is the reader that the novel's opening openly attacks. Oliver Harris makes a similar claim in regards to the opening scene of *Naked Lunch*: “The introduction of this audience into the scene works therefore to structure the narrator's relationship with the reader in the same hostile terms of seduction and exploitation as the rest of the section makes uncomfortably clear. In short, the victimized audience is made the central subject” (50). In Harris's estimation, the text warns “the reader against the seductions of narrative and

the fascinating image by focusing on exchange, on the consumption of the text as an economic and cultural 'B' production" (*Secret*, 51). Subjectivity is returned to the reader precisely because of the text's hostility towards the passive, voyeuristic form of reading interpellated by the introduction. At the same time as subjectivity is antagonistically returned to the reader, the text, or what Burroughs calls the "hostile independent entity", denies Burroughs authorial control, "saying in effect, 'I will write what I please'".

The contention that the "advertising fruit" is just a surrogate for the reader limits the interpretation of this character, when he may also be a proxy for the text's author. Like an advertising executive, Burroughs talked about creating a commercially viable novel when drafting the text, and the author also saw himself as an anthropologist in the world of urban junkies: Burroughs is an upper-middle-class, Harvard-educated, homosexual pulp fiction author, or, in another life perhaps, an "Ivy League, advertising executive fruit". Burroughs is a native of both subterranean and suburban America, and while he perhaps lacks the "Florida tan" of the advertising executive, Florida was where his parents lived at the time of writing *Naked Lunch* (Miles, 716-717). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Burroughs's maternal uncle, Ivy Lee, was an infamous advertising executive and a pioneer in the public relations sphere. There is some sense that this advertising executive is the negative excess of Burroughs's identity; that the advertising executive, who is quickly abandoned at the start of the novel, is what Burroughs could have become had he chosen a different career and mode of existence. Furthermore, the abandonment of the executive signifies Burroughs's rejection of the earlier realist mode of *Junky*; the text which *Naked Lunch* borrows this scene from as Oliver Harris points out⁸⁹. Harris suggests that this incidence of intertextuality displays antagonism towards the reader/ad executive,

⁸⁹ "I had the stuff in a package of cigarettes and was ready to throw it in the water-filled gutter. Sure enough, there was a burly young man in a white trench coat standing in a doorway. When he saw me he started sauntering up the street ahead of me. Then he turned a corner, waiting for me to walk past so he could fall in behind. I turned and ran back in the other direction. When I reached Sixth Avenue, he was about fifty feet behind me. I vaulted the subway turnstile and shoved the cigarette package into the space at the side of a gum machine. I ran down one level and got a train up to the Square" (*J*, 54).

specifically the reader of *Junky* who is seeking knowledge of junk (*Secret*, 49-52). However, reading the ad exec as the author brings added significance to a novel where he is quickly abandoned. The ad exec and the author of *Junky* represent the superficial world above while the subterranean, fantasmatic realm of *Naked Lunch* is something other.

The contrast between the advertising exec and the addict in the opening scene of *Naked Lunch* recalls a description made by Julia Kristeva in an essay entitled, "What Good Are Psychoanalysts at a Time of Distress Oblivious to Itself": "I imagine a huge city with houses of glass and steel, reaching the sky, reflecting the sky, itself and you. People cultivate their image, hurried and made up in the extreme, covered in gold, pearls and pure leather. In the streets, on every corner, the filth piles up and drugs accompany the slumber or rage of the outcasts" (14). While Kristeva's scene suggests a certain economic hierarchy, this disparity is nullified in the subterranean world where *Naked Lunch* begins. What is important is that the "symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony", reflected in the "houses of glass and steel" and embodied in the people cultivating their image, "covered in gold, pearls and pure leather", requires the "obscene, superegoic inverse" encapsulated in the "slumber and rage of the outcasts". Disparity is not a side-effect but a requirement of the symbolic order. The subway, on the other hand, is a great leveller and contact zone for the suburban and the subterranean: a place that defies the spatial and material hierarchy of the city above.

An underground metropolitan railroad system, with its invisible shifts through time and space, its gritty aesthetic and its hidden, subterranean being, is a synecdoche of the narrative style and form of *Naked Lunch*. The subway also reflects the dark, subterranean and circular life of the addict, while the metropolitan city above is constantly evolving and progressing through demolition and rebirth: "'They are rebuilding the City.' Lee nodded absently.... 'Yes... Always...'" (*NL*, 235). The subway is apparently at odds with the arboreal skyscrapers that hubristically puncture the Manhattan skyline. The subway, like its junkie denizens, is caught in a perpetual loop, never transcending its subterranean space, while in a similar fashion, the city

demolishes and rebuilds itself above in a performance of progress. Similarly, the author of *Junky*, a realist text that attempts to give the reader “facts of general validity” regarding junk, is of a piece with the arboreal skyline of Manhattan: an empire built on knowledge (*J*, 12). However, the author of *Junky* is just another addict caught in the negative dialectic of control: “[The introductory narrative of] *Naked Lunch* lays bare the power relations silent in Burroughs’ own earlier prose”, and it is precisely these power relations that this section undermines and ultimately rejects (Harris, *Secret*, 51).

Leaving the author of *Junky* behind on the subway allows the text to forgo the epistemological and aesthetic “power relations” contained in *Junky* and which can be associated with the term ‘authorial’. After this abandonment of the author, the text descends further into the mosaic structure and “routine” style of a novel thoroughly at odds with the realism of Burroughs’s earlier texts. Alex Wermer-Colan notes, “Burroughs’s collages take to its logical conclusion Roland Barthes’s notorious claim that ‘it is language which speaks, not the author’ by figuring language as a self-replicating ‘virus,’ ‘a separate organism, ‘that forces you to talk’” (519). This compulsion towards communication also describes the production of *Naked Lunch*’s “routines”, which are ascribed to a “hostile, independent agency”. This ostensibly determining voice is a representative of the chain of signification or “the discourse of my father... which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce” (Lacan, *Ego*, 89). However, the reproduction of the “chain of discourse” in the form of a “routine” aestheticizes discursive “Control” as an explicitly unfriendly and autonomous entity. Performing the “chain of discourse” as such reveals its “obscene, superegoic” contradictions and excesses, thereby delegitimizing it. Silencing the “chain of discourse” in this way is one of *Naked Lunch*’s ethical imperatives, and this is evident in the opening scene where Lee appears forced to speak, even if it is to admonish those who talk too much:

