

Kaleidoscope of Vistas  
*Identity Destabilization in William S.  
Burroughs' Novels*

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By

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# Abstract

William S. Burroughs' work is generally regarded as narratives of opposition and revolt. However, in this thesis, I will examine how his socially deviant characters are not exempt from discourses that rely on binary hierarchies, and promote coherence. The dissemination of identity shows the limits of essentialist rhetoric, and the impossibility of pure self-representation. For Burroughs, the liability of our ability to create truths is the ignorance of its multiplicity and unavoidability. The violent and obscure effects of language manifest in characterizations and identity descriptions. I will approach this thematically, through social discourses, naming, and sexuality. The first analysis will examine the oscillation of identity within seemingly cohesive depictions, and delineate Burroughs' theory of language. The second analysis will examine Burroughs' use of nicknames, conflation of name and function, and the semantic re-appropriation of epithets as problematizations of identity and context. The third analysis will discuss how we can read sexuality in Burroughs' novels, and the possible tension between sexual identity and eroticism. Such a thematic division also necessitates reflections on how Burroughs upsets distinctions of being, language, and context. This thesis examines Burroughs' novels in relation to the possibility of providing a critique of essentialism, while simultaneously being indebted to language structures that accommodate recognition and identification.



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# Abbreviations

<i>CRN</i>	<i>Cities of the Red Night</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>Junky</i>
<i>NE</i>	<i>Nova Express</i>
<i>NL</i>	<i>Naked Lunch</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>The Soft Machine</i>
<i>TE</i>	<i>The Ticket that Exploded</i>
<i>Q</i>	<i>Queer</i>
<i>WB</i>	<i>The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead</i>
<i>WL</i>	<i>The Western Lands</i>

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The ‘Priest’ They Called Him: Identifying William S. Burroughs

The work of William S. Burroughs spans multiple categories: from novels to painting, to spoken word and cinematic performances. As his platforms are numerous, criticism often blends together his performances, interviews, and novels. In Gus van Sant’s 1989 film *Drugstore Cowboy*, Burroughs appears briefly as a character called Tom the Priest, contemplating: “Narcotics have been systematically scapegoated and demonized. The idea that anyone can use drugs and escape a horrible fate is anathema to these idiots. I predict that in the near future, right-wingers will use drug hysteria as a pretext to set up an international police apparatus. As an old man I may not live to see a final solution to the drug problem” (*Drugstore Cowboy*). Matt Dillon’s character Bob, who robs pharmacies for drugs, states that Tom the Priest should have been a philosopher. This scene shows Burroughs in a familiar setting, and his musings on drugs, sex, and politics are often cited alongside his novels. In addition, Burroughs as a figure of authority comes up in the works of his fellow Beat writers. His works, and his public persona, are mostly viewed as countercultural. However, in a letter to Paul Bowles in 1972, Burroughs recognizes the co-optation of counterculture into the mainstream: “Any sex act can now be shown on the public screen with beautiful actors and that’s a powerful sight. [...] Anything described in *The Wild Boys* can now be seen in color and close up. And that means fewer sales. It seems I wasn’t kidding when I said I was working to make myself obsolete” (*Rub Out the Words* 590–1).<sup>1</sup> Despite this private evaluation of his position, Burroughs was continuously working: writing, lecturing, and giving readings. The likely threat of no longer being subversive did not affect his production.

The author worked tirelessly on his public performances, rehearsing the manuscripts of his readings and perfecting his timing. His stage presence gained notoriety in the 1970s, and according to biographer Ted Morgan, fellow author Norman Mailer dreaded reading with Burroughs on college campuses: “[E]very time [Burroughs] opened his mouth he got a laugh. It was his penumbral presence and gallows humor. Whatever he said, however banal, something like ‘it’s goddamn chilly in the morning,’ they fell on the floor laughing,” and Mailer is reported thinking: “let me out of here, so I don’t have to compete with this guy

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<sup>1</sup> Due to Burroughs’ extensive use of ellipses in his novels and letters, all added ellipses will be marked by square brackets. This is also used in citations from secondary literature for consistency.

saying crazy things in a graveyard voice” (Morgan, “Why William S. Burroughs Hated His Biography” n.p.). However, although Burroughs became firmly positioned as a countercultural icon, socio-political readings of his novels struggled to find consensus on the nuances of his countercultural affiliations: “It was not always clear whether his own struggle for liberation extended to embrace the collective (or even personal) struggles of those who were still living in oppressive conditions” (Hibbard 25). His experimental style makes any clear-cut ideological reading difficult. Even if Burroughs’ writing calls for freedom and independence, the novels do not give cohesive alternatives for collective social change.

Another approach critics take is biographical readings that compare the content of the novels with the author’s own life, his visits to Tangier, Mexico and Scandinavia, and reading the experimental passages as prisms of drug hallucination. Furthermore, biographical facts and anecdotes entertain readings that focus on the writer as a figure of opposition to conformity: Born into a prominent family, the future writer received parts of his education at Harvard University. It was at this time, while making frequent visits to New York City and expanding his social circle, that Burroughs recognized a different option for himself. He started socializing with so-called social deviants, meaning those who did not conform to the image of ‘wholesome’ Americans, including homosexuals, criminals, and drug addicts. Burroughs broke with the expected academic path, and made detours to New York City and Europe, combining his new lifestyle with scattered academic topics.

His perspective on why he started to write; “I didn't feel compelled. I had nothing else to do. Writing gave me something to do every day,” echoes his explanation of why he started to take drugs: “Well, I was just bored. I didn't seem to have much interest in becoming a successful advertising executive or whatever, or living the kind of life Harvard designs for you.” (Interview n.p.). This explanation of why he started to write contradicts the myth that it was after he accidentally killed his own wife Joan Vollmer that he felt compelled to become a writer. In the introduction to the first edition of *Queer* (often included as an appendix in newer editions), Burroughs wrote:

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death. [...] 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 had no choice but to write myself out.  
(*Q* 135)

This passage is often referred to, however, Burroughs points out earlier in his text that it was Brion Gysin who used the phrase “Ugly Spirit,” and interpreted a sentence from Burroughs’ cut-ups: “Raw peeled winds of hate and mischance blew the shot,” as the shot that killed Joan. Before that, Burroughs had interpreted it as blowing a shot of heroin (*Q* 132–3). The difference in the statements on why he started to write is emblematic of Burroughs’ ability to both create and disturb the image of himself as a writer.

In early 1943, Burroughs met Allen Ginsberg in New York City, and Jack Kerouac later the same year. In 1944, they witnessed the Kammerer/Carr murder that Burroughs and Kerouac write about in *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*. The life on the wrong side of the law necessitated continuous movement, which is depicted in his (semi) autobiographical novels *Junky* and *Queer*. In the late 1940s, Burroughs became tired of what he perceived as ubiquitous government interference, especially the intensified criminalization of drug use. Risking jail time in numerous states for forging prescriptions, public indecency, drunk driving and drug possession, Burroughs moved to Mexico City in 1949 to wait for the statute of limitations on his charges to expire (Morgan, *Literary Outlaw* 169–171). His reactions to, and musings on the difficult situation for addicts, are described in *Junky*, where he shows how the new laws concerning addicts are loosely defined and therefore enforced without much regard to evidence and contextualization.

The extensive biography *Literary Outlaw: The Lives and Times of William S. Burroughs* meticulously describes Burroughs’ encounters with law enforcement as well as his personal and professional life. However, the biography was not graciously received by the author. The work’s biographer Ted Morgan explains in an article called “Why William S. Burroughs Hated His Biography” that “Bill was complaining about various scenes, and even the title, *Literary Outlaw*, saying he had never been an outlaw. Though in fact he had been arrested by the Mexican police” (n.p.). This is not an isolated incident, as he was well known for overthrowing labels. When asked whether he had any affiliation with the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, Burroughs is reported to have dryly replied: “I have never been gay a day in my life, and I’m sure as hell not part of any movement” (*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*). Nevertheless, the images of a criminal, homosexual, and a drug addict have provided biographical and socio-political centers, which the literary criticism has evolved around. The question is not whether or not Burroughs and his novels confirm these labels, but why he resisted marginalization.

We can recognize that identity categories evoked in criticism often meet critique by the author himself. Comparatively, we can look at the descriptions of fellow Beat writers, where their prose promotes juxtapositions. The Beats, cultivating their respective lifestyles and literary merits, often wrote about each other using pseudonyms. Burroughs is also known (or for some, mostly known) through the writing of other Beat writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Herbert Huncke. An example often cited by Burroughs scholars is from Kerouac's acclaimed novel *On the Road* (1957), where Burroughs is portrayed as "Old Bull Lee." Here we see Burroughs as a well-educated man, with a certain authority within the group; a description slightly unsettled by an equivocal appearance:

He spent all his time talking and teaching others. Jane sat at his feet, so did I, so did Dean; and so had Allen Ginsberg. We'd all learn from him. He was gray, nondescript looking fellow you wouldn't notice on the street, unless you looked closer and saw his mad bony skull with its strange youthfulness and fire---a Kansas minister with exotic, phenomenal fires and mysteries. He had studied medicine in Vienna, known Freud too; had studied anthropology, read everything; and now he was settling to his life work, which was the study of things themselves in the streets of life and the night. (*On the Road*, 246)<sup>2</sup>

As we can see in Kerouac's description, experience and extensive literary knowledge gave Burroughs a certain authority within the circle of writers. Moreover, formal education and life experience are juxtaposed in this passage. Kerouac encapsulates Burroughs in an equivocal description of his appearance that suggests that people are not who you think they are at a first glance, and cannot be classified with one or two words. By the time of Kerouac's publication, Burroughs had already published *Junky*, originally titled *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* (1953) by William Lee.<sup>3</sup> Burroughs was in his forties when Kerouac gave him the nickname "Old Bull Lee," and about 10 years older than the others. Similarly, Herbert Huncke describes Burroughs as "one of the most erudite men I've ever known" (*The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* 89). However, Huncke also provides a contrast to readers who mostly have an image of Burroughs as an experienced drug addict and outcast: "Somehow there was something ludicrous about a man of Bill's obvious educational background becoming a business partner [in crime] with knock-around, knock-down, hard-

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<sup>2</sup> This is from a new edition of the novel. In the first edition, Ginsberg and Burroughs were referred to as Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The novel has been titled *Junkie* and *Junky*. The edition I am using in this thesis is called *Junky*, therefore all references will be made with this spelling. There are no critical differences between other editions and the one I am using in terms of textual content in quotations.

hustling Phil” (95). Burroughs had just started to take morphine, and was learning how to con doctors for prescriptions. Huncke explains that he remained “somewhat skeptical of Bill,” but after recognizing that he was “honest” about his interest in drugs and a lifestyle on the edge of the law, Huncke admits that he “began to feel friendlier towards him and to respect him” (97).

Equivocal descriptions, as we see in Kerouac’s writing above, that emphasize that people are usually not who they appear to be at first glance, can also be found in Burroughs’ novels *Junky* and *Queer*. In these novels, knowing or classifying a person based on appearance becomes increasingly difficult: from the first pages of *Junky*, where we meet a man whose name even the narrator is uncertain of, to a bar-scene in *Queer* where Lee is mistaken for being an agent due to his somber appearance. Equivocal descriptions are both a part of Burroughs’ literary style and, as I will argue, a theme in itself: the encapsulation of identity requires contradictory information.

With the publication of *Naked Lunch* (1959), and the subsequent trial where Burroughs had to defend what the court called pornographic content, the writer gained notoriety. With this novel, Burroughs had extensively worked on different themes, such as satiric scenes of government control, depictions of drug use, and the act of writing itself, diverging from a linear or cohesive structure:

This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yips and the slamming steel shutter of commerce, screams of pain and pathos and screams of pain pathic, copulating cats and outraged squawk of the displaced bullhead [...] 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 . . . [...]. Now I, William Seward, will unlock my word hoard . . . . (NL 191–2)

The phrase “kaleidoscope of vistas” emphasizes Burroughs’ approach to write about what mattered to him: By addressing conceptual thinking through displacements and juxtapositions, we can create *openings* of paradigmatic thought.

Burroughs continued this project with the *Nova* novels, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express*.<sup>4</sup> The reader is thrown into a world dominated by the Nova conspiracy where the obsequious dependency and reproduction of linguistic systems results in

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<sup>4</sup> *The Soft Machine* (Olympia, 1961; Grove 1966), *The Ticket that Exploded* (Olympia, 1962; Grove, 1967) and *Nova Express* (Grove, 1964). *SF* and *TE* were first published in Paris before they were published in New York by Grove. In this thesis, I will use the first US edition of *TE* and *NE*, see works cited list. All citations are with the original spacing (sometimes there are double spacing between words), lower case letters, et cetera. The space between punctuation marks, ellipses and dashes are common in works that were written on a typewriter.

symbiosis. The Nova mob “interpellates individuals into a social order that is organized to benefit the controllers, and gives those individuals generic ‘identities’ that are no more beneficial than the definite article, the paradoxical term that grants specificity to common nouns even though ‘the’ itself is no less generic than the noun it modifies” (Murphy 117). The images that words produce are addressed in *The Wild Boys A Book of the Dead* (1971), where the novel’s structure is played and re-played as multiple cinematic narratives. Burroughs elaborates his focus on sexuality and the sexual body, where the backdrop of the cinema calls for attention to how imagery and setting also influence our notions of sexuality. At the end of the novel, the Wild Boys are explained as destroyers of all control systems. The seeming antithesis to the Wild Boys lack of language and inability to combine human existence and freedom is depicted in the sections about The Articulated in *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), the first novel of Burroughs’ last trilogy. The pirate commune fighting for revolution and freedom for all in *Cities of the Red Night*, will be addressed in this thesis as an example of how a proclamations of being anti-essentialist does not necessarily escape expectations of how one is supposed to live and contribute to the greater good.

From the 1980s, Burroughs criticism has been increasingly postmodernist, most notably in Robin Lydenberg’s *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* (1987), where she advocates the similarities of Burroughs’ prose and postmodern theory. However, she does not make a clear distinction between different theories, but unifies them in Burroughs’ writing. Michael Sean Bolton continues this approach in *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: The Narrative Strategy of William S. Burroughs* (2009), where Burroughs is neatly compared with Jacques Derrida’s theories, while simultaneously drawing upon Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Lacan. Both scholars focus on the experimental works, and reject the early, linear novels. In addition, Bolton does not address sexuality in his dissertation. The closest to a postmodern reading of *Junky* and *Queer* is provided by Timothy S. Murphy’s Deleuzian interpretation in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997). The critical landscape that this thesis will both utilize and problematize mentions the problematic of identity, however, these studies are often subsumed other concerns. French poststructuralist theory, especially the the aforementioned thinkers, greatly altered the critical focus on Burroughs novels, which mirrors the effect that French poststructuralism has had in general: “[A]s of now, there is no longer a discourse of truth; there are only apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of truth—transient, tactical and political” (Cusset 131, 2nd bracket in orig.). An issue that I will argue has been inadequately addressed is identity

destabilization in Burroughs' novels. By examining how destabilization occurs, and what effect it has on central themes of literary criticism, we can notice structures around centralized themes and identities as they occur both in the novels and in criticism. As I have shown, numerous platforms affect how we read Burroughs' novels. This thesis will examine identity thematically, through social categorization, naming, and sexuality, while simultaneously looking at how the novels problematize these themes.

