

'THE AMERICAN NON-DREAM': ADDICTION AND THE GROTESQUE BODY IN WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS' WORKS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the tropes of addiction and the grotesque body as William S. Burroughs' paradigms for social control and subversion, further illustrating how they refer to the social, political, and economic context of the United States in the post-war decades. To do this, it highlights dynamics and images in Burroughs' works which concern invasion, predation, and control. The author's conceptions of the 'junk pyramid,' the 'naked lunch,' and the 'soft machine' illuminate his theories on oppression and parasitism. The author bases his discussions on models of production and consumption which characterize post-war capitalism and all power systems and hierarchies. Opioids, or 'junk,' emerge as both mechanisms of social control and positive metaphors of free exchanges between the (grotesque) body, or the national body, and the Other, or the 'non-American' as they open the body to external infiltration. As a mechanism of disruption, junk represents the threat of subversion and transformation. Burroughs' narrative of resistance comes to include a struggle against the control of the human consciousness as well, as his 'American non-dream' theorizes a conspiracy of the media and language as control mechanisms. The concrete counter-cultural solutions proposed by Burroughs include spontaneity and experimentation in consciousness with such techniques as cut-ups, fold-ins, and collaborations. His proposition is to liberate consciousness and to eschew the predatory nature of social structures and hierarchies.

Keywords: William Burroughs; Cold War literature; grotesque body; addiction; *Naked Lunch*.

Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs are commonly considered to be the founding trio of the Beat Generation, as the movement developed from their group of friends and collaborations. However, Burroughs has often sought to eschew categorization as a Beat, especially as the movement began to shift, often spurred by Ginsberg, beyond the literary and to the social, political, and cultural arenas in the 1960s and 70s. However, he undeniably plays an essential role throughout the movement, both as early mentor to Ginsberg and Kerouac and as writer, if sometimes more on the 'beaten down' rather than the 'beatific' side of 'Beat.' Like the other more characteristically Beat authors, he was, as Ginsberg (2017) relates, "dedicated totally and sacramentally in a sense to exploring his consciousness" (140). Consciousness is a central theme for Burroughs as well as the Beats: the writer engages in matters of perception and awareness on different levels, both in his life experience and in the formal crafting

of his works. Primarily, this preoccupation comes from the identification of contemporary society with an attack and a conspiracy against human consciousness.

As this article illustrates, Burroughs employs tropes of abjection and the grotesque body in his exploration of the individual self, the United States' sense of national identity, and the relations between the two. These tropes help shape his social, political, and economic critique of the United States during the Cold War. Significantly, Burroughs' attitude towards many of his themes is conflicted, reflecting his conflicted attitude towards American national identity: libertarian and individualistic, but fiercely critical of consumer culture and capitalism. Where Burroughs' explorations of consciousness place him at the heart of Beat sensibility, thanks to his often conflicting political and personal views, the writer defies strict categorization as part of the "general liberation" that, for instance, Ginsberg associates with the Beat movement, which includes "Sexual 'Revolution' or 'Liberation,' Gay Liberation, Black Liberation, Women's liberation too" (4).

In many of Burroughs' works, addiction emerges as his paradigm for social control and the grotesque body as his paradigm for subversion. Opioids, or 'junk,' serve as both mechanisms of control and as positive metaphors of free exchanges between the grotesque body, or, by extension, the national body, and the Other, or the 'non-American.' As a mechanism of disruption, they represent the threat of subversion and transformation. In light of Burroughs' use of these tropes, the writer's notorious countercultural position may be conceived in an innovative manner: Burroughs' revolt against social control and his propositions of openness and fluidity may come to be viewed to be part of a larger struggle against the control of human consciousness.

Burroughs' life experience may be taken into account for the purpose of an analysis of his tropes of addiction. In fact, Burroughs' engagement with the themes of subversion and social control reveals an ambivalence in his consideration of substances as, alternatively, negatively charged mechanisms of control and positively charged metaphors which induce openness and an exchange between inside and outside realities which opposes abjection. This ambivalence, and the multiple layers which his discourse surrounding drugs presents, underlies the author's sustained involvement in both

experimentation with psychedelics such as ayahuasca, mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD, and long periods of addiction to opium derivatives such as heroin, morphine, and methadone, which he refers to as ‘junk.’