“Grassed on me he did,” I said morosely. (Note: Grass is English thief slang for inform.) I drew closer and laid my dirty junky fingers on his sharkskin sleeve. “And us blood brothers in the same dirty needle, I can

tell you in confidence he is due for a hot shot.”(Note: This is a cap of poison junk sold to addict for liquidation purposes. Often given to informers. Usually the hot shot is strychnine since it tastes and looks like junk.) (*NL*, 9)

The grass or informer who Lee mentions is another character and indeed another aspect of Burroughs, specifically the author who effectively informs on the life of the addict. This betrayal began with the publication of his first novel *Junky*, originally attributed to William Lee, but that novel preceded the protracted separation of Bill Lee and William Burroughs. Lee and the grass, Burroughs, are “blood brothers in the same dirty needle”. This common blood suggests a close and perhaps familial relationship between the criminal and snitch: Lee and Burroughs. The author’s maternal and paternal names thus interact in this conflict which imitates and partakes in the dispute taking place between Burroughs’s “Deposition” and Lee’s text⁹⁰. By portraying the underworld of addiction, Burroughs is betraying Lee, who, in order to escape must “vault a turnstile” in an attempt to evade the author and reader who are “making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station” (*NL*, 1). In effect, this conflict between Lee and the informer encapsulates the compromised epistemic economy of *Junky* which both claims knowledge of addiction and denies its possibility.

The death of the author will be enacted with the hot shot that Lee promises for his informer. With the death of the author/informer, “the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes, *Music, Image, Text*, 147). The death of the author/informer, as the “final signified” of the text, correlates with *Naked Lunch*’s refusal of the hermeneutic closure promised by Burroughs’s “Deposition”. Later, the fate of informers, both literal and textual, is shown in the trash floating in the East

⁹⁰ *Naked Lunch* reverses the aesthetic division between Lee and Burroughs presented in *The Yage Letters*, with Lee coming to represent the revolutionary, anti-realist approach of *Naked Lunch*.

River, described as a “mosaic of floating newspapers, down into the silent black ooze with gangsters in concrete, and pistols pounded flat to avoid the probing finger of prurient ballistic experts” (4). With these images the text is describing its own illiterary form; one whose “mosaic” structure functions like a “silent black ooze” that will perpetually evade the investigations of author and reader alike. The novel wants to remain hidden for fear of what it might be turned it into. The text actively resists being framed as the didactic novel the introduction claims it is. The “Deposition” resurrected an author the novel decided to kill off early on. In some sense we must choose between a literary death and a literal resurrection, between Burroughs and Lee, between a fictitious introduction written in a factual style and the transgressive illiterature of a novel that both destabilises the status of its author and denies the hermeneutic desires of its readers.

Having already planned to kill off the author with a hot shot, Lee moves on to the reader/advertising executive who is in line for a different kind of ploy: “I’ll catnip the jerk.’ (Note: Catnip smells like marijuana when it burns. Frequently passed on the incautious or uninstructed)” (*NL*, 10). The text being sold as *Naked Lunch* will disappoint its readers’ expectations; the promised product will not be forthcoming. *Naked Lunch* is pathologically illegible and aggressively so. The text sketches ugly and violent images, placing them in an apparently arbitrary sequence that appears to be designed to confound the reading process. Intoxication for the reader is not provided by means of a straightforward prescription or foreseeable high. By being “catnipped” we will experience Lee’s deception for ourselves through the lack of narrative closure.

There is also a suggestion here about the lack of signification. Signifiers, such as what appears to be heroin in the hot shot, or marijuana in the catnip scam, reveal signification to be dangerous or illusory. Lee, the conman can manipulate the process of signification as he understands the potential for exploiting the gap between signifier and signified. Burroughs’s later assessment of the word as virus is implied here, and it is the process of signification that plays the parasitic role, limiting language to a simple and direct relationship between signifier and signified. The mosaic structure and

antagonistic style of *Naked Lunch* are not employed as an attack on words as such, but are an assault on the process of signification.

Burroughs derives his criticisms of signification primarily from Alfred Korzybski who states that “the word is not the thing” and “whatever you say a thing is, it is not” (xxv, xvii). The dangers of signification are highlighted in the following passage from *Naked Lunch*:

“Ever see a hot shot hit, kid? I saw the Gimp catch one in Philly. We rigged his room with a one-way whorehouse mirror and charged a sawski to watch it. He never got the needle out of his arm. They don't if the shot is right. That's the way they find them, dropper full of clotted blood hanging out of a blue arm. The look in his eyes when it hit – Kid, it was tasty....

“Recollect when I am traveling with the Vigilante, best Shake Man in the industry. Out in Chi...We is working the fags in Lincoln Park. So one night the Vigilante turns up for work in cowboy boots and a black vest with a hunka tin on it and a lariat slung over his shoulder.

“So I says: 'What's with you? You wig already?'

“He just looks at me and says: 'Fill your hand stranger' and hauls out an old rusty six shooter and I take off across Lincoln Park, bullets cutting all around me. And he hangs three fags before the fuzz nail him. I mean the Vigilante earned his moniker....” (*NL*, 2)

Being able to read is no prerequisite for being able to read well. The gimp does not read well and perceives poison as heroin; he reads ideologically and suffers the outcome. Lee almost suffers the same deadly fate because he believes he is privy to the “reality” behind the Vigilante’s performance, that is, the Vigilante’s “true” identity or subjectivity. Lee does not recognise that the Vigilante has succumbed to one of *Naked Lunch*’s key tropes, where subjects are subsumed by their performances. Robin Lydenberg writes that

“performance is never innocent in *Naked Lunch*; it eventually replaces life itself, the imitation absorbing and devouring of the original” (40). Lee operates in full knowledge of the Vigilante’s performance, but does not anticipate that the Vigilante may become his role and turn on him, thus earning “his moniker”. This experience produces a kind of paranoid knowledge which suggests that nobody can be trusted: “You can never be sure of anyone in the industry” (*NL*, 146). *Naked Lunch* advises against trusting anyone in a world where “all Agents defect and all Resisters sell out” (*NL*, 205). Lee’s experience of misreading the Vigilante’s performance allows him to perceive the viral nature of identity and signification. Lee’s incredulity amounts to a form of paranoid insight which enables him to recognise the various pathological forms that make up the political “Parties of Interzone”. This scepticism enables him to see beyond the superficial identities that individuals and groups adopt, permitting him to observe the viral nature of identity as such.