## 1.2 Strange Bedfellows: Burroughs, Derrida and Bataille

The term identity destabilization reflects notable concerns of deconstruction: firstly, identity points to essentialist traits that stabilize how we recognize and name things and beings around us, a continuous process; secondly, destabilization points to the unraveling of supporting and manipulative structures that enforce and reinforce our notions of essence. In other words, the unraveling of structures that support essentialist thought, is dependent on essentialism to exist.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) emphasizes that deconstruction is not a process that happens from the *outside*, and can therefore be localized as a method, but a process that cannot help but be within the structures of meaning:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (*Of Grammatology* 24)

Significantly, Derrida refers to the plural “movements” of deconstruction, which indicates that it is not a singular method with a beginning and an end, but relates to multiple processes of language where meaning and context multiply. Moreover, by “operating from the inside” deconstruction does not stand separately from a text, but as in this case, the exposure of essentialist thought must recognize the existence of these cases of centralizing essence.

Burroughs' novels arguably take a deconstructive stance; that you cannot help but inhabit the structure of which you wish to critique. In his writing, he problematizes the hold that language has on being, and how we are continuously defined within structures of recognition and identification. The examination of this, however, is not merely summed up as being against essentialist thought, as it is dependent on essentialism to function as critique.

The tension this creates in Burroughs' prose—the focus on the problematic of identity categories, while recognizing the unavoidability of identification—will be the primary concern of this thesis.

Derrida is renowned for his work, often referred to as Deconstruction. However, similar to Burroughs, much critical space has been devoted to discrediting his writing. Labeled a poststructuralist for his dissection of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of linguistics, Derrida's writings nevertheless span several categories. His theories are often composed as readings of or responses to philosophical works by, for instance, Martin Heidegger and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, works of fiction by Stéphane Mallarmé and Jean Genet, and the avant-garde writing of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille. Derrida, while developing his own theories, stays closely to the texts he is reading, and provides a platform for reading how identity is established and displaced within a sentence, or a paragraph. Furthermore, an attention to displacement of concepts, such as recognition, sameness, and naming in Burroughs' novels, will be important in all of the main chapters. Derrida's texts are used in a number of academic fields, from philosophy to sociology, art, and literary criticism. For literature, it means not only reading an author's text, but also recognizing use of literary centers, which include, but are not restricted to, the author, ideology, historical context, and politics.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential introduction and translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* will also play a part in this thesis, in addition to her work specifically, in the second part of chapter four. Spivak argues for a nuanced interpretation of deconstruction, which I believe is crucial in examining identity in Burroughs' works: "Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced" (qtd. in Landry and MacLean 27). As postmodern readings of Burroughs are often critiqued for emphasizing the notion that everything is arbitrary, it is important to recognize this distinction.

The Derridean vocabulary in this thesis will follow the citations used in each example. The use of "différance" and "presence" throughout the first chapter stems mainly from the citations used from *Of Grammatology*. At other times, "deconstruction" and "play" will appear. In the third chapter, "essentialism" is more widely used than before, as the theoretical aspect includes Bataille and Spivak, and is not strictly Derridean. Peggy Kamuf contemplates the privileging status of the word "deconstruction" in scholarly texts, a status that Derrida

continuously attempts to undermine in his own writing: “The word has had a remarkable career. [...] Derrida has confessed on several occasions that he has been somewhat surprised by the way this word came to be singled out, since he had initially proposed it in a chain with other words—for example, difference, spacing, trace—none of which can command the function as a master word” (Kamuf vii). The use of deconstruction in this thesis will refer to Derrida’s approach, but not be confined to a specific text. Therefore, I use it sparingly.

Several of Derrida’s works will appear in this thesis, and reading his texts arguably demands a great deal of attention. As with Burroughs’ novels, I wish to accentuate the different ways that identity is problematized in the texts, and nuances that can only appear by repetition and re-appropriation. That means that there is not one single definition that will structure the whole thesis, but the approach will examine the aforementioned unavoidability of essentialism. I am not preoccupied with whether or not Derrida and Burroughs have the same ideas, as that would establish a highly problematic conflation of fiction and philosophy, and also not recognize that although literary criticism is often indebted to philosophy, equating the two would result in inadequate readings of both. I will address how my reading relates to Derrida’s different ideas and theories in each chapter. Derrida and Burroughs have also been called “strange bedfellows” (Wood 13) with the elusive connection of resisting systemized thought. Critics have pointed to notable theories by Burroughs, including “word-locks,” where he argues that systems of meaning “will lock up a whole civilization for a thousand years” (Burroughs and Odier, *The Job* 49), and explains language as an alien force that inhabits and controls people, resulting in “a virus that made the spoken word possible” (13). These theories are often treated as conclusions, rather than positions within the novels. With this authority, textual examples are read from this theory, often separated from contextualization or difference. Furthermore, it re-instates the centrality and authority of the author figure in the texts. I will show how Derrida’s theories can unravel notions of presence and stability in Burroughs’ novels, and examine the possibility and consequences of identity destabilization. Kamuf addresses Derrida’s particular style of double reading texts, meaning “seeking out idiomatic points in language” and “accumulating as far as possible the resources of undecidability which lie dormant in syntax, morphology, and semantics” (Kamuf xi). This combines close-reading with previous consensus in criticism, and displacement of concepts. Pertinent for this style, is that while it exposes structures in the texts, it simultaneously incorporates the effects of such structures on our ability to produce recognition:

The result can often seem obscure to whoever has been taught the standard of so-called clarity of style is the first and indispensable criterion of expository prose. But Derrida never cultivates this ‘obscurity’ for its own sake; on the contrary, the apparent density of his writing has its correlative in a relentless demand for clarity of another order, which may be called, in a seeming paradox, a clarity of the obscurity, opacity and fundamental differences of language. Standard notions of clarity or “correct” style, when viewed from this perspective, must be seen as, themselves, obscurantist since they encourage a belief in the transparency of words to thoughts, and thus a ‘knowledge’ constructed in this illusion. (Kamuf xi–xii)

I will discuss how cohesiveness, which is produced by so-called clarity, relies on being “contradictorily coherent” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 352), meaning that the totality of a sentence often has its center elsewhere, and favors a language structure that plays with binary hierarchical positions.

Georges Albert Maurice Victor Bataille (1897-1962) is often placed in the periphery of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western philosophy. Prominent intellectual and literary figure, his lack of a proper philosophical education made him an easy target of scorn by key 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre who accused him of mysticism (Irwin 32). For the most part, Bataille’s writing is now read through the vast circle of thinkers he influenced, most notably, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Jean Baudrillard. If we call Burroughs and Derrida “strange bedfellows,” Bataille arguably falls into the same description. The latter bedfellow focused much on the uneasy and systemized relationship between binary systems of thought, such as taboo and transgression, society and nature, being and death. Bataille developed his radical critique of materialism, which he called *base materialism*. The reason why it is described as radical is that his articulations call for a reevaluation of what we consider materialism, and concomitantly, the separation between materialism and idealism (Noys 499). In Bataille’s explanation of this term we can recognize his influence on Derrida: “Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it specifically idealist” (Bataille, qtd. in Noys 499). Similarly, Derrida argues for the re-interpretations necessary to avoid falling into transcendental readings that rely on the apparent *presence* of subjects.

At the same time of developing his theories, Bataille wrote erotic works of fiction. During the early and mid-1950s, Bataille’s fictional works could be found under the counter in Paris bookstores, a space he would share with Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*. While most

publishers shunned Burroughs and Bataille, Maurice Girodias launched Olympia Press in Paris and published their works alongside James Joyce, Henry Miller, Jean Genet, and Vladimir Nabokov as well as cheap pornography called “db’s,” meaning, dirty books (Cullen 26). The notions that Bataille argues have been excluded by materialism and idealism include mourning, war, and perverse sexual activity (Noys 500). For Bataille, as for Burroughs, sex is not a separate issue and should not be read as such. Burroughs is rarely read in connection with Bataille’s philosophical ideas; however, I will argue that Bataille’s writing can influence a different reading of sexuality and desire in Burroughs’ fiction, which will emphasize the dissonance of being and representative qualities of sexual identity.

*Eroticism (L’Erotisme, 1957)* will be of importance to the third chapter of this thesis. In this work, Bataille examines and explains the erotic tension between sexuality, being and death. Pertinent for my chapter is his focus on the tension between societal discourse and the violence of being that manifests through erotic desire:

The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives. Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. (17)

When asked to make a distinction between the erotic, the sexual and the pornographic, Burroughs argues that: “All these words are loaded with hidden meanings. [...] The distinction between eroticism and sexuality for example—I think it is another case of either-or in Western thought: it’s either love or sex. . . I think what we’re dealing with here is a largely verbal confusion which is implicit in these words” (*The Job* 111). To approach this disavowal of categorization and ‘hidden’ connotations, it can be useful to examine how Burroughs depicts a tension between the establishment of categories, and what happens to characters and notions of identity in sexual situations.

At the core of both Bataille and Burroughs’ writing lies communication, whether in speech or writing, where they take issue with the notion that being can be presented and represented unequivocally, and comply with cohesive identities. For Bataille, communication creates tension because it entices the realization that we are separated beings, while simultaneously dependent on social relationships: “Communication, then, also implies violence. It accentuates our difference and institutes conflict both between us and within us as

individuals” (Richardson 31). In other words, the presentation and representation of identity does not lie neatly outside the person, but simultaneously evoke an inner experience of instability and juxtapositions. In *Eroticism*, Bataille extends this discussion to desire and sexual acts, where eroticism is used as a more general term to accentuate the division between the world of reason and that of violence: “There is in nature and there subsist in man a movement which always exceed the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order (40). Erotic is the name Bataille gives the relationship between taboo and transgression, the social rules and our desire to break them: “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (18). Depictions of sexual desire in Burroughs’ work, arguably breaks down these fixed patterns, however, there is still a tension there that can be examined with attention to Bataille’s delineation of emotional eroticism and physical eroticism, as it relates to establishment of the self and the other.

### **1.3 Outline and Aims**

To approach Burroughs’ novels, and what I recognize as instances of identity destabilization in his work, my analysis will be divided into three main chapters. It will begin with the two (semi)autobiographical novels and end with the first novel in his last trilogy, *Cities of the Red Night*. Due to time and format restrictions, the latter novels in the *Red Night* trilogy, *The Place of the Dead Roads* and *The Western Lands*, and the aforementioned *Nova* trilogy as a whole, will not be discussed at length, but briefly mentioned. As the chapters are divided thematically into societal identity categories, naming and sexuality, my reading will not be strictly linear. I will address instances from different novels that can problematize the aforementioned themes.

In the second chapter “Nothing is True —Everything is Permitted,” I will begin the examination of identity destabilization by analyzing different character depictions in *Junky* and *Queer*. It is important to begin with sentence structures because I will argue that this upsets readings that are based on traditional interpretive strategies that facilitate binary hierarchies. In *Junky*, this is shown both in characterizations and through Burroughs’ depictions of the subject within the moral discourse and the judicial process. In *Queer*, communication and self-identification result in various uneasy routines where the narrator addresses not only alienation in regard to ‘the other,’ but also in how he is expected to

identify himself. The section “Through the Looking Glass: On Reversing the Narrative Eye/I,” will delineate some of the literary critique of the (semi)autobiographical novels, that explains the novels from a notion of morality. Furthermore, I will examine the identity issues that are presented in *The Ticket that Exploded*, which will reiterate Burroughs’ theories of language as shown in his fiction, and examine how this coincides with the aforementioned identity issues in *Junky* and *Queer*. By addressing the complications of identity inscription, we can begin to see where Burroughs’ resistance towards identity categories, as mentioned in this introduction, comes from.

The third chapter, “Reduce to One Word One Image: Burroughsian Nomenclature,” will argue for an increased attention to naming of characters in Burroughs’ novels. This will include readings of nicknames, conflation of name and function, and semantic re-appropriation of epithets to cognomens (nicknames). It will also use the etymological function of cognomens, which is to establish identity, and examine the numerous ways that Burroughs calls attention to the processes and effects of naming. This chapter focuses on different instances in different novels, including the (semi)autobiographical novels, the seminal work *Naked Lunch*, and instances from the experimental novels. This will allow for examination of the different usage of naming, and how it occurs in different writing styles.

For the most part, critics have attempted to make this issue as clear as possible by reducing naming in Burroughs’ work to the effects of metonymic contraction, which means here that by naming something or someone, the unproblematic disposition of identity reduces the being. However, I believe that this is only one example of how naming is presented and problematized in Burroughs’ novels. Therefore, I will establish the concept of Burroughsian nomenclature —where “nomenclature” emphasizes that naming is a continuous *process* of recognizing and classifying identity, not created in a vacuum of finite signifiers, but oscillating between multiple contexts of being: biographical and societal. By recognizing essentialist thought through metonymic contractions, we can begin to examine textual effects of a probable destabilization.

Burroughs’ prose cuts, unusual character names, and the juxtapositions of technology and the notion of the virus have inspired science fiction, most notably the American-Canadian writer William Gibson, and the development of cyberpunk. When Gibson first became acquainted with Beat literature, he established an immediate affinity with Burroughs’ work. Although he recognized Kerouac as more approachable than Burroughs, it was the elusive and confusing science fiction aspect of *Naked Lunch* that intrigued the cyberpunk writer (Gibson,

Interview n.p.). The self-creation of identity that occurs in Gibson's writing, from fusion of technology and the human body to the alternative reality of cyberspace, provide a digital platform for the rift between being and creation that I will argue creates tension in Burroughs' writing. In the aforementioned chapter "Reduce to One Word One Image: Burroughsian Nomenclature," I will revisit this link between Gibson and Burroughs. In *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson plays with naming and the uneasy connotations that occur with conflation of name and function. I will not do a comparative analysis of the two writers; rather, inspired by Gibson, I will give an example of how attention to identity conflicts produced by naming can destabilize and illuminate otherwise seemingly unproblematic identity constellations, such as the image of Doctor Benway.