The grotesque body presents fewer ambivalences in Burroughs’ consideration. According to Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body as theorized in *Rabelais and His World* ([1968] 2009), the grotesque body is one which is open and fluid, leaking, in a continuous exchange between outside and inside (of the body) through openings and cavities, and through acts which are performed on the borders of the body such as eating and defecating (317). The grotesque body is also characterized around an emphasis on materiality, through the principle of degradation. In Burroughs’ works, the trope of the grotesque body comes to signify, by extension, its abstract counterpart of the national body. For the post-war United States, defined by the conformity and paranoia of the Cold War, what lies outside of the national body is the ‘non-American’ and non-conforming. Burroughs’ proposition to disrupt the confines of the body, therefore rendering it grotesque, is one of openness. This openness extends, concretely, to several groups of people and ideas which the Cold War United States rejects.

In the Prologue to *Junky*, Burroughs ([1952] 2010) describes the Louisiana ‘junk law,’ which criminalizes being an addict without specifying the term ‘addict,’ as one of the “symptoms of nationwide hysteria” and as “a police-state legislation penalizing a state of being,” expressing that “the anti-junk feeling mounted to a paranoid obsession, like anti-Semitism under the Nazis” (142). Burroughs maintains, as expressed in his essays “A Treatment That Cancels Addiction” and “Jail May Be Best RX For Addicts MD Says,” which figure at the end of the third edition of *The Soft Machine*, that the national disapproval of the addict was instituted by the American Narcotics Department’s legislation on addiction, which criminalizes the phenomenon and punishes the addict, rather than treating them (Burroughs [1968] 1992, 132).

Burroughs further believes that this criminalization contributes to the spreading of addiction and that the suggested treatment contributes to its maintenance, implying that addiction is, for the NAD, both desirable and encouraged. In both essays, Burroughs discusses the efficacy of apomorphine treatment for heroin addiction in

opposition to methadone treatment. He explains why, in his opinion, the methadone treatment is preferred over the apomorphine one: methadone, unlike apomorphine, is an addictive substance, and therefore preserves a form of addiction in the patient. Moreover, apomorphine has been proved to effectively treat and contrast states of anxiety which arise with cravings. Burroughs claims that this is another explanation for its unpopularity as a treatment: "Since all monopolistic and hierarchical systems are basically rooted in anxiety it is not surprising that the use of the apo-morphine formulae have been consistently opposed" (143). The author therefore identifies both the criminalization of addiction and its treatment, methadone, as instruments of social control.

As David Ayers (1993) notes, Burroughs also considers junk as a paradigm for social control in *Naked Lunch*, developing this notion through the idea of the 'junk pyramid' (223-24). In "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," Burroughs ([1959] 2015) describes the "pyramid of junk one level eating the level below right up to the top or tops since there are many junk pyramids feeding on peoples of the world and all built on basic principles of monopoly," remarking that "Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession" (200). Burroughs therefore refers to addiction by implying a relation with the forces at work in the world which aim to maintain established orders and social pyramids.

The apomorphine solution symbolizes for Burroughs the escape, or liberation, from both addiction and the established systems of control. This appears to occur in concurrence with a liberation from physical stimuli, such as language and images. As stated in *Nova Express*, "A powerful variation of this drug could deactivate all verbal units and blanket the earth in silence," and "Apomorphine is no word and no image – It is of course misleading to speak of a silence virus or an apomorphine virus since apomorphine is anti-virus ... Word begets image and image is virus" (Burroughs [1964] 2010, 46; emphasis in the original). The control which Burroughs examines is therefore both physical, concerning people's lives and social positions, and metaphysical, concerning consciousness. Notably, his assessment of the virus as word and image suggests a relation to advertising and communications media.