The Parties of Interzone

The “Parties of Interzone” are made up of four groups: “The Divisionists”, “The Liquefactionists”, “The Senders” and the “Factualists” (*NL*, 80-82). The Divisionists create replicas of themselves by perpetually splitting apart, like a virus, while the Liquefactionists fluidly envelop and subsume the general populace into one body. “These very different strategies of proliferation and reduction serve ultimately the same goal of replacing individuality and difference with total uniformity” (Lydenberg, 30). Both Liquefactionists and Divisionists are sides of the same coin: “Control”. The third malevolent party mentioned in this chapter are “The Senders” and they attempt “Control” via telepathy.

All of the parties represent not only “Control” but different aspects of language. The Liquefactionists represent the enclosure of all within a system of language while the Divisionists represent language’s division of being into particular beings, through the application of Aristotelian, either/or logic. The Senders complete the triumvirate, as language opens up the psyches of the populace allowing the senders in to affect total control.

Referring to *Science and Sanity* by Alfred Korzybski, Burroughs points out that “Aristotelian *either* or logic, setting up such polarities as intellect *or* emotion, reason *or* instinct, does not correspond to what we know about the physical universe and the human nervous system” (*The Adding Machine*, 159-160). Aristotelian logic divides the self against itself and also functions politically, separating normative modes of identity from maligned Others. Language is subtly dynamic; it enfolds everything within the symbolic order and divides the world into different classes of being. While ostensibly all classes of beings are independent, their identities enclose them within a symbolic order that becomes the basis for a system of knowledge/power. The Vigilante and “the man who taught his asshole to talk” represent how language and identity come to subsume agency and subjectivity. The “Parties of Interzone” operate in an identical manner to language and identity in the cases of the Vigilante and the talking asshole. “Islam Incorporated and the Parties of Interzone” also explicitly details how the revelation of the viral operations of language and identity is, in and of itself, a radical act. The “Factualists” oppose the three other “Parties of Interzone” by demonstrating how the other parties are parasitic, despotic forces. The names and descriptions given to the “Parties of Interzone” are representative of the factualist method, a method and mode of politics that both Lee and Burroughs identify with (*NL*, xxvi, 146).

The parties of Interzone are a representation of the Moroccan nationalist movement that came to prominence in Tangier while Burroughs was writing *Naked Lunch*. The “Islam Incorporated and the Parties of Interzone” chapter suggests that there is a problem with the promotion of Islamic identity as a mode of political identity as this monocultural form of political organisation implicitly attacks Tangier’s heterogeneous, international status. “Islam Inc.” function as agent provocateurs who undermine Interzone’s nationalist movement⁹¹. “Interzone has an ordinance forbidding a meeting of Islam Inc. within five miles of the city limits” because

⁹¹ Interzone refers in this case to the International Zone of Tangiers, which was a British, French and Spanish protectorate, up until its reintegration with Morocco in 1956.

Islam Inc. has been adept at revealing how Islamic identity, as a mode of political organisation, is doomed to failure:

A rout of Mullahs and Muftis and Musseins and Caidis and Glaouis and Sheiks and Sultans and Holy Men and representatives of every conceivable Arab party make up the rank and file and attend the actual meetings from which the higher ups prudently abstain. Though the delegates are carefully searched at the door, these gatherings invariably culminate in riots. Speakers are often doused with gasoline and burned to death, or some uncouth desert Sheik opens up on his opponents with a machine gun he had concealed in the belly of a pet sheep. Nationalist martyrs with grenades up the ass mingle with the assembled conferents and suddenly explode, occasioning heavy casualties. (*NL*, 145-146)

The violence and anarchy on display here demonstrate that the Islamic nationalists' desire for social and cultural uniformity cannot be fulfilled. Despite the homogeneity implied by "Islam Incorporated", their meetings are populated by a multiplicity of fiercely-independent identities: "A rout of Mullahs and Muftis and Musseins and Caidis and Glaouis and Sheiks and Sultans and Holy Men and representatives of every conceivable Arab party make up the rank and file". The reduction of these many Islamic identities down to a singular "Islam Incorporated" leads to gatherings that "invariably culminate in riots". Islam Inc. appear to be a branch of the "Factualists" as both A.J. and Lee – who are identified as "Factualists" throughout *Naked Lunch* – work for them. What Islam Inc. represent is the equivalence of all the maligned parties of Interzone: that the Liquefactionists, Senders and Divisionists all desire the incorporation of the diverse identities of Interzone – described in "The Market"⁹² section of *Naked Lunch* – into one single, uniform identity. What all the non-factualist political parties implicitly represent, despite their superficial differences, is what Islam Inc. explicitly

⁹² "The blood and substance of many races...Migrations, incredible journeys... The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast, silent market" (*NL*, 106).

embody: the cleansing of Interzone's heterogeneity in order to form a uniform Islamic identity.

Burroughs and Lee do not champion the nationalist movement in Tangiers nor the plight of those opposing imperialism and colonialism in the region. Tangier's former imperial status created a temporary autonomous zone in Morocco, one that was effectively free from the moral restraints of the Middle East and the West. "Although Burroughs might not have been completely hostile to Moroccan nationalism, *Naked Lunch* does not make a sustained stand against colonialism and often does not resist the arrogance of imperialism" (Hemmer, 66). Indeed, the logic behind Burroughs's apparent opposition to the nationalist movement in Tangier is precisely the same rationale that leads to Lee's support of the anti-imperial liberal party of Columbia and his celebration of the postcolonial multiplicity he identifies throughout South America. Both apparently contradictory positions signify an opposition to the "Repressive... life fearing armadillos" who oppose the multicultural potency represented by Interzone (*YL*, 40). This political pragmatism, self-interested as it may be, reflects a desire for tolerant, anarchistic, multicultural spaces. This desire is also represented in the mosaic form and antagonistic style of *Naked Lunch*, that, despite the efforts of the "Deposition", refuses to be reduced to a single identity.