I consider sexuality to be a crucial theme in Burroughs' novels. Therefore, the last chapter "'The Irreconcilables': Sexual Identity and Eroticism" will address the possibility of identity destabilization in regard to depiction of sexual desire, identity, and Burroughs' infamous sex scenes. Jennie Skerl writes that Burroughs "early identifies himself with other 'outsiders'—the artist and the criminal—and the two are linked in his mind as he begins to write as a child. In adolescence, the artist's alienation intensifies as he finds that his sexuality deviates from the bourgeois norm. Homosexuality is also linked in his mind to criminal and artistic behavior" (18). Nevertheless, Burroughs never achieved the same status as a gay icon as Allen Ginsberg. A prominent issue has been how Burroughs separates homosexuals into effeminate and easily identifiable "fags" and "queens," and the more masculine "queer." Another critical claim suggests an alternative interpretation that:

overcome[s] the heterosexual binaries of male/female. "Masculine" sex offers an alternative to active/passive readings of the fag/"real" man paradigm. In such a situation, it is no longer clear who will occupy a passive or active role. Indeed, the terms are emptied of value; gendered readings of sexuality are exploded as each partner adopts both positions. (Russell 136)

Despite this recognition, or its significance, Burroughs' novels are continually read as overcoming or transgressing the male/female paradigm. In the first section of the last chapter I will suggest an alternative reading of *Queer*. From recognizing the perspective of adopting two established positions that derives from a binary separation, I will introduce the theme of Bataille's eroticism to examine the tension that occurs in the homoerotic depictions in the novel. This will continue the theme of violence in interactions that I will argue cannot be explained away as adopting a mutual space. In other words, rather than using homosexuality

as 'other' to heterosexuality, I will examine how the self and the other are continuously problematized within homosexuality. The second section of chapter four will address *The Wild Boys*, where Burroughs develops his sex scenes into a dominant theme, and plays with the embodiment of sexuality. In the last section I will visit the possibility of freedom in *Cities of the Red Night* as advocated by the revolutionary group The Articulated, where the collective good emphasizes binary sexual codes through Burroughs' depiction of a breeding-scene.

Each chapter will reiterate dominant criticism, and address the use of essentialist and established categories of identity, and examine how Burroughs' novels destabilize them. By using Derrida as the main theoretical approach, my examination will include how literary criticism perpetuates centralization of identity. Overall, the focus will be on the ubiquity of identity inscriptions, both through character appearances and societal discourses that rely on a stable subject.

## 2 Nothing is True — Everything is Permitted

*Excluded by my birth and tastes from  
the social order, I was not aware of its  
diversity. I wondered at its perfect  
coherence, which rejected me.*  
—(Genet, *The Thief's Journal* 182)

*Weep no more — absent tenants —  
ghost voices calling false human hosts*  
—(Burroughs, *TE* 131)

William S. Burroughs' (semi)autobiographical novels *Junky* and *Queer* have received little attention from scholars. "For most readers, Burroughs' career begins (and ends) with *Naked Lunch*," Timothy S. Murphy observes, "and even those who are aware of the texts that preceded it have only rarely granted those texts serious study" (46).<sup>5</sup> When discussed, *Junky* and *Queer* are mostly regarded as autobiographical accounts of the writer's life.

Consequently, the value of these works has often been limited to their exposé quality of the transgressive life of a homosexual junk addict who became one of the leading literary figures of the Beat generation. Although such studies do have their contextual merit, they have taken an unquestioned precedence in Burroughs criticism that, ironically, is upheld by critics who advocate a theoretical interpretation of his authorship but dismiss *Junky* and *Queer* due to their conventional linear structure. In fact, most critics who seek to promote Burroughs' works in academia through poststructuralist interpretations have not regarded the early works as more than a bibliographical footnote in their attempts to present and promote him as an innovative writer. I believe that the critical treatment of *Junky* and *Queer* has suffered from two distinct false assumptions:

- 1) That the linear narrative structure means that the novels are not innovative literary contributions.
- 2) That the cohesive structure automatically presents a stable depiction of characters and identity.

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<sup>5</sup> The notable exception is Murphy's chapter "Fugitive Words in *Junky* and *Queer*" in his book *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, where he delineates what he perceives as the novels "fugitive cartography," i.e. the continuous flight of the junkie, the different urban settings, and the "spaces between" (street corners, subway stations, doctors' waiting rooms, to mention a few). Murphy uses "amodern" to describe what he recognized as Burroughs' connection to both postmodern theory and modernistic literary concerns.

My reading of *Junky* and *Queer* will not only supplement the existing canon of Burroughs criticism with a new perspective of the novels through the theme of identity destabilization, but also question earlier criticism that relies on traditional interpretation strategies. I will discuss identity in relation to character descriptions in *Junky* and *Queer*, and examine how the issues that are presented in these novels are concerns that are later explored through experimental writing, such as the fragmentation of identity that occurs with the cut-up technique in *The Ticket that Exploded*. *Junky* and *Queer* have not been recognized as innovative works of identity destabilization, however, I believe this is an important feature in the novels that set them apart from other (semi)autobiographical works. In this thesis, I will show how Burroughs destabilizes identity throughout his authorship, and it is crucial to recognize his early techniques to get a nuanced picture of the possibility of exposing how language influences and controls our notions of individuality through stabilization and classification.

In *Junky*, the story is told through the eyes of the narrator and depicts encounters taking place in New York's criminal underground, a stay in jail and a hospital in Kentucky, and the narrow alleyways and nightlife in New Orleans. When the War on Drugs intensifies the criminalization of junkies, the narrator flees to Mexico City, but later returns to the U.S. In *Queer*, the focal point shifts, and the story is told both around and through Lee who is off heroin and consumed with his infatuation with a man named Allerton. While he travels South America in search of the drug *yage*, both the social interactions and Lee's contemplations of his sense of self expose the power dynamics of identity formation. This chapter will be devoted to how identity is depicted and destabilized within the frames of moral discourse, the legal system and social interactions, in addition to semantic concerns. *The Ticket that Exploded* is a repetitive and anarchic text that presents issues of mind control rooted in the idea that language is a virus. While many critics have treated this as an allusion, I will look at what this means *literally* in regard to how we use language to construct identities. If language stabilizes our notions of sameness and difference, then how people are classified, segregated, and presented in language lies at the core of Burroughs' continuous concern with semantic and sociopolitical control.

I will first address the implications and consequences of mythologizing the author, which has been a significant result of the discussions around his (semi)autobiographical works. Secondly, I will look at how Burroughs characterizes and suspends characterization through signifying marks. I will also juxtapose the problematization of identity concepts in

*Junky* and *Queer* with the disruption of characterization and identity in *The Ticket that Exploded*. In the latter, identification, as such, is seemingly suspended from semantic control in the form of fragmentation and ellipses. *The Ticket that Exploded* is the second novel in the *Nova* trilogy and I consider it a central text for studies of identity in Burroughs' authorship. I will not do a thorough interpretation of Burroughs' seminal work *Naked Lunch* in this chapter. The reason for this is simply that his most famous novel has been studied in great detail, and received the most attention. However, I will draw some comparisons to this work; perhaps it will encourage readers of *Naked Lunch* to see the (semi)autobiographical novels in a new light, or even encourage those who found *Naked Lunch* barely readable to endeavor on the seemingly daunting task of reading *The Ticket that Exploded*, and the rest of the *Nova* trilogy.

Due to the nature of my proposal, and what I recognize as Burroughs' early textual insistence on decentralization and destabilization, I will examine Jacques Derrida's ideas of *différance* and *presence* to approach the idea of identity deconstruction in both the linear texts and the experimental *The Ticket that Exploded*. Derrida's theories have not been applied to the linear novels before, however, his ideas are arguably most interesting when applied to concepts and structures that we perceive as given. In "The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau," Derrida's explains his view on what he calls the play of "classificatory difference":

[P]roper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration, because the erasure and the imposition of the letter are originary, because they do not supervene upon a proper inscription; it is because the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, anything but the original myth of a transparent legibility present under the obliteration; it is because the proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences, within a writing retaining the traces of difference, that the interdict was possible, could come into play, and, when the time came, as we shall see, could be transgressed; transgressed, that is to say restored to its obliteration and the non-self-sameness [*non-propriété*] at the origin. (*Of Grammatology* 109, 2nd bracket in orig.)

Derrida postulates that the proper name is created and obliterated in its context, and therefore undermines the notion of unique reference and stability *outside* of the given context.

However, the possibilities of contexts do not "create meaning from the outside," as a stable referent, because proper names (or signs) "does not provide fixed central positions around which contexts are constructed" (Bolton 162). Compared to the traditional interpretations of the (semi)autobiographical novels, this gives a radical perspective on how to read identity,

which is comparable with Burroughs' innovative character representations and destabilization of the subject within language. Furthermore, this perspective will allow me to scrutinize the structure of the contexts that facilitate the apparent identity constructions. The reception of *Junky* and *Queer* focuses on Burroughs as an addict, his references to himself as queer, and often interprets the moral or immoral functionality of these works. However, through Derrida's disentanglement of components that structures and stabilizes our notions of identification, we can recognize techniques in Burroughs' writing that continually question and expose such constructions.

In regard to self-identification, the concept of *non-propriété*, or "non-self-sameness," questions the notion of *essence*, that is, a centre or a locus of identity that is inherent or in some way comes before our structuralized concepts of recognition and identification. The idea of center that supports the self-identification of the sign, and the 'I' as a cohesive subject, results in inflexibility that, as Bolton observes "[represent] the potential for violent exclusion or 'othering'" (164). In other words, by stabilizing a notion of self, or the 'I,' one necessarily creates 'the other' in its image. Derrida's ideas of *différance* can facilitate an examination of how identity is constructed and re-constructed within its context, and I will argue that the idea of *presence* that valorizes identity concepts is, in Burroughs' works, exposed to be complex instances of hierarchy. This also means that the paradigms that facilitate such establishment of the subject must also be deconstructed.

The idea that identity is mediated by complex constructions of presence is easy to forget in the seemingly cohesive texts, *Junky* and *Queer*. The automaticity in our perception and construction of identity concepts are exposed in different ways in *Junky*, *Queer* and *The Ticket that Exploded*. The purpose of focusing on the early novels in a reading of destabilization is to 'open up' the (semi)autobiographical narratives from the traditional conflation of linearity/cohesion; presence/stability; sensible/intelligible. In fact, the automaticity of recognition and identification has left the topic of identity destabilization largely unnoticed in the linear narratives.

## **2.1 Through the Looking-Glass: On Reversing the Narrative Eye/I**

An interesting aspect of the novel *Junky* is the faceless narrator William Lee, a stylistic choice that by resisting simple narrator/author juxtaposition has caused much controversy. The name Lee is Burroughs' mother's maiden name, and is used in several of his novels. This

biographical fact has been used to support the conclusion that the author is the narrator, which results in readings of the author as a spokesperson, an anchor point, a voice. It not only takes a meticulous reader to systemize the presence of narrative voices in Burroughs' novels, but also an inventive one. The recurrence of William Lee and other variations of Burroughs' name, as Bolton observes, does not conflate the author and the persona, but "creates a number of shifting and transforming characters who serve as something akin to authorial avatars" (146). The emphasis on a cohesive author identity has resulted in readings of the (semi)autobiographical works as strictly *romans à clef* where the biographical facts have authority in the readings of the texts. Furthermore, the experimental works have been treated in a similar way, where the texts are perused to *discover* the author's sociopolitical concerns and sympathies. To do this, Burroughs criticism flourishes with citations from interviews and appendixes, where the author's own statements take precedence. However, his statements are more a study in contradiction than illumination, and to get to a cohesive truth critics must disregard a number of statements and rely completely on the authority of one transcript.

While *Junky* is written in first person singular, the narrator slips into a more omniscient role when describing other characters. There are rarely any definitive statements about the "I" persona and his motivations are predominantly limited to his next score. In *Queer*, Burroughs utilizes a third person narrative voice, and emphasizes performance in relation to identity. In addition, the insecurity that is revealed in the pursuit of his object of desire makes up a seemingly more "rounded" narrator than in *Junky*. Nevertheless, the focus of critical reception of the novels has been the author and not the text. Critics are divided on how to read the other characters so they can hold up a mirror and expose the "I." Oliver Harris emphasizes similarities between the nefarious character Bill Gains and William Lee, and attempt to trace Gains in later texts. He uses this to trace themes between Kerouac and Burroughs' writing (35). John Tytell insists on solidifying, or 'making sense,' of the texts' message in their origin of the author, by giving biographical information, comparing the character Gains with the notorious coat thief Bill Garver (40). This results in criticism where "[n]arratives, according to such interpretive approaches, must be taken as objects, as puzzles created by the authors to be decrypted or reassembled in the hands of readers" (Bolton 139). Furthermore, an evaluative construction of an author as a medium for sociopolitical concerns, where the texts are mostly read as reflections of the author, consequently relates to concepts of intentionality. This often results in attempts to square off the author to fit him into dualistic interpretative approaches.

The early novels have played a significant part in mythologizing Burroughs as the “gentleman junkie” and “literary outlaw.” In lieu of any centralized political ideology in Burroughs’ texts in general, content has been siphoned to correspond with a more coherent and idealized image of a countercultural figure. Burroughs has undoubtedly been a significant influence on American and European counterculture, and is perhaps as much known for his presence in music and film as his contributions to literature. He collaborated with artists of various genres, such as Brion Gysin, John Giorno, Tom Waits, and Kurt Cobain. Burroughs also appeared in several cameos on screen, such as Opium Jones in Conrad Rooks’ 1966 cult film *Chappaqua*, and Tom the Priest in the aforementioned 1989 Gus van Sant film *Drugstore Cowboy*. The image of a countercultural figure has, for many, preceded his texts. Consequently, the classification of a prophet for revolt has also been used to devalue his literary project as irrelevant or unsuccessful, as it does not give a cohesive *alternative* to social order, a manifesto on cultural or political change, or as David Lodge argues: the novels lack “an instructive moral” (38). In this approach, Burroughs’ writing also fails as satire (Bolton 30), and the criticism stifles itself by trying to fit his novels into traditional dualistic interpretations.