Once free from the control of everyday stimuli and social mechanisms of addiction and predation, exemplified by the pyramid of junk, a gnosis of truth and detachment from the material world would take place. The ‘word’ particularly is described as violently aggressive in the “Atrophied Preface” at the end of *Naked Lunch*: “Gentle Reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunist land crab, it will hang you and catch your jissom like a scrutable dog, it will coil round your thighs like a bush-master and inject a shot glass of rancid ectoplasm” (192). The anecdote of “the man who taught his asshole to talk” (110) proposes another violent understanding of the word, or language. In fact, in this *Naked Lunch* routine (comedy sketch), a man’s mouth becomes obstructed with “un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue” (111), and his anus begins to act like a mouth: “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 as any other mouth” (110-11). As Robin Lydenberg (1987) points out in her study *Word Cultures*, “The anecdote of the talking anus challenges the comforting myth that it is language which distinguishes man from beast, man from his own bestiality” (27). Language is therefore exposed as dangerous, as something which may easily turn against people: Burroughs suggests, through the ‘talking asshole routine,’ also known as the ‘carny man’s routine,’ for instance, that “the word has a strong, perhaps even a stronger affinity with body than with mind” (27). When defining the novel, the author states that “*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” (Burroughs 1959, 187; emphasis in the original). The image of the pulse suggests an escape from the world of the flesh, as well as from that of the senses and consciousness: language is implied as residing in both.

As Robert Batey (1996) notes, the junk pyramid exemplifies all power systems and hierarchies: “Burroughs sees the drug trade as the model for predatory practice in vast categories of human enterprise: business, politics, government, religion, philosophy, and the professions” (103). The ‘naked lunch,’ which in “Deposition”

Burroughs defines as the “frozen moment when everyone sees what is at the end of every fork” (199) corresponds to, in Eric Mottram’s words, “the moment a man realizes his cannibalism, his predatory condition, and his necessary parasitism and addictive nature” (Mottram 1971, 15). The junk pyramid exemplifies these processes. One of the ways in which Burroughs represents them in his works is extending addiction to several substances beyond the known psychoactive ones; in *Naked Lunch*, for instance, Black Meat and Mugwump fluid, substances derived from the bodies of imagined creatures, are also addictive. Religion too becomes drug-like in a parody of different faiths:

‘*Christ?* ... The one and only legit *Son of Man* will cure a young boy’s clap with one hand – by contact alone, folks – create marijuana with the other, whilst walking on water and squirting wine out his ass ... ‘*Buddha?* A notorious metabolic junky ... Makes his own you dig. In India, where they got no sense of time, The Man is often a month late ... ‘*Mohammed?* Are you kidding? He was dreamed up by the Mecca Chamber of Commerce. (94-96, emphasis in the original)

Religion is exposed as, indeed, ‘the opium of the people.’ The drug trade sets the paradigm of social control in different fields which, like religion, are brought back to a concrete and business-like model of production and consumption. All professions, especially medicine and law, are attacked (Batey 1996, 103). In *Naked Lunch*, Doctor Benway is the exemplification of the corrupt, predatory professional; his involvement in drug consumption strengthens the parallel between the dynamics of the social order and those of junk (Burroughs 1959, 174, 177). Moreover, Benway’s sadism allows him to get ‘kicks’ from his own practice which, from the physical to the psychological, is based on the infliction of pain: for instance, he performs appendectomies with a rusty sardine can, and his ‘T. D. – Total Demoralization’ plan is nothing less than an attack on the human psyche. Similarly to drug consumption, the social pyramids of junk are shown by Burroughs to be based on the materiality, commodity fetishism, and consumerism which characterize post-war capitalism. The word and the image, which suggest the control of the masses through mass media and advertising, further relate his points to the economic, political, and social situation of the United States during the Cold War.