While *Naked Lunch's* introduction suggests that the novel is simply a representation of addiction, the text itself reveals how language, literature, desire and identity can be used as a means to "Control". At the same time, by representing these methods of control in a "factualist" manner, *Naked Lunch* attempts to introduce the reader to the possibility of escape and liberation. The text achieves this by refusing to yield to author or reader alike; as such it represents a form of limit experience "that wrenches the subject from itself" (Foucault, "Interview", 241). This wrenching of the subject from itself leads to the potential for new and more authentic forms of subjectivity, freed from the bounds of addiction, ideology and normative identity; something which *Naked Lunch*, through denying readerly satisfaction and narrative closure, implicitly attempts to engender in its readership. This potential for authenticity is fundamental to *Naked Lunch's* existential ethos. The text does

not celebrate authenticity as intrinsic and self-evident but rather as something that might come into being as it encounters the difficulty of making itself manifest. If *Naked Lunch* arouses anxiety in regards to the possibility of subjective freedom, this is intended to spur the reader towards achieving an authentic form of agency.

Conclusion: A Subjectivity of the Future

Naked Lunch is written to make things happen and aims to forge a subjectivity that can free itself from social and linguistic control: “*Naked Lunch* forces the reader to take up a position and decide upon his or her desire” (Wermer-Colan, 516). In order to break out of a subjectivity that is addicted to immediate pleasure and interpellated modes of transgression, one must imagine a revolutionary subjectivity of the future. This subjectivity of the future is akin to Jean Paul Sartre’s existential subject who is:

free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good or Evil unless he thought them into being”. (*The Age of Reason*, 320)

Unlike Sartre’s existential subject, the reader of *Naked Lunch*, as the subjectivity of the future, must open herself up to becoming outside the range of normal subject positions. Reading an impossible text opens the reader up to the possibility that “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 249). Crossing the borderline between the self and these multiplicities involves “[migrations], incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valley where plants grow out of genitals, vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of body)” (*NL*, 106). This subjectivity of the future must shed egoic and bodily

enjoyment as well as socially accepted modes of subversion in order to prepare for a heretofore unimaginable becoming. The reader as the subjectivity of the future thus combines the existential subject with what Jacques Derrida describes as *l'avenir*:

In general, I try and distinguish between what one calls the Future and "*l'avenir*" [the 'to come']. The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So, if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is *l'avenir* in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival. (Dick and Ziering)

In *Naked Lunch*, *l'avenir* is "[a] place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a Live One" (56). This "Live One" is the reader fomented in a fervent "Silence" or "vibrating soundless hum". The reader realises their authenticity as a participant in an infinite, inescapable present tense: "A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet". Later in his career, Burroughs will establish that making way for the "emergent future" and achieving authenticity involve discarding language and entering space: "To travel in space you must learn to leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, priest talk, mother talk, family talk, love talk, party talk, country talk. You must learn to exist with no religion no country no allies. You must learn to see what is in front of you with no preconceptions" (*The Job*, 21). However, this rejection of orthodoxy is implicitly and consistently carried out throughout *Naked Lunch*.

Burroughs's rejection of socio-cultural norms is markedly similar to

Antonin Artaud's conception of a body without organs: "When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom" (qtd. in Miller, 275). Brian Massumi explains that we can "think of the body without organs as the body outside any determinate state, poised for any action in its repertory; this is the body from the point of view of its potential, or virtuality" (70). Like the subjectivity of the future, "[you] never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150). As such, the BwO is a means for imagining and bringing something new into the world as a product of "desiring production" (150). However, the body without organs must learn to recognise the difference between desiring production and microfascism, where "desire desires its own repression" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 215). While Burroughs draws firm lines of association between desire and "Control" in both *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, at the end of the "Atrophied Preface," sexual desire is suggested as a means to spiritual transcendence and freedom: "Gentle reader, we see God through our assholes in the flash bulb of orgasm. . . . Through these orifices transmute your body. . . . The way OUT is the way IN. . . ." (*NL*, 229).

Moving away from inauthentic or microfascistic modes of desire involves suffering, which is another form of desiring production. The process of achieving a body without organs can involve "suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150). Burroughs's compositional struggles with *Naked Lunch* mark the text's production as "bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire" (150): that is a breaking free from inauthentic or microfascistic modes of desire. This suffering is due to the breaking apart of "the shell of the body" and shattering literary modes of organisation in order to bring forth something that defies the conventions of literature. As Oliver Harris pointed out earlier, Burroughs's compositional struggles in regards to *Naked Lunch* resulted in "a physical agony, on a par with the pains of addiction" (Harris, *Secret*, 211). This "physical agony" is also

on a par with the discomfort suffered by Burroughs when taking “yage”: “It occurs to me that preliminary sickness of Yage is motion sickness of transport to Yage state. H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* speaks of indescribable vertigo of space time travel”⁹³ (*L*, 181). Suffering, alienation, nausea, anxiety and despair mark the becoming of an authentic, existential subject: “In a word, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself” (Sartre, *Selected Prose*, 157). This suffering is also felt by the reader attempting to comprehend *Naked Lunch*. Suffering marks the becoming of a body without organs, and the suffering Burroughs endured during *Naked Lunch*’s composition signals the becoming of the body without organs of a book:

What is the body without organs of a book? There are several, depending on the nature of the lines considered, their particular grade or density, and the possibility of their converging on a “plane of consistency” assuring their selection. Here, as elsewhere, the units of measure are what is essential: quantify writing. There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book also has no object. As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4)

The connections that the body without organs of a book makes with other bodies without organs furthers the creation of new assemblages and the

⁹³ Letter to Allen Ginsberg dated July 8th, 1953.

metamorphosis of “other multiplicities”. As such, the process of reading in this context is a means to building one’s own body without organs. Reading such a text involves the transmission of “intensities”, a connection with “other assemblages”, and the convergence of many “bodies without organs”. *Naked Lunch* describes and performs its own status as a book which is a body without organs:

The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an innaresting sex arrangement. This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yipes and the slamming steel shutters of commerce, screams of pain and pathos and screams plain pathic, copulating cats and outraged squawk of the displaced bull head, prophetic mutterings of brujo in nutmeg trances, snapping necks and screaming mandrakes, sigh of orgasm, heroin silent as dawn in the thirsty cells, Radio Cairo screaming like a berserk tobacco auction, and flutes of Ramadan fanning the sick junky like a gentle lush worker in the grey subway dawn feeling with delicate fingers for the green folding crackle. . . . (NL, 229)

Naked Lunch, as a body without organs, spills “off the page in all directions”, both forming its own assemblages and multiplicities and demanding the reader do likewise. *Naked Lunch* actively reflects how “[there] is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made” by making the author’s suffering manifest itself through the text’s denial of narrative closure and hermeneutic satisfaction. The “Deposition” promises that addiction is *Naked Lunch*’s final signified, but it necessarily fails in a text for which many prefaces have been written: “They atrophy and amputate spontaneous” (NL, 224). The structural relationship between the “Deposition” and the text illuminates the difference between transgressive and socially sanctioned modes of desire and enjoyment articulated in

Barthes's conception of texts of pleasure and texts of *jouissance*.