Before exploring more instances of dualistic interpretation and the results of this, I have to comment on my own use of the classification “countercultural” in the previous paragraph. It is a description that follows Burroughs and places him in the cultural landscape; however, it is not uncomplicated. The prefix *counter* in “countercultural icon” suggests *pure* opposition, a reaction that owns its existence to the prevailing majority, whatever that is at the time, and is formed as a direct answer. He *is* the “literary outlaw” that doesn’t play by the rules; the “gentleman junkie” that rejects the idea of the nuclear family and political surveillance during McCarthy’s propaganda; the anarchist that wants to dismantle national borders. What Burroughs recognizes, however, is that “[t]he counter-rule is still a rule” (Derrida, *On the Name* 8), and that attempts at transgressing the existing rules by means of opposition, consequently mimics what it opposes. Any attempt at replacing the existent social structure in his novels experience problematic consequences when “revolutionaries” fail to recognize that power is not located in institutions, but created on all levels through construction and negation of meaning. Not only reform as attempted in *Cities of the Red Night* but also pure destruction of systems as shown in *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* are ultimately “like trying to abolish the symptoms of a disease while leaving the disease itself

untouched” (*The Job* 73). Subsequently, attempts to argue for the author’s intentions on moralistic and political grounds risks to replicate the systems that are destroyed in the novels.

Critics who take a more neutral stance in the evaluative question also use the idea of the countercultural aspect as a limitation of Burroughs’ most famous work. Mary McCarthy makes such a conclusion when she states that “[*Naked Lunch*] was not intended, surely, for the general public, but for addicts and former addicts, with the object of imparting information” (38). A curious effect of such claims as well as those that state the novels lack a moral stance, have been that critics who support Burroughs’ literary relevance have attempted to restore morality on behalf of the author. “The view of drug experience is harshly antiromantic,” John Tytell explains, “*Naked Lunch* is an educative warning against the horrors of addiction” (12). While the novel’s nightmarish content and visceral scenes can hardly be seen as an encouragement for drug use, Tytell’s statement is one of numerous examples of attempts to ‘clean up’ the novels, and reissue them as social or moral statements. In such interpretations, however, it is not so much the texts as the author and his intentions that are being read.

Other attempts to restore Burroughs’ significance have been in the name of *objectivity*. In *Junky*, Burroughs is “the addict turned diagnostician, a victim of sickness now devoted to the analysis of diseases” (Tanner 110), and the novel “can be read as a documentary” (Mottram 31). Even postmodern critics have named Burroughs as an impartial outsider in *Junky*: “Burroughs himself often adopts the stereotypically modern role of sociologist or anthropologist” (Murphy, *Wising* 47), where the writer introduces the reader to “a way of life, a vocabulary, references, a whole symbol system as the sociologists say” (*J* xiii). The conclusion posited is that the narrator’s control lies in an “‘objective’ point of view that differs from the viewpoints of his subjects” (Murphy, *Wising* 47). A direct consequence of this is that characterizations and identity are taken for granted in the linear narrative and the symbol system that Burroughs refers to has not been deconstructed. The narrative gaze is explained as a subject that is somehow *outside* the text, and notions of agency are used instead of the workings of the novel as the main premise to evaluate the work. Furthermore, the actions of the characters, including the criminal activity in *Junky* and the sexual desire in *Queer* are all kept at an arm’s length. An example of this is how the junkie-dealer relationship has been sanitized as a critique of capitalism and an allegory for control. The experimental texts are perused to find an “intellectual center,” as Tytell calls the “pervasive suspicion of the dangers inherent in technological organization (12–3). The locus of control is found

(allegorically) in institutions, with the addict as a helpless spider in the system. Harris notes that “the side effects of the junk paradigm have been catastrophic, because it scores as abstract all Burroughs’ models of control and disease. [...] Nothing Burroughsian is abstract: the force of his ideas cannot be separated from the effects of his words” (Harris 36–7). The implications of an emphasis on abstraction in the texts undermine the mantra of Burroughs’ authorship: that the word is a virus (*TE* 49), and language is not a divorced entity of meaning, but creates and manipulates its subjects. It would be a mistake to undermine Burroughs style of writing, as it is never divorced or incidental to its themes.

Robin Lydenberg states about *Naked Lunch*: “Burroughs [is] at odds with conventional literary criticism which equates interpretation with metaphorical decoding and with the ethical pursuit of truth” (10). Lydenberg’s statement can also illuminate the critical reception of *Junky* and *Queer*, where the amputated reading of the (semi)autobiographical novels fails to take into account how Burroughs challenges stability and characterization within their apparent referentiality. Georges Bataille suggests that: “A dictionary would start from the point at which it would no longer give the meanings but the tasks of words” (“Language” 25). He gives an example with the word “formless,” where he argues that the word not only indicates that an object lacks a form, but also that the lack states that there *should* be a form. In other words, by naming, or identifying, we create and utilize oppositions of classification and order. Similarly, by stating that a work is immoral, it does not only indicate that there are inherent moral problems with the text, but that the text should aspire to be morally instructive, which is the desired cause. Furthermore, such an aspiration requires an author that works on behalf of morality, and is a centralized voice for moral and ethical concerns. In this pursuit for authorial truth, the construction of such concepts is left unquestioned.

“I am evidently his idea of a character” (3), the narrator states in the beginning of *Naked Lunch*, before he is replaced/ recreated as other narrative voices. In *Junky* and *Queer*, we can recognize what that entails. For an author whose name and reputation precedes him, it is time to look at how notions and classifications of identity are presented and challenged in his works. His texts problematize the notion of an existentialist “choice” in regard to self-identity, as what one “chooses to be” is not a self-contained entity of truth, that stands outside language—identity, as such, cannot be reduced to societal effects that are located “outside” the human being, in forms of institutions and class, but inherent in all forms and constructions of meaning.

## 2.2 Word Locks: Writing Identity in *Junky* and *Queer*

The early novels posit interesting questions with their titular identities “junky” and “queer.” What it means to be either, or both, is problematized throughout the novels. In addition to commentary in form of contemplative paragraphs on the status of a junkie, or a queer, Burroughs also challenges the use of identity categories in instances that depend on a stable subject. *Junky* is also noted for being “devoid of any message about the morality of doing drugs,” (Johnson 101). In later editions, publishers found it necessary to include disclaimers to mediate some of the information in the novel, along with new introductions. In addition, it was published as a double book with “an antinarcotics tract by a former drug agent, for ‘balance’” (Grauerholz 43), effectively positioning the novel as a cautionary tale. That is not to say that the novel does not touch upon the concept of morality, because it devotes a whole paragraph specifically to this discussion.

Burroughs approaches the question of morality through how the subject is mediated within the moral discourse, and how a presupposed idea of morality/immorality *creates* the subjects and classifies them rather than being a divorced entity of applied moral truth. To explain how Burroughs situates identity within moral discourse, I will examine Derrida’s explanation of the idea of *play*, in relation to the notion of being as something that is self-contained.

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.  
(*Writing and Difference* 292)

The opposition to, and at the same time a reworking of, the idea of center, which is grounded in a history of meaning (which invariably *is* history) lies in the notion of play that permeates the differential structure. This entails an emphasis on ambiguity and contextualization that, in the name of truth, is often glossed over or disregarded to create a cohesive presentation of a concept. Within the paradigm of moral truth, depictions of characterization and identity shows how the imposition of this structuralized concept, is, in fact, ambiguous and reworked in any given context. Moreover, I will add another factor: that the scene below shows the Derridean

subject that I mentioned in the introduction, which is not a stable fixture from where applied concepts can derive their empirical truth, but in constant flux.

When Lee goes to jail, the reader is treated to some succinct imagery that shows the pain of withdrawal that eventually lands him in the hospital where his status causes moral concerns. For the heroin addict, junk detaches the person from their body, and the person “float[s] without outlines” (J 7). However, this feeling is temporal, and withdrawal seemingly brings back all the postponed physical states at once, which leaves the junkie incapacitated and at the mercy of the state of his flesh. Lee observes that his “body was raw, twitching, tumescent, the junk-frozen flesh in agonizing thaw” (94). Furthermore, the simplest motion deprives the addict of any control of the body: “There was a sudden rush of blood to my genitals at the slippery contact. Sparks exploded behind my eyes; my legs twitched—the orgasm of a hanged man when the neck snaps” (94). After a while, the police bring him to the hospital, and the narrator finds that a re-classification of his status is necessary to justify medical help. A conversation between the two doctors in the hospital follows: “‘After all, doctor,’ he said to his colleague, ‘there is the moral question. This man should have thought of all this before he started using narcotics.’” Whereupon the other doctor answers: “‘Yes, there is the moral question, but there is also a physical question. This man is sick.’ He turned to a nurse and ordered half a grain of morphine” (95). The first doctor suggests that the moral question is somehow suspended from the status of patient, as a ‘higher’ or self-referential entity from which all other questions should be decided. However, Burroughs’ aphoristic dialogue emphasizes how moral questions do not stand *on their own*, but are reworked according to the situation and the people involved. The patient on the bed can be treated or not treated based on which identification status take precedence: a junkie is a criminal, and giving him morphine would enable him. Or, a junkie is sick, therefore a patient, and to give him morphine would decrease the pain.

The scene in the hospital displays the problems of having a *sense* of what is moral. Derrida problematizes the idea of morality as inherently moral, and asks: “[W]ould it be moral and responsible to act morally because one has a *sense* [...] of duty and responsibility? Clearly not; it would be too easy and, precisely, natural, programmed by nature: it is hardly moral to be moral (responsible, etc.) because one has a *sense* of the moral, of the highness of the law, etc.” (*On the Name* 16). The Hippocratic Oath of ‘doing no harm,’ the code of ethics adopted by medical professionals is, by the first doctor, suggested to be under the ‘higher’ standard of morality, the dualistic separation of right and wrong. However, what *is* right and

what *is* wrong is problematized due to the status of the patient. As *doing right* would entail leaving the patient in pain, is arguably at odds with helping him, which would also be ‘right.’ Yet morality is not suspended in the name of treatment and responsibility. As the other doctor concludes, as the patient is labeled “sick,” the treatment is legitimized. As such, the addict is at the mercy of each individual doctor with their own perception of what constitutes sickness, identity and responsibility. Morality as inherently responsible, and that following what is “right” is the highest responsibility, is put into question: is it possible, even as a theoretical concept to equate what is right and what is moral responsibility? Lee cannot simply be junk-sick, as the apparent coherency of moral discourse does not permit such combinations; to give an addict morphine only prolongs the abuse. One state (the physical) has to assume legitimacy over the other (the patient’s criminal identity) to address the immediate situation. Morality, as this paragraph suggests, is not in itself moral, as it would leave the addict in an agonizing state, but not cure him of his addiction or make him *not be an addict*. The reception of *Junky* as an immoral work that needed supplementary comments to explain its position within the moral binary completely misses the mark. The novel shows how the subject is positioned and classified within the moral discourse to uphold a sense of truth. *Junky* does not promote an idea of immorality as the natural opposite to and destruction of morality; rather it juxtaposes the moral dualism and shows it at *play*. That is not to say that there is no such thing as morality, but the binary, the foundation of moral understanding, is shown to be a construction of opposites, and not inherently moral.

The narrator moves in different environments throughout the novel and the clash between the criminal underground and the law necessitates that junkies have to play different roles to get access to drugs and avoid sentencing. However, it is not sufficient to see identity as unstable because it is mediated by different discourses; that would presuppose that a discourse is a stable, cohesive and self-referential structure that makes sense within its own system. Referentiality is problematized in *Junky* when a change in legislation as part of the War on Drugs intensifies the debate on morality, responsibility and identity: “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” (*J* 142). The frames of penalization are thus suspended, and it becomes illegal to *ever have been* an addict. Senators recite propaganda in the name of the children; all people that are in possession of or have been

in possession of drugs are responsible for recruiting children to drug addiction. For addicts and peddlers, the rhetoric does not make sense as children have very little money to use and are high risk as they tend to talk under questioning (*J* 143). The political rhetoric shows that to appeal to emotion, and to draw children into the picture, is effective to mobilize both police and citizens to protect the young innocents. Based on information from other addicts Lee observes the effects of the situation: “I got a picture of the situation in the U.S. A state of complete chaos where you never know who is who or where you stand” (143). Because of the ambiguity of the classification of an addict, the apparent coherence in the legal system that systemizes criminals and lawful citizens rejects any control that the individual has over his own status. To give up drugs, an action that should result in the suspension of your criminal identity, can still give prison time if previous connections are used against you. The act of taking drugs is the predicate for *being* an addict, however, the law suggest that ‘addict’ is not just a criminal identity, but also a personal trait that can be penalized.

The conflation of the subject and the law is prevalent in Burroughs’ writing, and complicates the idea of “being” as suspended from the “word locks” of identification. As mentioned in the introduction, Burroughs’ “word locks” are rigid concepts that paralyzes and dictates our way of thinking about the world. It emphasizes the hold that language and identification has on our perspectives, which ensures that some ideas are never questioned, and old systems perpetuate. The instability of legislation is also twice repeated in *Naked Lunch* where one judge says to another: “Be just, and if you can’t be just, be arbitrary” (5, 62). The individual discretion and authority implied in these examples are juxtaposed with the other meaning of arbitrary, namely lack of meaningful context and randomness. In Derrida’s terminology, the *presence* of the subject as an addict is created and recreated at each moment, and shown as completely dependent on contextualization, which also changes due to the instability of the subject. In *Junky*, Burroughs shows that the ambiguity of characterization has dire consequences when ‘to be’ an addict does not necessarily mean being addicted or in possession of narcotics. Another example from *Naked Lunch* of the consequences of this conflation of “being” and context states that: “A *functioning* police state needs no police” (31), because it is internalized in the subject and agency is dislocated, which creates self policing. The symbiosis of the being and the law leaves differentialization imperceptible, and creates an image of a whole. The referred subject, or the subject inferred, is shown already in *Junky* to be an entity that does not distinguish between the notion of being and contextualization.

An apparent contrast to the medical and legal discourse is “jive-talk,” the “fugitive glossary” that lacks any centralized source, like a dictionary or law paragraph. It also lacks a centralized origin as “jive-talk” is a combination of slang derived from jazz music, hipsters, addicts and criminals with an emphasis on temporality. Its “intentions are fugitive” and may be used differently in the same area (*J* 158). Understanding is therefore based on one’s position within the environment and acceptance as “one of them.” In the “jive-talk” used in *Junky*, a person who collaborates with the police, a “pigeon,” an “informer,” is known as “wrong.” Furthermore, those who score for someone who has been associated with “the People” (the Police) are tainted and often end up as “stool pigeons” themselves because they cannot be trusted. While the words vary, the effects remain perfectly clear. The ambiguity is located in the instability of the words, and not in the instability of meaning. In reference to those who help informers to score, their actions precede them, and they are thus classified. This language operates with an immediate *naming*—effect. While this would seem to simplify the identity question, it intensifies it. Once the association with the police is recognized, however loose it may be, the subject is marked and kept at a distance. To recover from this branding is almost impossible.