Significantly, the pyramids, the word, and the image are all used as tropes of invasion and possession. These dynamics shape Burroughs' discourse of the grotesque body and of abjection: they are based on movements of transformation, movements between openness and closure, fluidity and rigidity, and acceptance or interrelation and rejection. Both on a physical and on a symbolic level, virus and junk operate in a similar way which consists of a penetration from the outside to the inside, to the point of complete transformation of the initial subject. In *The Soft Machine* ([1961] 1992), Burroughs summarizes the mechanism as “*invade. damage. occupy*” (6; emphasis in original). Burroughs' focuses on material reality, on how virus and junk affect the cellular and molecular components of the ‘soft machine,’ which is “the human body under constant siege from a vast hungry host of parasites” (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 130). In his Prologue to *Junky* and in the book, he states that “Junk is a cellular equation” and that “the use of junk causes permanent cellular alteration. Once a junky, always a junky” (Burroughs [1952] 2010, xvi, 117): the transformation of the invaded subject is a totalizing one.

Burroughs frames a direct social, political, and economic critique of his time. The tropes of infiltration, invasion, penetration, and occupation unequivocally correlate with the United States during the Cold War and to the nation's paranoia, fear, suppression, and rejection of the Other. These were acted out in foreign policies of aggressive militarism and in internal policies of implementation of conformism with regards to political and economic ideologies and cultural norms and values. This enforced standardization would often label what was considered Other as pathological, as with different mental states or illnesses, or criminal, as with homosexuality. Addiction would also be considered as an illness of a psychological nature, with Burroughs' disapproval, as he always claimed junk addiction to be “a metabolic illness” for which “any form of so called psychotherapy is strongly contraindicated” (Burroughs [1968] 1992, 142).

This demonization of difference corresponds to what Jonathan Eburne (1997) names the “rhetoric of disease” (6): non-conforming behavior or lifestyle—homosexuality, addiction, criminal acts—would be rejected and labeled as ‘deviant,’

psychopathological and criminal, to be cured through institutionalization in mental hospitals or to be punished through jail. This dynamic further corresponds to that of abjection, according to which something which is already part of the subject, or, in this case of the United States' sense of national identity, becomes expelled and externalized as something different, as Other. Therefore, there is a fear that the Other, when internalized, will be able to pervert the nation and "penetrate into the national fabric and disrupt its integrity" (6). The expulsion of the abject—theorized by Julia Kristeva (1982) as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4)—therefore maintains the illusion of a whole, secure, bounded presence of subject or national identity. Eburne (1997) effectively summarizes the national 'nervous breakdown' of fear and rejection of the non-conforming as

a mass of 'anxieties' drawn from foreign and domestic policy alike – the fear of communism, the Bomb, homosexuality, sexual chaos and moral decrepitude, aliens (foreigners and extraterrestrials) – became condensed with a nightmarish lucidity upon a unifying rhetorical figure: a festering and highly contagious disease which threatened the national 'body' (6).

Although Burroughs often refers to Western societies and Western systems of thought, it is clear throughout his works that he addresses the United States specifically. In the dystopian locations of the novels, freedom as an 'American' ideal is mentioned in sentences which refer to situations of addiction and control—for instance, "Shoot your way to freedom, kid" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 6)—and the national anthem is interwoven with the narratives at different points in the novel, such as in the chapter of *Naked Lunch* which exposes Benway's sadism in the medical profession. This scene, a cut-up from "Twilight's Last Gleamings," a vignette from the late 1930s written with Kells Elvins, is accompanied in the novel by the figure of the diplomat, who still mumbles, as he dies of cerebral hemorrhage, "The Department denies... un-American... It's been destroyed... I mean it never was... Categor..." (Burroughs 1959, 54).

Political satire permeates Burroughs' body of work and is directed towards all official roles and levels of the hierarchies, from senators to private agents and

investigators who do not know who they work for and have no sense of personal identity, from “Clem Snide—I am a Private Ass Hole—I will take on any job any identity any body” (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 40) to the President of the United States. In “Roosevelt After Inauguration” (Burroughs [1953] 2010), the President appears “dressed in the purple robes of a Roman Emperor and, leading a blind toothless lion on a gold chain, hog-call[s] his constituents,” orders the members of the Supreme Court to have sexual intercourse with a monkey until “the Supreme Court came to consist of nine purple-assed baboons,” and abandons himself “to such vile and unrestrained conduct as is shameful to speak of. He instituted a series of contests designed to promulgate the lowest acts and instincts of which the human species is capable,” such as ‘Molest a Child Week’ (109, 111).