In *The Pleasure of the Text* Roland Barthes describes the difference between a "readerly" text of pleasure or enjoyment and a writerly text of "bliss" or *jouissance*:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.

Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (*Pleasure*, 14)

Texts of pleasure maintain the consistency of a socially determined subjectivity, while a text of bliss or *jouissance* "seeks its loss" (14). In style and intention, the "Deposition" is a text of pleasure that is "linked to a comfortable practice of reading". The text of *Naked Lunch*, however, is a text of bliss which "imposes a state of loss... discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language". What separates *Naked Lunch* from the "cut-up" works is the former's hybrid status as both a text of pleasure and *jouissance*:

Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture (which permeates him quietly under the cover of an "*art de vivre*" shared by the old books) and in the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse. (*Pleasure*, 14)

Naked Lunch is “doubly perverse” as it simultaneously seeks the “consistency of selfhood” and “its loss”. This loss of selfhood is tied to “the destruction of that culture” which has interpellated a particular kind of selfhood: a subject of ideology.

It is Burroughs’s desire for an authentic form of agency and subjectivity – after the various maladies of culture and addiction have been cured – that places him at odds with certain critics. Timothy Melley writes, “Burroughs’s nervousness about the erosion of individual autonomy stems from the same contradictions that have produced the contemporary culture of addiction” (42). As such, Burroughs’s desire for authenticity and subjective agency underlies his addiction. Further to this, Melley questions tropes in *Naked Lunch* that other critics, like Deleuze and Guattari, perceive as radical: “The fluid and uncertain subjects [that occupy *Naked Lunch*] are often labeled ‘schizophrenic’ and ‘postmodern,’ but they are a direct result of attempts to conserve a traditional model of individualism” (42). However, as was detailed earlier, the schizophrenic model is a mode that has no limits and is constitutive of “a traditional model of individualism” as much as it constitutes a radical “postmodern” or “schizophrenic” subject. Burroughs’s perversion lies in his zealous faith in the schizophrenic model, which ultimately leads to a questioning of the model itself. Burroughs, in his works of illiterature, is unwilling to cut up the link between the “symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony” and its “obscene, superegoic inverse” which constitutes the “field of Law” (Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 64). Instead, revealing this relationship is very much part of Burroughs’s *modus operandi*. Like the “doubly perverse” subject, Burroughs maintains a belief in the possibility of authentic agency that can occur through the disruption of interpellated modes of selfhood. This ‘perversion’ may produce what Melley calls agency panic, but aligning the various modes of Barthesian textual enjoyment is a key trope in Burroughs’s early works of illiterature, as is the maintenance of a belief in the possibility of agency and authentic subjectivity. By adopting a liminal position, between a “schizophrenic” or “postmodern” conception of subjectivity and “a traditional model of individualism”, *Naked*

Lunch works to establish the agency of the reader who must decide her own position in regards to the limits and vagaries of desire, subjectivity and transgression that the work presents. This model of subjectivity matches well with Žižek's description of subjectivity as a kind of nothing:

the difficult thing is to see reality in its pre-ontological status, as not fully constituted, to see the nothing where there is nothing to see... in contrast to constituted reality, in which actuality is more than potentiality, present more than future, in subjectivity, potentiality stands "higher" than reality: subject is a paradoxical entity which exists only as ex-sisting, standing outside itself in an ontological openness.
("Ideology I")

Naked Lunch occupies a similar pre-ontological status as a fragmented text or body without organs of a book. The reader of an impossible text like *Naked Lunch* represents the becoming of a form of subjectivity for whom "potentiality stands 'higher' than reality": the subjectivity of the future.

Conclusion

Passive, submissive imitation does exist, but hatred of conformity and extreme individualism are no less imitative. Today they constitute a negative conformism that is more formidable than the positive version. More and more, it seems to me, modern individualism assumes the form of a desperate denial of the fact that, through mimetic desire, each of us seeks to impose his will upon his fellow man, whom he professes to love but more often despises.

René Girard (*The One for Whom the Scandal Comes*, 7)

“Hassan’s Rumpus Room” and “Freeland” in *Naked Lunch* illustrate the difficulty in breaking out of modernity’s dominant cultural order. Meanwhile the “Deposition” attempts to lock readers within an addictive paradigm of reading. The schizophrenic elements of the text resist interpretation and function to confound the reading process. Lee’s interactions with the Vigilante and the Gimp reveal that misreading can be deadly: however *Naked Lunch*, as an impossible text, insists that misreading is inevitable. *Naked Lunch* presents its reader with an impossible task, but there are spoils for the willing: the possibility of subjective agency. Deleuze and Guattari imagine a body without organs as a horizon rather than a goal (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 150). In Burroughs’s works the horizon is a similarly impossible existential freedom: a subjectivity of the future.

Reading *Naked Lunch* as illiterature has unearthed some rich and complex interpretations of the text. The “talking asshole routine” reveals how the psychology of disgust can be used to weaponize political discourse. The power of the “Deposition” to limit interpretations of the text reveals the cognitive limitations installed by addiction. Meanwhile the schizophrenic experience of reading *Naked Lunch* outlines how confusion and shock can be wielded as tools for political domination. *Naked Lunch* confounds the reading process in order to force readers beyond automatic modes of apprehension and coax them towards imagining a subjectivity of the future. Misreading is

inevitable and, as such, our cognition and identity will always be provisional, *ad hoc* and contingent. Recognising one's cognitive, epistemological and hermeneutic limits – along with identifying how these limits are interpellated by ideological forces to create “reality” – allows the reader to encounter a “limit experience” through reading an illegible text. Illegibility is not the ultimate goal of Burroughs's illiterature, but rather the objective is a subjectivity freed from a determined and determining “reality”.