The transitory context marks a junkie’s life, and “his living spaces [are] threatened by the police outside as well as by informers—‘pigeons’ or ‘stoolies’—inside his group, who make the landscape radically unstable” (Murphy, *Wising* 51). This discontinuous mode of living does not only necessitate a rootless lifestyle, but also a keen ability to read situations and people. The expression ‘to read’ is not used unwittingly here, as the junkie characters rely on their ability to decode messages, spot hierarchies, and always be aware of how every communicative effort does not only indicate who the other people are *to them*, but also *their function* in the interaction. Burroughs utilizes several stylistic choices to describe characters and emphasize the deceiving concept of recognition and classification. Often the description ends with a negation of the statement that has just been made. The narrator explains the difficulty of recognizing and identifying other people: “His mouth was thin, twisted down at the corners. A junky mouth, for sure. There are people who look like junkies and aren’t, just as some people look queer and aren’t. It’s a type that causes trouble” (*J* 129). Misidentification is not simply a theoretical concept because it also has very real consequences in interaction with other people. The idea that one can spot a junkie or a queer is upheld by the notion of these categories as *essentially* different or deviant from other identities. Consequently, this use of essentialism does not recognize the difference between

classifying one aspect of one's being and conflating it with an overall identity. Burroughs shows this by mentioning junkies and queers in the same sentence. While they are very different aspects of identification, they are treated the same from pseudo-scientific interpretations of examining and cataloguing a person from appearance.

Another example of Burroughs' negating statements is when the narrator presents a sartorial trait in junkies: "Junkies all wear hats. If they have hats. They all look alike, as if wearing a costume identical in some curious way that escapes exact tabulation" (*J* 122). Firstly, written in the 1950s, a man that wears a hat is hardly a helpful description. Secondly, "if they have hats" negates the previous "all." The joke extends to the second line that shows that the common trait does not actually help identification.

Throughout *Junky* and *Queer*, the present characteristics are often wrong or contradict themselves. For instance, the narrator himself is taken for being an FBI agent by a conspiracy nut at a bar in New Orleans, who believes Lee is there to investigate narcotics (*J* 70). In relation to sexuality, similar problems of identification are presented.<sup>6</sup> There is much emphasis on how the narrator does not look like a junkie or look like a queer. The narrator shows annoyance over the fact that another character named Moor is able to manipulate conversation so that he appears reasonable and Lee is portrayed as vulnerable and a "detestably insistent queer" (*Q* 7). In his own story, the narrator emphasizes how identity is continually created and imposed in different relations.

The trope of the unreliable narrator takes on a whole different level in this novel where the narrator himself is not able to control what happens in conversations. The power relationship in social interactions is depicted, where a rigid classification of one person automatically gives the other person the upper hand. The naming of identity in this case puts the participants in the interaction in an instant positioning within a hierarchy. 'Reasonable' stands in contrast to the reductive identity classification as the text shows the stereotypical image of a feminized "queer." This is shown as a product of their interaction, where Moor has defined Lee even within Lee's own story (*Q* 7–8).

While *Junky* shows identity destabilization in relation to seemingly stable concepts such as morality, legislation and crime, *Queer* shows how performance and the notion of self-identity share similar characteristics. The narrator constantly underscores his own behavior as a performance: "Lee paused. The routine was coming to him like a dictation. He did not know what he was going to say next, but he suspected the monologue was about to get dirty" (57).

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<sup>6</sup> Sexuality will be discussed at length in chapter 4.

The third person narrator fluctuates between different roles in the novel. The roles of the queer, the performer, the presentation of the narrator through the other characters' eyes, and the 'I' show that one cannot escape identification and contextualization with larger concepts. In an unpublished interview, Derrida approaches the idea of improvisation and performance, with the insistence that what we perceive or expose is indebted to our preprogrammed understanding of what it is that we are exhibiting:

Even when one improvises in front of a camera or a microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place, the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants; one is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. (qtd. in Landgraf 19)

Derrida's concept of the ventriloquist emphasizes that our understanding of ourselves is made through the names that we know, which is crucial to understanding Burroughs' insistence on the power that language has over our concepts of identity and being. By recognizing the debt our utterances have to the "preprogrammed names," or "word-locks," *Queer* is a provocative work not because it depicts a queer lifestyle in the 1950s, but because it challenges the equivocal insistence on contextualization of the being.

In *Queer*, Derrida's ventriloquist is a self-conscious narrator who, as he is performing, exposes the contextualization that influences his narrative. The novel does not fit into the trope of the 'queer narrative' as type of story that takes issue with an identity at odds with the majority, or the feeling of not belonging in a social group. Instead, Burroughs rewrites it as a destabilization of contextual predicates and self-identification that makes a person who he is. *Queer* was written back to back with *Junky*, but was not published until 1985. The story does not involve a coming-out tale, like Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), although both novels reflect the hierarchy of homosexual sub-cultural identity and identity performance. The view of "fags" as overly feminine and participants in a continual performance and conformation of their sexual identity through gestures and idiosyncrasies is prevalent in both Vidal and Burroughs' novels.

What distinguishes *Queer* from other so-called queer narratives, however, is the constant undermining of what the reader may expect to be the issue at hand. In the novel, Lee reflects: "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" (Q 35). The reference to a "script" as in a text, a narrative, or manuscript is refused by the narrator, and reflects the aversion towards a traditional narrative structure of finding one's place or identity in society. Any hint of a personal crisis of not just dealing with one's own homosexuality, but *being a homosexual* is rejected. Doctor Kildare was a fictional character created by the writer Frederick Schiller Faust, who also wrote numerous westerns and various pulp fiction, under over twenty pseudonyms, including Max Brand. The novels' transition into films in 1930s and 40s, however, developed a moral universe with the medical institution as the epitome of good values. The doctors, although saviors, were depicted as physically frail men dependent on their mothers' advice (Marchessault 321). The narrator rejects what he regards as an effeminate reaction, which is juxtaposed with *being* homosexual, depicted as an overt display of sexual identity.

Burroughs' text refuses to be a story that tells how to come to terms with one's own sexuality, and instead exposes the structuralized thinking that seemingly demands such a reflection as if the basis for one's sexuality is an identity category. Here, Derrida's ventriloquist realizes and comments on the cultural associations and acknowledges the debt to the social and cultural discourse of homosexuality, and plays with the idea of performing according to standard. He dismisses the plot of an emotional crisis that has to be solved in the novel, and emphasizes the centralized concepts that we use as our understanding of homosexual identity. As a performer in the story, the narrator does not shy away from the stereotypes, but recognizes the preprogrammed concerns, and, as in this example, points out the cultural context from where he derived his 'scene.' As Derrida points out, the schemas and languages are already there. What this means for Burroughs, is that the author has to expose the sources of information, but ultimately recognizes that the schemas and languages cannot be avoided. This is why destabilization of identity and concepts is crucial when reading Burroughs' text: The author, in this matter, is a part of the reaffirmation of identity concepts because the text relies on recognition and repetition.

As seen in *Junky*, Burroughs is not concerned with the normative moral question as an issue of distinguished opposites. In *Queer*, he similarly avoids the dominant discussions that rely on dichotomies; in terms of being and self-identity, the ascribed sexualities of "fags" and "queers" mimics the hierarchy of the male-female binary, and although the terms are used throughout the novel, it is not the main problem of identity in the text. Murphy notes that: "In

writing, at least, Burroughs has always already been ‘out.’ [...] The dialectic of ‘in’ and ‘out’ is of little use to Burroughs the novelist, as is the narrative norm based upon it” (Murphy, *Wising* 61). Lee indulges in exhibiting certain behaviors as a performance for the other characters, and combines it with the focus on identity and sameness: “The difficulty is to convince someone else he is really part of you, so what the hell? Us parts ought to work together. Reet?” (*Q* 36). ‘Othering,’ as I mentioned in the introduction, as a potential consequence of the insistence of stable self-identification, is suspended by two factors: Firstly, the narrator both inhabits and recognizes the different roles that the homosexual discourse offers him, such as, the “insistent queer,” the coming-out narrator, the “subhuman” female impersonators and passing for straight. These factions of homosexual identity highlight the consequences of identifying with one particular group. The lower status that the drag queens have in the narrator’s quip about “subhuman” impersonators shows that the violence of the identity mark, which literally reduces the subject to a position within a hierarchized binary; to succumb to such a *part*, necessarily disrupts any idea of a ‘whole.’ The performance aspect is thus played out because the character recognizes the elements that need to be in place to exhibit different personas.

Secondly, the text adds an interesting point of view through the suggestion that “someone else is a part of you” in the quote above; by recognizing the indebtedness our sense of self has to the exclusion of the other, the sense of estrangement necessitates an acknowledgement of the other person. In that way, because the sense of self is also rooted in the idea of what one is not, the other is a part of what makes up a seemingly cohesive subject. In *Junky*, the class system and social segregation is caricatured, and shows peoples’ obliviousness to the effects of self-identification:

The American uppermiddle-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* 41–2)

Here, it is the absence that valorizes identity, and by extension, it is the hidden factor in all ideas of ‘truth,’ that is, what is present. The biggest crime, it seems, in Burroughs’ novels, is to be dependent on the idea of *being* through identity categories. To challenge this, one must recognize that destabilization of identity is rooted in the notion of sameness as much as in otherness. To recognize the contrastive identity markers is only one factor of reading identity;

as deconstruction is not merely to recognize contradictions in a text, but showing “forces of signification *within the text itself*” (*Dissemination* xv). Burroughs shows the hierarchy of one mode of signification over another, and emphasizes (to borrow Derrida’s title) the violence of the letter. However, he also exposes the “forces of signification” by showing the flexibility of contextualization and discourses that occurs when there is no stable subject.

One of Burroughs most striking stylistic choices in character representation is the juxtaposition of adjectives that aligns oppositions. This challenges the notion of a person as a coherent entity and destabilizes signifiers as they appear. The transient spaces that Murphy suggests as contextually decisive for the instability of identity in *Junky* (*Wising* 49) is rather a reversal of roles, and proves insufficient when faced with the “internal” conflict of character representation and identification: Jack who had a “hard, confident voice with overtones of connections, fixes, setups that would make a stickup sound easy and sure of success,” has something “curiously diseased about him.” His changing physical state makes him difficult to recognize, and “[h]is face was lined with suffering in which his eyes did not participate. It was the suffering of the 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” (*J* 3). The embodiment of opposites also extends to the ‘self’ where Burroughs juxtaposes “glazed, alert-calm hoodlum eyes.” The suspended violence that is described in Jack’s gaze is already fully erupted in the division of body and self. Who he *is* —a heavy, diseased man one day, and a quick young “fresh-faced kid” the next—is in constant flux. He is neither as incapacitated as the former description indicates nor as innocent as the latter. A wrongful observation (or classification of threat), can have big consequences. The need for identification is juxtaposed with the impossibility of proper inscription of the subject.

In *Queer*, the character named Allerton, Lee’s object of desire, is described as having “an equivocal face” (13), a recurrent description in Burroughs’ writing. Allerton is “very young, clean-cut, and boyish, at the same time conveying an impression of makeup, delicate and exotic and Oriental. Allerton was never completely neat or clean, but you did not think of him as being dirty” (13). The negation of a characterization at the moment it is attempted, also extends to the self-evaluation Lee makes of himself in the novel, which is written in third person: “The silence seeped into Lee’s body, and his face went slack and blank. The effect was curiously spectral, as though you could see through his face. The face was ravaged and vicious and old, but the clear green eyes were dreamy and innocent” (10). Burroughs is

described similarly by Kerouac in *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*: “he had a look about him that suggested racetracks and gambling tables. But that was the external impression only. He spoke in a slow surly drawl that had an incongruous tint of refinement to it” (97). In *Hippos*, Burroughs raises concerns about dichotomization, character representations and appearances. In the otherwise conventional plot-based narrative, there is an authorial self-consciousness at play. Instead of merely continuing a self-conscious author-presence in the following novels Burroughs utilizes this concern to create his own narrative style of negation and juxtaposition.

Todd Tietchen states in his analysis of the *Nova* trilogy that “the human subjectivity is constituted of internalized, intersubjective discourses which are in turn (mis)recognized as individual” (110). In Burroughs’ writing (the linear narratives as well as the experimental), these intersubjective discourses that appear in his character representations expose the notion that Derrida calls “the exemplarity of the example” (*On the Name* 17-8). Exemplification and characterization also do the opposite of what they attempt, namely, to provide a unified image of the whole. By offering an example, one does not simply offer a statement that through its singularity gives accuracy, because through its singularity it cannot be anything more than an example. When Burroughs offers an example, here a character identity that is rooted in the idea of representation, he also exposes the consensus that has to take place in order to share a description that will serve as an interpretation of meaning. Derrida’s “exemplarity” shows that the meaning is not self-contained but dependent on an agreed structure of societal concepts and expressions. Burroughs inscribes the conflict in its representation, where the identity of the subject oscillates, and is contradicted in the same paragraph rather than being contradicted in a later paragraph, or through a focal shift. The destabilization of the subject, of his so-called identity, therefore, is not an effect of contradiction in the plot, but already problematized in the linguistic exercise of character representation. The characterization is not a totality of elements that presents a unified whole, but in constant flux, where shifting signifiers displace the previous identification. In his writing style, Burroughs performs the destabilization of presence and identity by utilizing the associative “chains of differential marks” (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 10) in his characterizations.

### **2.3 Spectral Performances: Disturbing the Binary Hierarchy**

Frequent descriptions in Burroughs’ writing are “ghost” and “spectral.” The effect of those descriptions is that they seemingly elude any sense of objective description and emphasize the

inferred subjective observation. Consequently, it disturbs the objective/subjective hierarchy and plays with ideas of presence and absence. What *is* and what *is being perceived* is fused together. This happens in the previously cited example depicting Gains' fluid character as not being "merely negative" but "positively invisible," which allows him to "materialize in someone else's overcoat" (*J* 41–2). The indicated invisibility takes an opposite turn where the individual is seen as a palimpsest of perceptions. As presence is destabilized by absence, absence as another centralized concept cannot be conceived of as we construct and reconstruct even with the barest clues of characterization. In *Naked Lunch*, we can use the description of the narrator as an example of projection and recognition: "Lee lived now in varying degrees of transparency... While not exactly invisible he was at least difficult to see. His presence attracted no special notice... People covered him with a project or dismissed him as a reflection, shadow: 'Some kind of light trick or neon advertisement'" (*NL* 60). Identity and recognition as described here is not a concern of what is true or what is false/a societal creation; it is not a coin that can be flipped with a person on one side and a symbol on the other. The notion of self-identity is here left as an ambiguous concept that is constantly prescribed and disrupted both by the context that directly inflicts on the character, and the relation to the 'I' as a narrator, a self-prescribed positioning of oneself as a subject. Identity is not removed from the being as we are not our signifiers, but we are not outside language; there is seemingly no escape from it, only destabilization. Burroughs' writing questions the notion that we have a choice in regard to our own identity, and exposes semantic structures that follow, due to word-locks, every instance of both positioning and self-positioning within societal paradigms. By doing this, Burroughs exposes and performs the instability of language; he performs it because his characters are constantly shown to be creations of both the author through juxtaposition, and their narrative context through the different roles they have to play. In addition, he exposes it by putting his characters in situations that directly or indirectly necessitates a shift in status and identity. This instability, however, only reveals the differential structure, but does not destroy it.