To describe the social and political situation of the United States in the post-war years, Burroughs adopts the notion of the ‘American non-dream.’ In the interview “The American Non-Dream” (Burroughs [1969] 2010), he denounces the country’s attack on human consciousness: “America is not so much a nightmare as a *non-dream*. The American non-dream is precisely a move to wipe the dream out of existence. The dream is a spontaneous happening and therefore dangerous to a control system set up by the non-dreamers” (102; emphasis in the original). Burroughs’ tropes of invasion, possession, and control reflect the author’s identification of post-war society with nothing less than a conspiracy. In a similar way to Burroughs, Ginsberg ([1959] 2015) had already stated that “Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind” (145). Burroughs, however, takes this one step further in the belief that his contemporary society was already fully immersed in this process, denouncing the existence of a ‘reality film’ in which the illusion of reality is fabricated—a postmodern simulacrum—and conveyed to make the present, which he would call ‘pre-sent’ (Ayers 1993, 228).

Throughout his works, Burroughs experiments with several techniques: cut-ups, which consist in collage; fold-ins, which create sequences by overlapping folded pages; and collaborations, such as the book *The Third Mind* (1978), the result of the combination of Burroughs’ and Brion Gysin’s minds, among others. These have the

purpose of reacting to the conspiracy of imposed levels of consciousness and systems of thought, the conspiracy of the word and the image. If language is the programming tool of the 'reality studio,' different uses of language are the deprogramming and deconditioning solution, a more practical alternative to the aforementioned solution of silence. Spontaneity is shown to be the appropriate counteraction to pre-imposed models of understanding. The dynamic is that of operating a liberation and stimulating an opening and a fluidity which institutionalized entities, both social systems and systems of thought, reject; closure, stability, and boundedness are necessary to their existence.

Several parallels may be noted between Burroughs' experimentation with psychoactive substances like ayahuasca and his formal experimentation. Burroughs directly relates the text to individual perception and awareness, transforming it into a means to expand consciousness. As Ginsberg tells in his lectures on the Beat Generation at the Naropa Institute, the Buddhist-inspired university where he set up the Poetics Program, the act of writing becomes for Burroughs "an investigation into the nature of 'the Word' itself, or even consciousness itself, which had become dominated by word and image. The writing and the cut-up writing later was a cutting up of consciousness, a way of investigating consciousness" (Ginsberg 2017, 153). The liberation of consciousness through a 'cancellation' of the word or, more concretely, textual experimentation therefore opposes the control which would be maintained through language, especially through its logical and linear syntactic aspects. As Ginsberg further explains, language was for Burroughs "a control mechanism. The very word itself, 'in the beginning was the word,' say the theists, trying to assert ultimate control over nature and human consciousness. Burroughs's final revolution was 'rub out the word'" (169).

Psychoactive substances and drugs, either as control mechanisms or deconditioning tools, recur in this discussion too. Whereas junk, any opium derivative, stands for Burroughs for addiction and control, ayahuasca, or yagé, operates for the author in the opposite way. At the end of *Junky*, he describes his curiosity for the psychoactive vine and opposes the substance to other ones in terms of opening and expanding:

I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk. Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in *yagé* what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. *Yagé* may be the final fix. (Burroughs [1952] 2010, 152; emphasis in the original).

As Joanna Harrop (2010) notes in her discussion of Burroughs' 'yagé aesthetic,' the effect which the substance had on the author's creative output cannot be dismissed. In fact, Burroughs is considered as the writer of addictive substances mainly because of his emphasis on the social importance of *Naked Lunch* in relation to junk addiction, which was the author's defense of the obscenity charges leveled against his novel (Harrop 10). However, as Harrop argues, the author's formal experimentation attempts to specifically replicate the alteration in consciousness which he experienced through the use of psychoactive substances, mainly yagé. Burroughs' own discussion of the cut-up technique proves this point: for instance, he declares that "to travel in space is to travel in time – If writers are to travel in space time and explore areas opened by the space age, I think they must develop techniques quite as new and definite as the techniques of physical space travel" (Burroughs [1974] 2010, 6). His cut-ups and fold-ins are his way to physically replicate space and time travel in writing, as the emerging sequences combine texts which were composed at different spatial and temporal points. "The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken," he writes in the "Atrophied Preface" explaining his cut-up logic, "but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth" (Burroughs [1959] 2015,173).