In *Junky* Burroughs articulated the subject of illiterature, the junky, as a subject under erasure. While the addict attempts to turn himself into a subjective void, remnants of his identity and trauma remain. Scattered throughout the novel are hints of a deep seated and profound trauma, but also the sense that it is possible to escape: that despite the power of cognition to create and control “reality”, it can, with some effort, be shifted towards the subject's advantage. The culture of drugs prohibition and the subculture of junk demonstrate how the addict becomes spoken for by the socio-political “reality” that surrounds him. Only through breaking out of the social and cultural matrix of addiction can the addict hope to move beyond substance abuse. Again, while this may be difficult, it is not impossible.

The problems of reading encountered in *Naked Lunch* offer a simple but important existential lesson: limiting life or reading to addiction may offer a straightforward escape and even teach “the user facts of general validity”, but addiction either erases or ignores the complexity and insurmountable multiplicity that constitute the self and the world (*J*, 12). The addict confuses multiplicity with erasure, impossibility with death and misreading with alienation. But it is the incomprehensible multiplicity of existence, which can only be misread, that allows the subject to enter the world.

In *Queer* Lee enters into the world of libidinal desire and encounters the romantic other, Eugene Allerton, as the inscrutable subject of illiterature. However, Eugene is merely a cypher for the ambiguous, invasive, complex and concomitant nature of desire and “Control”. Lee's desire reduces him to a control addict who seeks to become the impossible: the *jouissance* of the Other. As Lacan states, “*jouissance* is marked... by impossibility”, hence Lee's

rage and despair shape his 'routines' and internal monologues (*On Feminine Sexuality*, 6-7). In pursuit of Allerton's desire, Lee unleashed his "Ugly Spirit" and became a pathetic and parodic performer of fascism. In doing this, Lee gestures towards Burroughs's fascist ancestry and the microfascist forces that underlie desire and everyday life. By encountering the romantic Other as an illegible subject, Lee may not have found love, but he gained access to interpersonal and libidinal truths. The lessons learned here regarding control, microfascism and desire were hard earned, and the profound personal consequences for Burroughs, revealed in the "Skip Tracer" dream, were life altering, but these insights guided Burroughs towards the aesthetics of illiterature and away from addiction. The impossibility of *jouissance* forced Lee to create an impossible literary form, the "routine", as a means to capture the *jouissance* of the Other and the otherness of *jouissance*.

In *The Yage Letters* Lee comes to experience the postcolony as an antidote to "Control". The racial, spiritual and aesthetic multiplicity of South America becomes the subject matter of Lee's most profound experience of "yage" described in "The Market" section of *Naked Lunch*. Lee's most vivid description of "yage" is a synecdoche of the postcolonial world that he experiences. At the end of *The Yage Letters* Burroughs provides a "cut-up" text, "I AM DYING, MEEESTER?", that contains many of the elements of the novella in microcosm: the suggestion being that the postcolony is a "cut-up". However, the success of this "cut-up" text is based upon its relationship with the realist text that proceeds it. *The Yage Letters* is a work of illiterature, even though it contains a "cut-up" text and descriptions of the "cut-up method", because of its interstitial, heterogeneous form that maintains some relationship with realism and "reality". The purpose of maintaining this relationship is to reveal the literary and mythic structure of "reality". *The Yage Letters* implicitly reveals Burroughs's interest in the occult, especially the letter dated June 21st, 1960 where he signs off as William Burroughs, as opposed to William or Bill Lee. *The Yage Letters* sets in motion a separation between Lee and Burroughs as the author begins to recognise the ability of literature to not only represent reality but to augment it. Burroughs's work thus takes on

an occult quality that is evident in the mythic power that is given to addiction in the “Deposition” section of *Naked Lunch*, which, in turn, becomes the form of the novel.

To summarise: in *Junky*, Burroughs outlines the reality of his junk addiction and his need to escape that reality in order to stop being an addict. *Queer* describes a more universal concept, “Control,” and its relationship to desire, the chain of discourse and genetic determinism. In *The Yage Letters*, Burroughs attempts to break away from the restraints of his addiction and culture by engaging with the entheogen “yage”, the postcolonial culture of South America, the occult and, ultimately, the “cut-up technique”. *Naked Lunch*, as a liminal text that comes before and after *The Yage Letters*, is not so explicitly optimistic. Instead, *Naked Lunch* sets up a challenge of reading that represents a form of “limit experience”. By refusing narrative closure and the hermeneutic operations of the reader, the novel occupies all positions, revealing the complicity of addiction, desire, transgression and obscene enjoyment in the maintenance of the socio-political and symbolic order. Refusing to be consistently held in place by theories and cultural norms, *Naked Lunch*, as an impossible novel, demands an impossible reading, giving space to a potential subjectivity of the future.

Jennie Skerl calls Burroughs a visionary (*Burroughs*, 7) but his vision is often a kind of blindness that can appear like “an octopus [squirting] out ink” (*Q*, 36). However, as Lee suggests in *Queer*, this blinding of the reader is a form of love, tough love perhaps, but one that offers a lesson: only by deranging cognition can the subject break out of reality and step towards authentic agency. Writing to “change fact” and “make things happen” is a means towards this. The occult in Burroughs’s work, along with his later diagnosis of the “word virus” all suggest the powerful and intoxicating effects of language. While Timothy S. Murphy and Robin Lydenberg offer noble attempts to situate Burroughs within the landscape of modern literary and cultural theory, Burroughs remains a culturally ambiguous and anti-theoretical author who will often confound attempts to situate him within a purely theoretical or academic milieu. It is Burroughs’s ability to refuse

categorisation and historical placement that accounts for his abiding relevance.