This brings us to the cut-up technique that resulted in three published novels and numerous shorter texts. The *Nova* trilogy attempts to address the concern of attached/automatic/associated meanings. Burroughs exercises the cut-up/fold-in routine in the *Nova* trilogy; an act of association destruction with the physical help of cutting written pages in half or folding them in to create new sentences. In addition, the texts were supplied with newspaper clippings, transcripts from various audio recordings, and other literary works,

which disrupts the idea of originality and centralization of the author. Because words and meaning coexist then in order to destroy this there must be a disruption of what we perceive as coherency. In *The Ticket that Exploded*, Burroughs writes: “What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of *that* history was the word” (50). This naming paradox suggests that we cannot conceive of anything that is before the word, because as it is perceived, it has already been named. This automatically positions the word in a hierarchy of meaning. The idea of language and being as inseparable is not inconsequential in Burroughs’ depictions of characters and identity, and readers must be careful to not regard the stylistic marks in *The Ticket that Exploded* as a circumvention of the identity problem.

In the novel, ellipses and dashes separate pronouns and adjectives, cause and effect, and creates an authorial voice that is “composed of many selves” (Hibbard 17). Furthermore, destabilization of identity is performed through a suspension of identification markers and repetition. “Yes you have grafting tools — Without you i on the pavement” (*TE* 40) The lower casing of “i” and juxtaposition with “you” removes the authority of the “I” in the text. There is no anchor point in the author, and subsequently no distance to the Other: “True? — i can’t feel it — Yes you have his face — healed and half-healed skin — Put it on — Without you i on pavement — perhaps if you had helped me — Good bye then — That silver film took it away from me — Well fade-out’ —“ (119). Decentralization of the “i”-reference and destabilization of pronouns undermine associative connections that attempt to grasp and disentangle identity markers. The text removes the distance between characters, readers and the author while emphasizing its literality that simultaneously keeps the focus on the Word. The notion of ‘the other’ as something removed or in opposition to ourselves is encapsulated in the novel as a doubling of pronouns, and a conflation of persons and the contexts. The internalization of ‘the other’ is shown in that one does not exist without the other. The co-references suspend the desire “to traduce or transfigure and reduce a man’s pulsating multiplicity to untranslatable inchoate word for latent consensus of ‘otherness’” (*TE* 29). To point out the oppositions or contradictions is for Burroughs, as for a deconstructive reader, not sufficient to expose the indebtedness to binary thinking.

The focus on identity destabilization then leads me to the absence of the identity mark. Several critics have noted that Burroughs was influenced by the writings of Alfred Korzybski, the founder of General Semantics (Lydenberg 121; Hibbard 14). Korzybski advocates an eradication of either/or dichotomies from language, which he perceives to be a foundational error in Western thinking, and replace the hierarchical structure of dichotomies with both/and.

“The IS of identity always carries the implication of that and nothing else,” Burroughs states in an interview with Daniel Odier, “and it also carries the assignment for permanent condition. To stay that way” (*The Job* 200). The “is” carries the implication that there is nothing else, the manipulation is controlled by the complete dominance of apparent coherency: “All naming calling presupposes the IS of identity. [...] The whole concept of EITHER/OR. Right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false, the whole concept of OR will be deleted from language and replaced by juxtaposition, by *and*” (*The Job* 200). Korzybski suggested that to achieve awareness of this, and to make it possible, it was necessary to practice silence: “We must in the simplest case, either point our finger to the object, insisting upon silence, or must perform bodily some activity and similarly insist upon silence, as the performing and feelings are also not words” (*Science and Sanity* 426).

What is more interesting in terms of such a comparison, however, is what actually happens in the text of *The Ticket that Exploded*. I will propose that the text ultimately disagrees with Korzybski’s idea of performing silence as a possible contrast to, and method of, escaping language. While the cut-up *Nova* trilogy was an exercise in disrupting the words from their concepts and connotations, the text ultimately states that the intention of separating the word from the individual is ineffectual in terms of exercising silence and positing being as something removed or outside language. *The Ticket that Exploded* presents the idea of identification as an encapsulation of differences, a dualistic separation that nevertheless cannot exist without each other: “The body is two halves stuck together like a mold — That is, it consists of *two* organisms — See ‘the Other Half’ invisible” (159).

The “Other Half” is the word. The “Other Half” is an organism. Word is an organism. The presence of the “Other Half” a separate organism attached to your nervous system on an air line of words can now be demonstrated experimentally. One of the most common “hallucinations” of subjects during sense withdrawal is the feeling of another body sprawled through the subject’s body at an angle . . . yes quite an angle it is the “Other Half” worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. [...] The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*. That organism is the word. (49–50)

The unity that is presented shows that in acknowledging silence, there is no longer silence. On the same note, acknowledging otherness is a part of establishing a sense of self. While silence

would leave the concepts and signifiers untouched and whole, destabilization in the form of plurality will expose the concepts as structures that are indebted to one another and their contextualization.

“The nova police” chapter proposes the routine of a seemingly removed entity that exercises control. This science fiction element of the Nova police or Nova mob in the novel, has the same effect as the cut-up technique: it provides a physical manifestation to the concept of control:

The basic nova technique is very simple: Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts — This is done by dumping on the same planet life forms with incompatible conditions of existence — There is of course nothing ‘wrong’ about any given life form since “wrong” only has reference to conflicts with other life forms. (55)

This presents binary hierarchy as a construction in the form of an alien intervention. It problematizes the idea of disturbing the binary hierarchy through a reconsideration and invention of new concepts and neologisms. The nova police, however, are not a coherent entity as critics who allegorize Burroughs’ works in terms of institutions and the outlaw, junkie or criminal suggest: “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? [...] In the same way a controller invades, damages and occupies some pattern or configuration of the human organism” (58). The metamorphic quality of the Nova emphasizes the faceless source of control. The source, however, is not a concentrated locus of control, but an endless production of concepts that spreads and adapts like a virus. The Nova agents are controllers of association locks, or “word locks,” that stabilizes the automatic images that springs from the binary structure. “Rub out the word and the image track goes with it” (145). The destabilization of the WORD can only happen if the binary hierarchy is destroyed. Juxtaposition of senses and feeling, persons and things, mythology and technology creates an impression of a television static effect/noise, where the information signal has been disturbed.

Derrida’s concept of the ventriloquist who cannot improvise *outside* of the preprogrammed names takes form as a Vaudeville performance in *The Ticket that Exploded*. The theatre reference to American variety performance in late 1800 to early 1900 is also mimicked in terms of style and content. Vaudeville performances included among other acts male and female impersonators and sprung from numerous entertainment sources, such as

freak shows and burlesque. Similarly, the novel is interspersed with comical or disturbing sex scenes, changing characters and stage directions: “great wind voices beside you — the Doctor on stage — ‘Out of here, female impersonators’ — orgasm of memory pictures — people gone —“ (158), “You want out? Con cop — It’s an old vaudeville act — Just walk in and throw the tin on the board — Learn to sit back and watch — Just take both parts — Watch what you walk into — So called human body?” (161). The performance aspect does not circumvent identity and identification but reveals the structure that lies behind our perceptions. Performance of identity requires sources of information on which to base the idea of an identity category. In that way, the result of who we are or perceive ourselves to be comes both before and after we have utilized the information that is available. The character is observed to belong to that identity category because he or she exhibits traits that coincide with that structure, however, the person is shown to transgress or not behaving as expected when factors do not comply with the idea of this specific category. This does not destabilize that identity category, because the negative observation of factors that are not there (that should be there), or traits that do not belong to that category, only strengthens the idea of what that category *is*.

The repetitive structure of the novel, which can be said to be partly vaudeville in terms of citation and content, and partly an instruction manual for tape recording as a literary exercise, emphasizes alternatives through minor changes in citation and contextualization. There is never an end to a concept or a character and consequently nothing is given. “Alternatively Johnny Yen can be written back to a green fish boy — There are always alternative solutions — Nothing is true — Everything is permitted —“ (*TE* 54). The last aphorism, which is also rewritten in *Cities of the Red Night* has been a source of disagreement for scholars who have attempted to discover Burroughs’ original intention with including references to the Muslim leader Hassan i Sabbah (Burroughs’ spelling) in many of his novels. In *The Ticket that Exploded* the line is separated by em dashes instead of commas and follows the same seemingly random structure of other lines that are divided by dashes. Burroughs’ frequent use of the dash as aposiopesis, from classical Greek ἀποσιώπησις meaning “to keep silent” (“aposiopesis” *OED*), leaves a jarring effect on the reader that searches for meaning.

The interruptive quality of the aposiopesis in form of dashes or ellipses leaves different effects in the novel. Where an ellipsis is used the sentence structure is still coherent, but leaves out much contextualization: “He picked up the passport and leafed through it. ‘Oh yes . . here is the date of entry . . Yes everything quite in order . . your passport *señor* . . “ (*TE*

29). The dashes, however, predominantly shows the effects of the cut-up technique, and separate the content from its source. Instead of marking that there is something unsaid or that the thought is trailing off, the frequent use that often extends over several pages, demands constant attention to each word:

Ancient Rings Of Saturn in the morning sky — The Old Doctor raises his blue hands — silence at this old doctor twice — hello yes good bye — indications enough in empty room, Miranda — Sex Garden caught in doors of Panic — Izzy the Push, Limestone John, Hamburger Mary, Jack Blue Note, silence to the sick lies — “Marks? — What Marks?” — Identity fades in empty space — last intervention, the Subliminal Kid — helped me with fingers fading — (183)

The text does not let the reader forget the effects of the words on the page and what they manage or fail to communicate. Silence is not a passive state or a retraction of content, neither is the destabilization of identity a non-response to the problem; it is a total noise factor that emphasizes the common structure. Although the lines lack a voice, the use of citations, recordings, and newspapers makes it possible to retrace their origin, as with the use of “nothing is true.” The lack of an identified or single voice in *The Ticket that Exploded* does not mean they lack a source, but it has been obfuscated by fragmentation. As also seen in *Junky* and *Queer*, the composites that make up a ‘whole being’ comes from various sources of information that always fight for authority: “Everybody splice himself in with everybody else. Communication must be made total. only way to stop it” (*TE* 166). Only multiplicity and destabilization of identity markers can counteract the reduction of being that comes through naming and identification.

While the novel seemingly destroys concepts of what literature ‘is’ or is supposed to ‘do,’ it would be a mistake to see it as inherently destructive. The novel exposes “[t]he separation gimmick that keeps this tired old show on the road” (*TE* 134), but also presents and exposes the desire for meaning. Bolton explains Burroughs’ decentralization of an author-figure and discontinuity as “something akin to Zeno’s paradox of the arrow”:

At any given point in space-time a unique arrow is recognizable, but from one point to the next, no identification between the arrows can be established. [...] the generality of arrows that create the arc from the bowstring to the target become mis-identified with particular arrows at particular points in space-time. For our purposes, the narrative voice at any given moment in a Burroughs novel become mis-identified with an over-riding, continuous narrative presence. (144)

The destabilization of identity concepts in the early novels as well as the more experimental works decentralizes the automaticity of the compartmentalization of identity, but also exposes the double aspect of desire where the need “to dominate, to kill, to take over and eat the partner” (*TE* 20) is juxtaposed with the desire to blend together, to erase difference and connect at a single point in time. This desire, the *need* for meaning and identification, emphasizes the stabilizing effect of replicating normative concepts, from which we derive a sense of self: “You will readily understand why people will go to any lengths to get in the film to cover themselves with any old film scrap . . . junky . . . narcotics agent . . . thief . . . informer . . . anything to avoid the hopeless dead-end horror of being just who you are and where you are: dying animals on a doomed planet” (*TE* 151).

Both the narrator and the other characters in Burroughs’ narratives are held responsible for their continual participation in reinforcing the “word-locks” of identification. The narrator through negation and juxtaposition, and the other characters are exposed through rhetoric that compromises the individual subject within the frames of representation. For Burroughs, the author is also dependent on these structures to form and create within the accepted forms of the narrative, but this also shows that the accepted forms will replicate themselves due to the insistence on presentation and identification. In other words, by not exposing their own dependence on cohesiveness, the authors will only replicate the system of “word locks” or “preprogrammed names.”

Critics that present an author as objective will, regardless of intentions, fall into dualistic interpretation patterns. The different choices of narration and the play with author/narrator identity are interesting aspects that challenge some assumptions of how to read Burroughs’ (semi)autobiographical works. The unquestioned emphasis on the early novels as *romans à clef* has resulted in a search for cohesive character presentations to discover who, from Burroughs’ real life, are represented. However, that entails an emphasis on cohesiveness, which will miss out on the innovative writing style of contradictions, negations and juxtapositions in the text. For every ‘fact’ that is gathered, there are paragraphs or statements that contradict it. The narrator is not just unreliable, because the bias that is presented in these novels lies in how we all use language to classify, segregate, and represent. Therefore, unreliability as textual *intention* is modified to incorporate concepts that we perceive as stable, and use to expose unreliability.

When Harris states that abstract interpretations of Burroughs’ novels, which centralize notions of power and control in institutions, have been catastrophic, I will state that this

includes the focus on the characters in the linear works. The effect of Burroughs' language is amplified in his characters, who will crawl, fade-out, perform and transform throughout the novels. Destabilization becomes crucial, because all identification in the texts has to go through semantic representation and therefore is indebted and formed by the binary hierarchy of signifiers. Furthermore, the transmutations and symbioses of characters that occur in the experimental texts are a literal effect of identification and representation, and takes form as a performance and execution of the malleability of the subject within language. Control, as Burroughs' treatment of characters shows, happens on all levels of communication.