The fact that yagé profoundly influenced Burroughs' thought process is clear in several of his 'yagé letters' written to Ginsberg, especially the 1953 letter which states that "Yage is space time travel" (Burroughs 1975, 44). As Ann Douglas (2010) explains, Burroughs aims to "liberate Western consciousness from its own form of self-expression" (xxiii). The inspiration of the psychoactive vine can be noted in several experimentations. For instance, one of the effects of ayahuasca is to provoke synesthesia, the receptiveness to multiple sensory perceptions simultaneously, which creates associations between, for instance, words and colors, smells, and feelings of touch. In his works, Burroughs often experiments with this different way of thinking, as

in the chapter “The Streets of Chance” of *The Soft Machine*. Here, a physical and neurological examination is undertaken and the subject’s thought processes are analyzed through an association in his brain of vowels with colors, “I Red/U Green/E White/O Blue/A Black” (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 93). This chapter makes direct reference to Rimbaud’s poem “Vowels” (1883): “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue ... A, black velvety jacket of brilliant flies ... E, whiteness of vapours and of tents ... I, purples, spat blood,” and so on (1, 3, 5). The subject’s processes are described in terms of synesthetic units:

Unit I White: room in Northern hotel... pilots on leave ... Unit II Black: Black Genuau dancer beating drum rhythms on the boy’s diaphragm ... Unit III Green: Vaseline on finger... smells of oil and metal ... Unit V Blue: orgasms puff white smoke across a blue sky cut by vapor trails... The units permutate 2 1 3 4 5 Unit II Black: hands beating drum rhythms. (101)

Burroughs therefore recognizes *yagé* to effectively actuate a shift in thought systems, more specifically in Western thought, which is based on linear and pre-fabricated combinations of words. He would attempt to disrupt this through the use of psychoactive substances and, concretely, in his cut-ups, fold-ins, and synesthetic passages. In the 1956 manuscript of the “*Yagé* Article,” Burroughs emphasizes the deconditioning potential of the substance in his inability to describe it through his usual self-expression: “I must give up the attempt 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” (quoted in Harrop 55).

The word is therefore revealed by Burroughs to be another trope of virus and social control. The author’s search for ways to eschew programmed reality and ways of thought through different experiences and writing styles reflects his search for openness and fluidity in a cultural and social system he believed to be based on structures of power, control, and metaphorical addiction and predation. As has been noted, junk—in both a literal and rhetorical way—becomes identified by the author as the paradigm for social control, as it maintains the social, political, and economic junk pyramids.

However, junk is a complex trope in Burroughs' works. At the same time, it proposes another way to understand openness and free exchange, as it renders the body grotesque in its openness to external infiltration and penetration.

Eburne's already-mentioned "rhetoric of disease" (Eburne 1997, 6) exposes the United States' preoccupation with infiltration, pollution, change, non-conformity, and (both literal and metaphorical, when considering the missile) sodomy. *Junk*, with its "invade. damage. occupy" rhetoric, therefore represents the threat of dissolution, subversion, and transformation which the United States perceived in relation to its sense of national identity, or national 'body.' The suggestion of openness and acceptance in national politics is reflected in the focus on the grotesque body, the body which exposes its own materiality and degradation and which is in a continuous relation with external realities, defying abjection. Although this notion does not strictly pertain to the grotesque body, in Burroughs' works disembodiment is another way to eschew the confines of the body and to disrupt its separation from the outside world.