Burroughs's "cut-up" texts were envisioned as a means to break free of ideology and "Storm The Reality Studio" (*Nova Express*, 156). He states that "[the] word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers... Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system" (*The Job*, 41). However, the "cut-up" texts eventually suggest that language appropriates subjective agency for itself: "the cut-ups exemplify speech that appears to not only exist but to reproduce without an identifiable speaker" (Wermer-Colan, 520). The "cut-up technique" – a literary method designed to remove the conscious mind from the act of creation – is envisioned being performed by machines that could rapidly spit "out books and plays and poems" (Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, 65). Later, in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), Burroughs suggests various forms of real world applications for the "cut-up technique", using cameras and tape recorders to cause riots and have businesses shut down (11-13). Further to this, in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), Burroughs details how to create fake news:

you scramble your fabricated news in with actual news broadcasts. You have an advantage which your opposing player does not have. He must conceal his manipulations. You are under no such necessity. In fact you can advertise the fact that you are writing the news in advance and trying to make it happen by techniques which anybody can use. And that makes you NEWS. (17)

Using the cut-up technique, "fake news broadcasts... could swamp the mass media with total illusion" (17-18). These are "weapons that change consciousness" (35), and the author imagines they will alter the course of human history. Burroughs believes that these techniques will end the Cold War between Russia and America and that "fake news" could be a more powerful weapon than the atomic bomb:

That is what this revolution is about. End of game. New games? There are no new games from here to eternity.

END OF THE WAR GAME. (36)

In *The Electronic Revolution* it is made plain that the “cut-up method” is no longer a purely liberating technique that opposes “Control” and the “word virus”, rather it can also be used as a means to “Control”. Perhaps this is necessary as Deleuze points out the need to create “new weapons” in the face of “societies of control” which were formed by the deterritorializing power of capitalism and schizophrenizing desire (4-6). From the boy who went to school at Los Alamos, birthplace of the nuclear bomb, Burroughs went on to create new literary weapons. These can be regarded as benign, benevolent and destructive, but there is no denying their force. However, *The Electronic Revolution* represents a turning point in Burroughs’s literary career. While he will maintain that the “cut-up” is a powerful tool in regards to other media, it begins to lose its centrality in his writing, with subsequent novels adopting more realist elements. With this, Burroughs’s later novels abstain from the more grandiose revolutionary claims of the “cut-up” works and instead imagine new, more convivial societies that exist outside, both spatially and temporally, the modern world.

Burroughs’s later novels such as *The Wild Boys* (1971) and *The Cities of the Red Night* (1981) present outlaw utopias where bands of youths and pirates form organic, anarchic societies. In these societies the individual is given purpose and freedom as part of a self-organising community. These texts suggest that, through the abandonment of conventional social structures such as nation, family and orthodox sexual relationships, personal authenticity can be established. Just as Lee must leave behind the impersonal matrix of junk in *Junky* to escape addiction, the individual must leave behind conventional social structures to escape “Control”. “An innovation in Burroughs’s treatment of social criticism in the works since 1971 is the creation of utopian alternatives to the present social order.... [However] Burroughs’s utopian fantasies exist in the past or in the future as alternative realities, but never succeed in conquering present reality” (Skerl, *Burroughs*, 78-80).

Naked Lunch seems caught between a dystopian present and the potential for an authentic future. The text is almost entirely dystopian and presents no explicit vision of a utopian potential. Rather, in *Naked Lunch* the means of escape are left entirely to the reader's imagination. As such, reading *Naked Lunch* is an invitation to an existential authenticity that can only exist only outside of the chain of discourse: "*Naked Lunch* is a blueprint, a How-To Book [...] How-To extend levels of experience by opening the door at the end of a long hall. . . . Doors that only open in Silence. . . . *Naked Lunch* demands Silence from The Reader. Otherwise he is taking his own pulse. . . ." (NL, 224). Against the explicit utopian impetus of Burroughs's later works, *Naked Lunch* demands an existential authenticity from its readers, one which can only exist outside of the chain of signification, "in Silence". However, *Naked Lunch* has not reached the extreme anti-language position of the "cut-up" works, nor is it representative of their ethical and aesthetic Manichaeism, epitomised by the opposition between the "word virus" and the "cut-up technique". Instead, *Naked Lunch* confronts its readers with negative images of modern society's maligned nature without recourse to suggestions for liberation or utopian alternatives.

In Burroughs's final journal entry written on July 30th, 1997, three days before he died, the author states:

Thinking is not enough.

Nothing is. There is no final enough of wisdom, experience –any fucking thing. No Holy Grail, No Final Satori, no final solution. Just conflict.

Only thing can resolve conflict is love... (*Last Words*, 351)

This ultimate act of resignation stands against the control Lee sought over Allerton in *Queer*. It seems love is the opposite of control, and Burroughs's early works of illiterature work against control by refusing any "final solution". Instead the reader must imagine their own "in Silence".