### 3 Reduce to One Word One Picture: Burroughsian Nomenclature

*The dative or vocative dimension which opens the original direction of language, cannot lend itself to inclusion in and modification by the the accusative or attributive dimension without violence.*

—(Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 95)

*[E]very being becomes his own shadow, and thus something other than himself. The hour metamorphosis, when people half hope, half fear a dog will become a wolf. The hour that comes down to us from at least as far back as the early Middle Ages, when country people believed that transformation may happen at any moment.*

—(Genet, *Prisoner of Love* 220)

A prominent trait in Burroughs' writing is the use of descriptive character names. The miasma of monikers, such as the Vigilante, The Subliminal Kid, and Hamburger Mary, is a conspicuous part of the novels' stylistic displacement of traditional fictional elements like character development. Nevertheless, the emphasis on these character appearances as fragmented has, at times, diminished the focus on these characters. Derrida addresses the statement in Plato's *Republic* that poets are imitators, and do not perform the mimetic exercise or "simple diegesis" standards of which they should be judged (*Dissemination* 200) by deconstructing the idea of *mimesis*. While Plato's statement is not the consensus nowadays, elements of this kind of thinking still influence and govern critical reception: "While most writers fictionalize characters, Burroughs fictionalized places," Eric Andersen states in "The Danger Zone" (102). This statement is not further addressed with an answer to why Burroughs does not fictionalize characters, or what such fictionalization entails, but used as a platform for writing about the fictionalized places. This is indicative of Burroughs scholarship in that the existence of fragmented characters is at times equated with no characterization at all, which consequently misses Burroughs' innovative style of addressing characterization. In my opinion, it would be a mistake to attempt to diminish Burroughs' use of character appearances (and disappearances) by extraditing them from the world of fiction, of literature, and Burroughs' own theory of language as it is reworked and performed throughout his novels. Burroughs proclaims his use of characterization as a process that uses

different traits from a variety of sources to produce an “identikit picture of [a] character” (*The Adding Machine* 157). This chapter, and thesis as a whole, focus on what happens when this multitude of characterizations are singularly *named* in the process of identity recognition. Therefore, rather than approaching characterization through fragmentation as a seeming lack of center, it would be useful to approach the “identikit picture” not as underdeveloped parts that endorse the reading of all characters as merely artificial, but as composite parts locked within a hierarchy of signifiers.

In this chapter, I will delineate some of the textual effects that occur with what I will call the Burroughsian nomenclature, meaning the author’s use of epithets as cognomens, iteration of names, and conflation of names and function. Cognomen refers here to nicknames, or monikers, but I will also discuss this further in part 3.2. of this chapter, where surnames are replaced with epithets. The experimental use of cognomens in the novels, and emphasis on language as a virus necessitate that the textual inscriptions are approached with the tangent question: What is in a name? This allows for a reading that recognizes the performative aspect of the instability of language –where the name oscillates between context and function. Previously, Burroughs’ use of variations of his own name, pseudonyms for the author’s real identity, and pulp fiction influence has been recognized by scholars. Burroughs uses combinations of normal names and names that point to function or that, as I will argue, in context problematize naming.<sup>7</sup> Such combinations can also be found in the novels of Thomas Pynchon where there are “some plausible [...] some obviously comic or referential [...], and some which are suggestive but not definite (Abbas 179). Due to the vast number of characters in Burroughs’ fiction, this chapter will predominantly comment on some key episodes where naming complicates the expectation or desire for finite identity. It will include the use of nicknames in *Junky* and Jack Black’s *You Can’t Win*, the semantic re-appropriation of epithets in *Naked Lunch*, the case of Dr. Benway, and *The Subliminal Kid*. This chapter posits that as Burroughs describes his characters, or refuses a description, he is, at the same time, commenting on or outlining the operation of description—its consequences, inconsistencies, and infinitude.

### **3.1 The Visceral and the Virulent**

Burroughs’ style of naming has been recognized as a feature where the character’s function is implemented in the name, such as *The Subliminal Kid* and *Opium Jones* (Bolton 200). This

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<sup>7</sup> For Burroughs’ use of variations of his own name, and decentralization of subjectivity, see Bolton 134-175.

effect is also popular among science fiction writers, who recognize Burroughs as a significant source for the development of the genre (Henthorne 39–40). Especially in novels of the cyberpunk genre can we see a trend of conflating name and function, and notable characters are Neil Stephenson’s Hiro Protagonist in *Snow Crash* (1992) (Bolton 200), William Gibson’s protagonists Case in *Neuromancer* (1984), and Johnny Mnemonic in *Burning Chrome* (1986). Gibson declares Burroughs a primary source, particularly the experimental fold-in technique as “a part of the history of cyberspace” (Wood 11), “cyberspace” being coined by Gibson. A thorough study of Burroughs and Gibson is still wanting, but Brent Wood directs the reader to a possible direction: “Burroughs is attempting to direct us to the energy of continuous evolution, or mutation, which, temporarily embodied in the human, is in Burroughs’ view under siege by the insidious self-replication of language” (14). At play in Burroughs’ experimental novels, are the attempts to destroy “word combos” that “reduce human behavior to a predictable science” (*TE* 20). The ambivalent trap of the logos manifests as character metamorphosis and mutilation, and decentralization of voice.

However, there is also destabilization through contextual and referential ambiguity. The word “visceral” has various contextual definitions, three of which will be useful; firstly, it refers to the emotional aspect of pertaining to, or touching deeply inward feelings; secondly, there is the physiological definition of diseases, affecting the viscera or internal organs; thirdly, there is the etymological Latin origin *viscerālis* meaning “internal” (“visceral” *OED*). In relation to Burroughs’ theories of language as a virus we can see that the virulent and the visceral effects are at work at the same time:

It is thought that the virus is a degeneration from more complex life-form. It may at one time have been capable of independent life. Now has fallen to the borderline between living and dead matter. It can exhibit living qualities only in a host, by using the life of another –the renunciation of life itself, a falling towards the inorganic, inflexible machine, towards dead matter. (*NL* 113)

This paragraph, where bureaucracy is aligned with cancer —“the end result of complete cellular representation” (112), shows an endless multiplication of the status quo: “A bureau takes root anywhere in the state, turns malignant like the Narcotic Bureau, and grows and grows, always reproducing more of its own kind, until it chokes the host if not controlled or excised. Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms” (112). This last line is important. The bureaucracy is dependent on a subject that can be recognized within a specific category to represent it. The amalgamation of the visceral effect, that is neither

outside nor inside the subject, but blur these divisive lines, and the virulence of language, where the symbiotic effect of language alters the ‘host,’ can be addressed through Burroughs’ use of character identity and character names.

A point I would like to address, is brought up by Gibson’s focus on uneasy contextual and literal derivations that come with naming. The portmanteau “neuromancer” is explained by the titular character: “Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead. But no, my friend [...] I *am* the dead, and their land” (289). The juxtaposition of words and effect, name and function, emphasizes the force of visceral imagery that comes with the word. The answer is an amalgamation of physical response in the nerves; the juxtaposition of positive and negative, but also the ambiguous images that are summoned by “romancer” and “necromancer.” This contains, according to Gibson: “considerable potential for cognitive dissonance, that pleasurable buzz of feeling slightly unsettled” (Interview n.p.). I will add that the “cognitive dissonance” that occurs with the authors’ naming would be development of the more obvious cyberspace influence, and an intrinsic part of an evolution-mutation reading by science fiction scholars, who include Burroughs. Later in this chapter, I will use Gibson’s comment to examine the similar effects of a cognitive dissonance that Burroughs’ character Dr. Benway entices. This visceral effect when regarded with the virulence of the word, underlines a reader’s contribution to text, and structure of meaning: “The advantage of Burroughs’ fugitive world, and the associative reading strategy it demands, is the opportunity for readers to fully and profoundly participate in the creation of that world” (Bolton 132–3)..

The word *visceral* as a textual effect, and the word *virulent*, or “virus” as Burroughs’ refers to language, are in his novels not easily separated into text and response, the original and the derivative. The reason why character names are significant is that character singularity would be another centralization of identity —where the search for what is ‘true’ about a character subsequently limits the possibility of being.

In the chapter, appropriately titled “The Market” in *Naked Lunch*, different metaphysical authorities are addressed, and the following conversation takes place: “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” (97). This “dead bullshit” aligns with the stasis of being in a logocentric tradition that continually reinforces structures that uphold our thinking as essence. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg in 1950, Burroughs addresses Ginsberg’s use of the word “human” as an essential state that unifies all people: “Human, Allen, is an adjective, and its

use as a noun is regrettable” (qtd. in Harris 93). The noun is essential; the first word category you learn to spot in a sentence structure; its invulnerable state as *present*, is displaced and problematized by Burroughs’ characters. Therefore, the name as used and regarded as a proper noun will here be read in light of the Derridean “proper name”; simultaneously specific and elusive. A proposition to the aforementioned problem from *Naked Lunch* goes as follows: ““So I got an exclusive why don’t I make with the live word? The word cannot be expressed direct . . . It can perhaps be indicated by mosaic of juxtaposition like articles abandoned in a hotel drawer, defined by negatives and absence. . . .” (97). By juxtaposing “human” and “the live word” (the latter as a self-reflexive reference to its own significance as a signifier), the paragraph invokes the determination of “the formal essence of the signified [as] *presence*” (*Of Grammatology* 18). Furthermore, the “articles abandoned in a hotel drawer” evokes Derrida’s emphasis on the indefinite possibility of contexts from which we base our understanding. The closure of identity, reflected in the *is*, allows for the binary hierarchy to continue to permeate our thoughts and strive for a continuous search for identification, that justifies, and ends with, finite categorization.

The Subliminal Kid from *Nova Express* (also encountered briefly in *The Soft Machine* 148; *The Ticket that Exploded* 183: “Identity fades in empty space — last intervention, The Subliminal Kid — helped me with fingers fading”) exhibits the traits of naming and function, where the character name becomes a reflexive comment on his role in the text. However, it also provides a starting point for how to approach the issue of naming, as the subliminal message that the Kid carries does not only affect how we read the character, but how we use language:

“THE SUBLIMINAL KID” moved in and took over bars cafés and juke boxes of the world cities and installed radio transmitters and microphones in each bar so that the music and talk of any bar could be heard in all his bars and he had tape recorders in each bar that played and recorded at arbitrary intervals and his agents moved back and forth with portable tape recorders and brought back street sound and talk and music and poured it into his recorder array so he set waves and eddies and tornadoes of sound down all your streets and by the river of all language. (*NE* 155)

The Subliminal Kid, member of the Nova Mob, the intergalactic control group that intersects human consciousness and spreads the word virus, is, despite the space reference, not located “outside” the human society. Similar to Derrida’s reading of Mallarmé’s character of the Mime in “The Double Session,” Burroughs’ Subliminal Kid both exhibits the traits of his

name, his role in the text and the reading process. While the character is part of the science fiction story that evolves in the *Nova* trilogy, The Subliminal Kid's name complements his function, and at the same time, how names functions as centers of recognition in texts.

To illustrate a double reading, Derrida explains of the Mime: "The Mime is not subjected to any authority of any book: the fact that Mallarmé points this out is all the more strange since the text called *Mimique* is initially a reaction to a reading" (*Dissemination* 209). For Derrida, the traditional use of mimesis is grounded in the idea of truth, where the word imitation establishes the 'one' and the 'other,' and the latter has to catch the essence of the former, answering to a binary hierarchy (*Dissemination* 206). Mallarmé's Mime, however, is self-reflexive in that he does not imitate; his words and actions are not prescribed, but he inscribes them:

In the beginning of this mime was neither the deed nor the word. It is prescribed [...] to the Mime that he not let anything be prescribed to him but his own writing, that he not reproduce by imitation any action (*pragma*: affair, thing, act) or any speech (*logos*: word, voice, discourse). The Mime ought only to write himself on the white page he is; he must himself inscribe himself through gestures and plays of facial expressions. (*Dissemination* 209)

Burroughs' Subliminal Kid resonates with Derrida's reading of the Mime, but also includes a far more sinister aspect. Burroughs takes issue with the idea of mimesis in writing, however, in his texts the inevitable subliminal function of the word is a virulent part of mimesis; this is the crucial factor of the language virus. The paragraph above describing The Subliminal Kid's movements is unrestricted, uncut, and the lack of punctuation shows the lack of sequence in his movements. He has no presence and yet he is everywhere: in every bar, in every street, and "by the river of all language." He effaces his own existence through his self-inscription. The character is not one that is moved by the story, but moves within the story itself, through the pages, and through the words playing them back to the reader.

The act of reading is to be subjected to these subliminal functions, which is why the multiplicity and violence of the characters are necessary to provoke destabilization of the image and the word. There are no words untainted by the subliminal, as there are no subjects that are not "marks". Murphy explains the double meaning of the term "mark": "the con man's term for his victims, which also suggest the needle tracks or marks by which addicts are identified, as well as the marks on paper that constitutes language" (Murphy, *Wising* 109).

The name is never taken lightly or for granted, but is continuously being problematized through contextual disruptions, deferral of agency, and violent consequences.

### 3.2 **Connaître quelqu'un par nom et par surnom: Immediacy and Distance**

An overlooked textual tension in *Junky* is Burroughs' rejection of full names for peripheral characters. The use of nicknames instead of full or normal names creates an ambiguity of immediacy and distance to these brief appearances, whereas a nickname can express familiarity or an identifying trait, Burroughs' names leave the reader with very little information. The juxtaposition of dubious character presences and problems with identification shows the beginning of Burroughs' curious re-appropriation of epithets as cognomens. I will begin by examining what can be said to be the origin of Burroughs' early style of character naming, not as an end in itself, but to establish some of the problems with naming and identity.

In Burroughs' early novels, *Junky*, and to a lesser degree *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* and *Queer*, epithets and nicknames are predominantly used as a designation of character function and identity in brief appearances: "There was Irish, George the Greek, Pantopon Rose, Louis the Bellhop, Eric the Fag, the Beagle, the Sailor and Joe the Mex. Several of them are dead now, others are doing time" (*J* 30). The matter-of-factly approach, both to naming and the characters' destinies, is common in these novels, and many characters from the criminal underground are merely referred to. They appear and disappear quickly, often without introduction, a trait that is amplified in *Naked Lunch* to the disassociation of voice, and also exercised by the assimilation of texts that became the novel as the readers know it. Thomas Dutoit outlines the problem of naming in his introduction "Translating the Name?" to Derrida's *On the Name*, and comments on repetition of nicknames: "If one's 'family name,' the proper name, is originally lacking in such a way that a nickname, a sur-name, must by repetition, fill its lack, then one's name, one's fame, one's renown comes before anything else through an act of re-naming. [...] The sur-name, by repetition or 're-naming' constitutes the proper name" (xi). By repetition in Burroughs' novels, the baptismal name is often dropped, and the "proper name" becomes the cognomen. Sur-name' in this citation refers to the roughly equivalent *cognomen* in English. Surname as a hereditary nickname is, historically speaking, relatively new. The French *surnom*, unlike the English *surname*, translates to "nickname," and the phrase *connaître quelqu'un par nom et par surnom*, directly translated : to know someone by their name and nickname, and

idiomatically: to know someone very well (*On the Name* x) separates the function of “actual” name and nicknames. However, it also implies that *together*, the names create immediacy.