A form of disembodiment, a dream-like state may be associated with landscapes as much as with human beings. Interzone, the setting of *Naked Lunch* among other works, consists, for instance, of a mingling of different ethnicities, sounds, and smells; its cultural and sensory load renders the city abstract and inconsistent, rather than material:

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 ... brokers of exquisite dreams and memories tested on the sensitize cells of junk sickness and bartered for raw materials of the will ... A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. (Burroughs 1959, 161-63)

The quality of being ghost-like also pertains, in Burroughs' works, to people. In the same way, multiple substances apart from the known ones behave like junk in that their addictive, junk-like existence is often assigned by Burroughs to human beings as well. In *The Soft Machine* and *Naked Lunch*, bodies are often described as dissolving, evaporating, and inconsistent – "I am a ghost wanting what every ghost wants – a body" (Burroughs 1959, 8), says the narrator, whose body is an "invisible and persistent dream

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body" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 6). Moreover, people may perform an activity named 'visiting,' which consists in a displacement from one body to another, in which the transferred person seems to maintain their conscience and can even converse with the original possessor of the body. "Visiting is so comfortable and habit forming. Visiting is junk" (80-81; emphasis in the original), states the narrator. This is one way in which the body is exposed as grotesque; as non-fixed, mutable, and disruptive of its supposed borders.

Whereas people and places often lose their borders, the opposite process may also happen: in the novel, for instance, the process of emphasis on materiality extends from humans to the surroundings, and other material realities may mingle with the reality of the flesh. The narrator illustrates these processes in the narrative, in passages such as "I scored for tea sometime somewhere in grey strata of subways all night cafeterias rooming house flesh," and "I drape myself over him from the pool hall. draped myself over his cafeteria and his shorts dissolved in strata of subways ... and all house flesh ..." (6). These cut-up passages exemplify a semantic rupture between human and non-human: bodies 'drape' themselves like curtains, the house is 'flesh' and the genitals are 'cafeteria' becoming 'subways'; notably, corporeal realities melt into buildings, particularly material objects in their solidity and structure. Significantly, materiality is one of the key emphases of the grotesque body, whose movement is towards degradation and obscenity.

The tension between materiality and immateriality which takes place in Burroughs' bodies, both degraded by junk and dream-like enough to be able to possess and be possessed, reveals the permeability and instability of the body as an entity and of its borders. As Eburne (1997) elaborates, junk specifically represents a subversion of the body: the injection of junk is an "internalization of an abject substance" (11) which transforms the reality of the body from the inside, as Burroughs observes in *Naked Lunch*:

The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines ... 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. (Burroughs 1959, 9)

Further, as it was previously mentioned, Burroughs claims that the transformations which drugs operate on the body occur at cellular levels. In his Prologue to *Junky*, he describes the motions of shooting and withdrawal in the habit of the junky and how the organism follows this movements in “replacement of the junk-dependent cells”: “A user is in a continual state of shrinking and growing in his daily cycle of shot-need for shot completed ... Junk is a cellular equation” (Burroughs [1952] 2010, xv-xvi). The perpetual transformation of the body of the junky reveals its lack of fixedness and stability in the grotesque sense.

Burroughs’ grotesque body, however, is not in harmony with nature and the universe, which is one of Mikhail Bakhtin’s characterizations of the grotesque body. Whereas Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque underlines a relation to the “essential aspects of being” (Bakhtin [1968] 2009, xxi)—the cycles of nature, humanity, the cosmos, and the rest of society—Burroughs’ depictions of the grotesque body result in an openness which is ultimately destructive and, as Eburne notes, all-consuming (12). Junk is therefore all-consuming as much as it is consumable, just as the sexual object in *Naked Lunch* is often destroyed with a violent death at the moment of orgasm; junk and sodomy are mechanisms of disruption but, at the same time, exemplifications of the junk pyramids and the predatory social structure, a “commodity of a hierarchized and violently repressive exchange structure” (12). Simultaneously, different layers exist in Burroughs’ discussion of the disruption of the body: the paradigm of junk is one of social control as well as of the grotesque, and materiality is also explored in “its relationship to the economic underpinnings of late-capitalist existence” (Breu 2011, 206). The writer’s conflicted attitudes towards junk and sodomy, or the sexual act in general, may be said to emblemize his conflicted relationship with the United States and the ‘body politic’ that the grotesque body makes reference to. Where his libertarian political identity shows in his propositions of openness and exchange, his cynicism about free market capitalism and analysis of its predatory nature show in his tropes of totalizing possession, predation, and destruction.