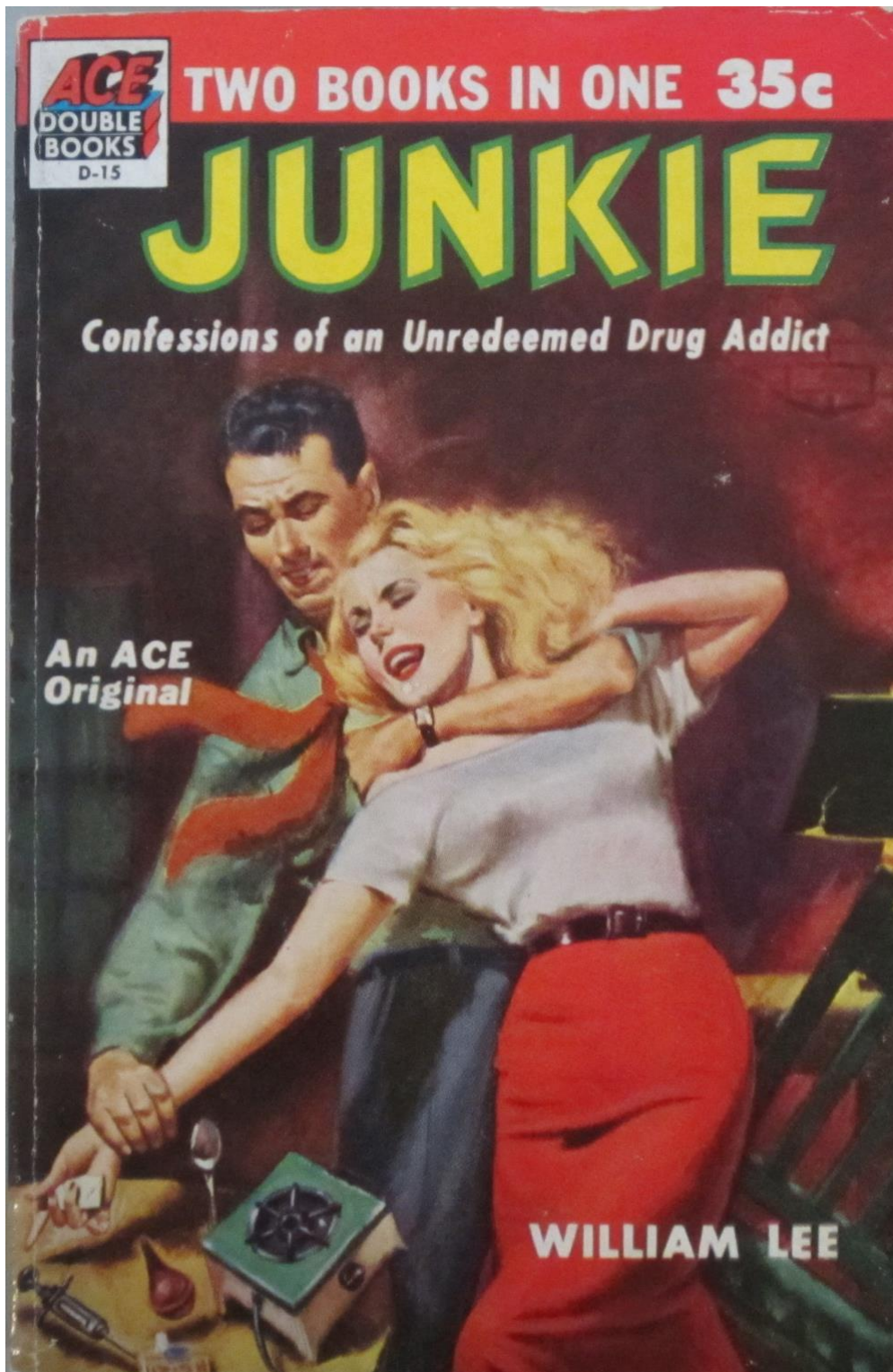


Figure 1:
Original Cover for Ace Books' publication of *Junkie* (Lee and Helbrant 1953).
The "Two Books in One" edition includes Maurice Helbrant's *Narcotic Agent*.

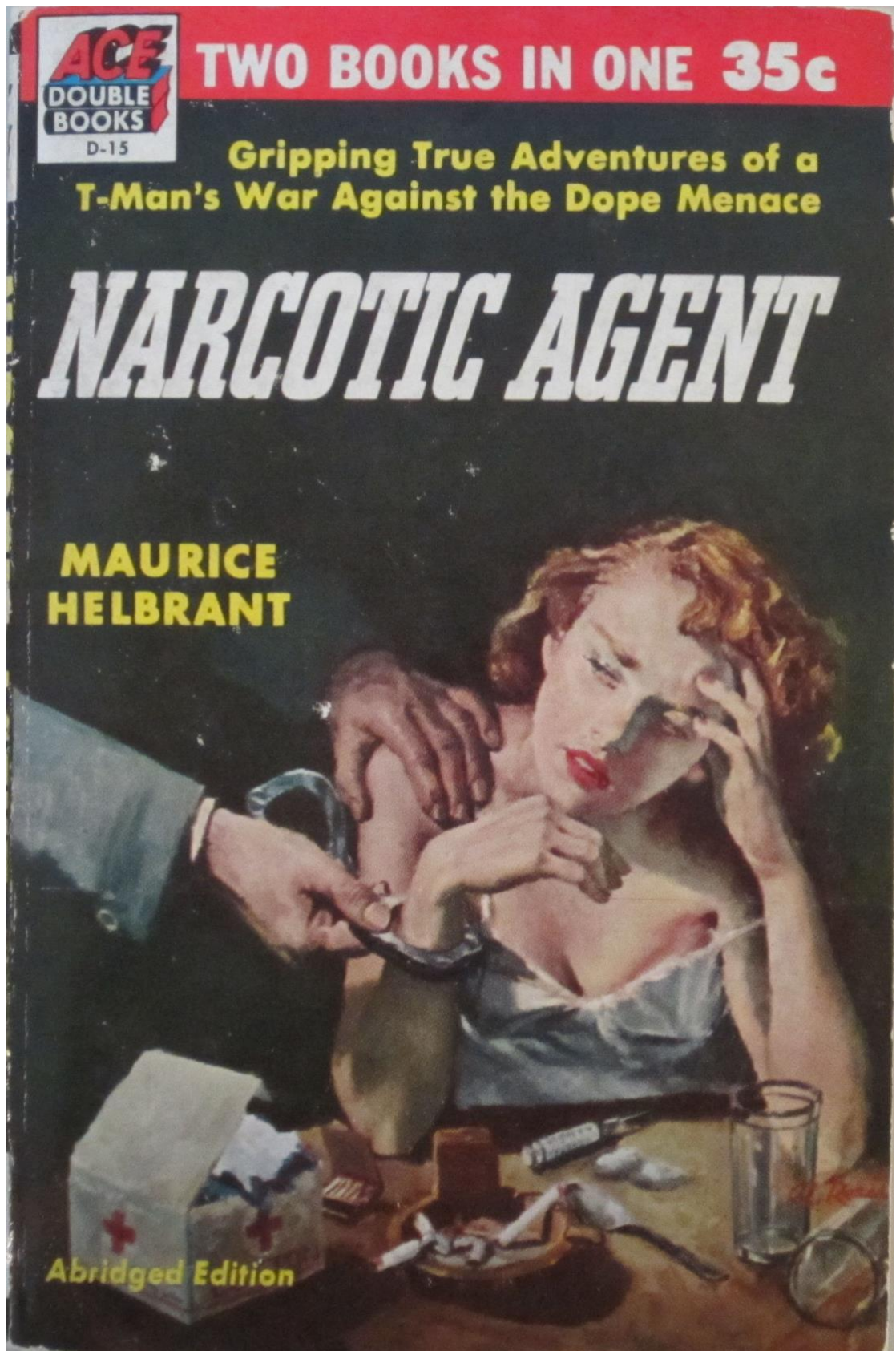


Figure 2:
Junkie's opposite number, *Narcotic Agent*. Original cover for "Two Books in One Edition" of Maurice Helbrant's novel, included in original publication of *Junkie* (Lee and Helbrant, 1953).

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