In his depictions of the body, Burroughs pushes the notion of grotesqueness to new limits: the bodies he describes are in continuous metamorphosis, often turning into animals such as crabs, scorpions, and insects, and bodily parts are apt to merge or become independent. The Egyptian in *The Soft Machine*, for instance, has “its eyes eating erogenous holes,” and his face “got an erection and turned purple” (Burroughs [1971] 1992, 20). In the “Ordinary Men and Women” chapter of *Naked Lunch*, Benway tells the story of “the man who taught his asshole to talk”: this is the previously mentioned ‘carny man’s routine,’ in which the orifice becomes independent to the point of substituting the mouth completely, and the carnay man finally finds that his mouth is progressively being eliminated by an overgrowth of “what the scientists call un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue, which can grow into any kind of flesh on the human body” (111). This passage is significant in that it symbolizes the physical and metaphorical victory of the lower stratum of the body over the higher one, of sexuality over reason, intellect, and individuality. This degradation, which brings about a literal silencing of the mental faculties, is the epitome of grotesque physicality. Throughout *Naked Lunch*, Lydenberg (1987) suggests, the body is either amputated or “condense[d] into one insatiable organ of need,” as the carnay man’s routine exemplifies: the orifices violently fight for dominion over one another; “Each orifice, trying to fill its emptiness by devouring other life, seeks exclusive domination over the body host” (29).

As previously illustrated, in Burroughs’ works, the trope of the grotesque body may be said to represent the United States’ ‘body of land’ and sense of national identity. However, the author has on some occasions made explicit the understanding that the body is a symbol of the personal self as well. For instance, in the process of ‘visiting’ mentioned before, the themes of possession and invasion are extended to identities, which are able to move from one body to the other, proving to be dynamic and unstable. In his essay “Immortality” (1976), Burroughs directly attacks the preoccupation with selfness in an argument in favor of cloning, claiming that existence is based on continuous exchanges with other people’s selves: “Let’s face it, you are other people and other people are you ... The illusion of a separate inviolable identity limits your

perception and confines you in time. You live in other people and other people live in you; ‘visiting’ we call it” (4).

In this essay, Burroughs invokes cloning and ultimately human mutation as “the end of the ego” (3), praising the potential of these practices to open new evolutionary paths for humanity. He believes that human beings hold onto the illusion of a stable, confined, whole subject, “the illusion of some unchangeable precious essence that is greedy old MEEEEEE forever” (3). In satirical tones, he confronts the human preoccupation with selfness, especially in scientists, relating it to a lack of spiritual development:

Like cattle on the verge of stampede they paw the ground mooing apprehensively... ‘Selfness is an essential fact of life. The thought of human nonselfness is terrifying.’ Terrifying to *whom*? Speak for yourself you timorous old beastie cowering in your eternal lavatory. Too many scientists seem to be ignorant of the most rudimentary spiritual concepts. (4; emphasis in the original)

Burroughs’ considerations on the body therefore evokes grotesqueness—fluidity, movement, instability—in physical as well as symbolic terms, in the body as well as the national and personal sense of being subject. He believes that the self is an illusion which holds people back from expanding their consciousness and accepting the reality of exchanges between what is continuously reframed as the self and all that exists outside: “There is no ego; only a shifting process unreal” (3). Selfness may further be equated with the American preoccupation with national identity during the Cold War, one which manifested, among other ways, in enforced standardization and fear and criminalization of difference. “And where might we position, in our current dystopia, our fragile Anthropocene, the provocative dismembering body of work that constitutes the opus of William Burroughs?” enquires Anne Waldman, addressing Burroughs’ engagement with an ultimately grotesque identity; “And the prescience within this ‘body’ that destabilizes many concomitant and parallel realities, revealing identity and gender to be fluid constructs? ... the ‘Burroughs effect’ defies categories. ‘The basic disruption of reality’ is what he posits” (quoted in Ginsberg 2017, xv).

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