Stylistically, the use of nicknames over family names and government identities creates interesting juxtapositions. The metonymic quality of the cognomen implies a short character description, such as Eric the Fag. However, “the Fag” never becomes appositional with “Eric” but the latter is often dropped, reducing the character to a mere sexual identity. *Junky* is widely regarded as Burroughs’ version of the autobiographical novel *You Can’t Win*, written by Jack Black and published in 1926 (Murphy, *Wising* 185). The similarity of themes is obvious as both novels mix personal experience with explanatory comments, time spent in prison and addiction, and a general disregard for societal conventions and hierarchy. Jack Black was a thief and vagrant active in the early 1900s, who later became an active writer and social commentator, mainly through articles in magazines such as *Harper’s Monthly* and *San Francisco Call*. The style of naming, both in Burroughs’ and Black’s writing, positions the characters within the criminal milieu, where acquaintances and friendships are often elusive and brief. The people mentioned in Black’s book are similarly referred to by their nicknames, such as Soapy Smith, Salt Chunk Mary (who also appears in Burroughs’ novels), Soldier Johnny, Foot-and-a-half- George and Shorty. While some of the characters carry obvious physical marks in Black’s book, the author emphasizes the necessity and advantage of blending in: “His face and figure were neutral. A hard man to pick up on his description. Medium size and weight. After one look at him you couldn’t say whether his hair was brown or black, whether his eyes were grey or blue. Quiet, unobtrusive, soft-spoken, a copper would hesitate before halting him on the street” (Black 87). As I have shown in the first chapter, such equivocal appearances flourish in Burroughs’ writing, which in *Junky* and *Queer* is partly what challenges the inscription of cohesive and stable identities.

In *You Can’t Win*, the character monikers are usually not explained, or given multiple possibilities: “Whether it was his appearance or his careful manner of speech that got him his moniker, ‘The Sanctimonious Kid,’ I never knew” (Black 87). Even the character seems to embody opposites; a jewelry thief who quotes Shakespeare and is “something of a philosopher” (183). The reason why no one asks about the elusive nicknames, and why the reader is not told, is because to ask about someone’s name or birth place invites suspicion (84), and a person who inquires too much will receive even less. Similarly, Burroughs’ naming, albeit descriptive, does not provide much stabilization or description of character. In his novel, Black dryly comments on how a “burglar with some humor” misleads William A.

Pinkerton, who wrote about train robbers in the early 1900s. As Pinkerton attempts to establish the definition of the word *yegg* to use for his article, he ends up with the wrong definition, therefore establishing a new definition of the word because people assumed his authority on the matter: “His business consisted largely of asking questions and necessarily he acquired much misinformation” (Black 126). As with their identities, the outlaws protected their colloquialisms. Burroughs aptly named his glossary of terms in *Junky* “Fugitive Words” to emphasize this.

Another comparison can be made by Burroughs’ use of the Johnson Family. In *You Can’t Win*, Black explains that the Johnson Family is the name the thieves gave themselves, meaning respected members “of the ‘yegg’ brotherhood, a thief of which little is known,” previously known as “bums” before the word contained disparaging connotations (17, 83). Burroughs attributes his usage directly to Black (*The Adding Machine* 73), and adds: “To say someone is a Johnson means he keeps his word and honors his obligations. He’s a good man to do business with and a good man to have on your team. He is not a malicious, snooping, interfering, self-righteous troublemaking person” (73). Note that Burroughs avoids a proper characterization by only mentioning what that kind of person it is not. He is “good” but not necessarily “good” by the definition of judicial laws, societal laws, or moral laws. A Johnson is *a* Johnson, by not following the common rules, but the unwritten ones of the underworld. A Johnson usually goes under the radar by not attracting attention. The ambiguity of presence, and necessary obliqueness as a *hombre invisible*<sup>8</sup> can, however, be recognized by others like him: “He passed and I never saw him again. But I recognized him. He was a Johnson” (75), and: “Yes you get to know a Johnson when you see one. [...] And sometimes you don’t see the Johnson” (73–4). A Johnson is one that does not interfere in other people’s business, but helps out a fellow Johnson when needed, either directly or clandestinely. This reciprocation replaces the otherwise hierarchal family structure, and promotes equality of status that can only be attained without a static societal structure. Neither authors attempt to establish or argue for a community of Johnsons, which is significant. Community by “its connotation of participation, indeed fusion, identification” is rejected for an emphasis on a “gathering together of singularities” (Derrida, *On the Name* 46) when they intersect.

“The Johnson family formulates a Manichean position where good and evil are in conflict and the outcome is at this point uncertain. It is *not* an eternal conflict, since one or the

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<sup>8</sup> “Several people commented on [Burroughs’] growing invisibility, something the Spanish boys in Tangier had noticed, which gave him the epithet El Hombre Invisible” (Miles 165).

other must win a final victory” (Burroughs, *The Adding Machine* 74). Burroughs’ take on the Manichean principle, where good and evil are parallel to infinity, is presented as an inevitable conclusion. However, the tension between what is good and what is evil, what is moral and what is immoral are not clear-cut principles that are innately true. A Johnson can be an outlaw, but still an honest person. While this quote seems to imply that the “final victory” is in the future, like an eschatological end, this conflict is nevertheless performed all the time, in all situations, and all acts of identification and stabilization. However, the victorious “good” or “evil” cannot be a static position, because it depends on each and every subject. The Johnsons, by virtue of not being one and the same, “formulate” this ambiguous position, which is simultaneously differentiated and deferred.

The aforementioned descriptive nicknames that flourish in Black’s and Burroughs’ writings are also an evasion of identities, either due to criminal records or as pseudonyms for people of their inner circles. Even actual names cannot be supposed to be the real name as Burroughs’ shows on the first page of *Junky*: “I had made the acquaintance of a man named Norton who was working in a shipyard at the time. Norton, whose real name was Morelli or something like that, had been discharged from the peacetime Army for forging a pay check , and was classified 4-F for reasons of bad character” (1). These names serve two functions: descriptive detail and evasion of identification. This is a contradictory, but also significant trait of Burroughsian nomenclature, where the name continuously unfolds and implicates larger problems. The nickname implies familiarity, and gives the impression of being invited into the underworld where colloquialisms and candid information minimize the distance between the reader and the underworld. However, the reader is denied traditional character development, as the characters often do not reappear, or are presented with minimal contextualization, including explanations as to why they are there. In the criminal underground, to know someone by their functioning name is to *not* know them in compromising situations, and minimizes snitching. Familiarity becomes unfamiliarity as a necessity; one’s name is attached to the full criminal record, which functions both as an active and a latent designator of their criminal identity. As I have shown in the second chapter, Burroughs points out that the escalating criminalization of junkies is shown to have an imprecise statute of limitation. This means that previous crimes can result in an extended sentence if they are tied to a new criminal case.

Murphy recognizes a correlation between Burroughs’ semantic re-appropriation and the “historically specific ‘mania for category-making’ during the cold war era” (*Wising* 93).

To identify *undesirables*, meaning deviants of any socio-political and sexual category, in order to exclude them, was used to illustrate the limits of “national desirability” (Kaplan qtd. in Murphy, *Wising* 93). To justify such identification, it is necessary to limit all implications of difference and individuality, and to utilize the rhetoric of essentialism. Kaplan’s wording is interesting because it shows that ‘the other’ was created to reflect the desirable qualities in a wholesome citizen. The agenda was to create and promote the image of the desirable citizen, and that it relied on the creation of the ‘other.’ Derrida suggests that “absolute fear would [...] be the first encounter of the other as *other*: as other than I and as other than itself. I can answer the threat of the other as other (than I) only by transforming it into another (than itself), through altering it in my imagination, my fear, or my desire” (*Of Grammatology* 277). The essentialism, which attempts to eradicate the non-self-same [*non-proprété*] of the subject through rhetoric that plays overtly on separation, and therefore *distance* to these undesirables, produces fear that will reproduce itself. In other words, by creating an image of the “other” they cease to be human, and are only regarded by the fear enticed by a symbol of alienation.

The abstraction that occurs when a description can be used to classify a person, as being part of something other, a *force* is disastrous as it allows generalization and excuses human docility when faced with injustice. In the chapter “From Here to Eternity” in *Exterminator!* (1973) the individual as part of a faceless group meets violence:

Mildred Pierce reporting: I was there. I saw it. I saw women thrown down on Fifth Avenue and raped in their mink coats by blacks and whites and yellows while street urchins stripped the rings from their fingers. A young officer stood nearby. “Aren’t you going to DO something?” I demanded. He looked at me and yawned. I found Colonel Bradshaw bivouacking in the Ritz. I told him bluntly what was going on. His eyes glinted shamelessly as he said: “Well you have to take a broad general view of things.” And that’s what I’ve been doing. Taking a broad general view of American troops raping and murdering helpless civilians while American officers stand around and yawn. “Been at it a long time lady. It’s the old army game from here to eternity.” (115)

“The broad general view of things” is implicated in our mode of thinking, and how we relate to and view other people. By categorizing and compartmentalizing context, the people in that context are similarly reduced to an overarching group. Therefore, taking the broad, general view is at once general and specific as it relies on a context that would justify such grouping of people.

### 3.3 Words. Pictures. — Epithets. Identity.

The epithet as a stabilizing or descriptive function in characterization becomes a significant problem in Burroughs' novels. It is not only the author's use of disruptive contextualization that disavows identity stabilization. In the 1960s, Burroughs wrote numerous letters to his friend and collaborator Brion Gysin. The letters are at times almost indistinguishable from pages from his novels. Burroughs' theory of language and writing, or perhaps more accurately his approach to writing, is often presented through an execution of the formulaic content. While this thesis is not primarily concerned with Burroughs' non-fictional writing, I will include one excerpt from a letter sent to Gysin in 1960 that illustrates Burroughs' meticulous and punning musings on the relation between name, word and image:

'That you know now is as clear as the 'Knows' on your??? Face.' Soviet Bid:  
Johnny Toumey: Johnny Too Me? Johnny Two Me? Me Too Johnny? Me  
Johnny Too? Johnny Me Too? Two Johnny Me? Me To Johnny woke up to  
see Johnny Two Face a mass of scar tissue: 'Does this disturb Doctor Benway?  
Face of thee Brother? Remember read The Reports. Here they are. I see you  
know how to read. Like Mayan Codices? More or less. You perfected that art  
along the Chang Dynasty with refresher course at Uxmal Chicken Itza  
[Chichén Itzá] and Chimu. Remember The Zero Gimmick? Remember the  
Two City Other Half Gimmick? Remember the Adding Machine? The stream  
lined Thing Police? Read. Remember. I see that you do.  
(*Rub Out the Words* 39–40, brackets in orig.)

The first part illustrates the thought process where the name Johnny Tourney goes through various punning before the sentence ends with Johnny Two Face “a mass of scar tissue.” The evocation of Mayan codices, that are pertinent in the *Red Night* trilogy, shows elements of mythology that Burroughs incorporates in his writing. Mythology operates as language in that it lacks a center: language and mythologies are fields “of endless substitutions” that “excludes totalization” (Makaryk; Derrida qtd. in Makaryk 586). In this quote, Burroughs shows that his ideas of identity, space-time intersection points, and the visceral effects of the word are closely connected. He continues to illustrate the approach of character naming and epithets: “Write in Pain Signs Word Signs. Cut. Concentrate. Cut. Reduce to Sentence Spell. Words. Pictures. Cut. Reduce to One Word One Picture. Or Three Lives or Five. Willy the Fifth. Reduce to one Sign” (*Rub Out the Words* 40). The epithet is used as cognomen, which becomes the proper noun, or proper name, and amplifies the stabilizing and mutilating structure of essentialism.

In *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (the title also alludes to Mayan mythology of an instructive book about the afterlife), the character of Joselito is described as the *marícon* son of Tía Dolores, a woman with one sweet and one evil eye that can jump from one socket to another (8). This evokes the Manichean position that Burroughs refers to in *The Adding Machine*, and the image of the eye as the seeing organ underscores the unstable position of what is good and what is evil. When a woman named Esperanza yells at Joselito that his hairs from his shaving are blowing into their food, she calls him “*puto grosero*” (vulgar queer) (5). Joselito has already been marked as a queer in the text by lines designating his homosexuality as *marícon*, and being Tía Dolores’ “professional son” (5). Esperanza’s comment however, results in a reaction that juxtaposes expression and identification, with violent outcome: “The epithet ‘grosero’ is too much for Joselito. He whirls cutting his chest. He clutches the wound with an expression of pathic dismay like a dying saint in an El Greco painting. He gasps ‘MAMACITA’ and folds to the red tiles of the balcony dripping blood” (5). However, “grosero” is not the only use of epithet in this example, “pathic” describing his expression also alludes to his homosexuality. Burroughs suggests that to be told what one is in a derogatory manner by a sender out of reach is a form of playback: “*Shame is playback: exposure to disapproval*” (*The Job* 19). Joselito’s reaction becomes inscribed in his identity—where the double meaning of pathic, both homosexual and passive, ends in a volatile reaction. Joselito is here made to perform his reaction in relation to his identity; however, at the same time he is being juxtaposed with the “dying saint” the idea of cleanliness as opposed to the dirty vulgarity. Joselito is told *what* he is (reduced from *who* to *what*), and it mutilates him.

In classical literature, the epithet as cognomen often creates tension where the contrast between the name and action reveals a character’s true nature, and shows that they have switched sides during the course of the story (L’Hoir 108). It is the double function that, through contradiction, is said to state something that is true because it seemingly presents a dispersion of character traits. However, this does not function as a liberating factor in Burroughs’ writing. A contradictive character trait will not challenge ‘essential’ character traits, but only reinforce the cohesiveness of the structures that makes the reader able to discover a point in the text where the character does not behave like he or she *is supposed to behave*. Bolton observes that “[t]hrough naming, rather than becoming complete, an individual becomes a ‘fixed image [...] a ME that cannot be allowed to change’” (Bolton 155; *WL* 158). The displacement of character identity and name, where notions of immediacy and distance to the characters oscillate, offers grounding in the textual situations in Burroughs’

early authorship that creates a sense of urgency in the necessity of not being tied to one's name. The use of nicknames and epithets take a violent turn from *Naked Lunch* onward, where the use of character inscription complicates rather than "adds" to a character's identity.

In *Naked Lunch*, the reader is addressed through the young "advertising exec fruit," "whose expectations of the junky are derived from 'B production' movies and their literary correlative pulp fiction" (Murphy, "Random Insect Doom" 223). While the first pages of *Naked Lunch* allude to familiar tropes of detective pulp, Murphy explains, "the genre markers begin to mutate as surreal, quasi-human characters like Willy the Disk and Bradley the Buyer appear" (223–4). It starts out with explanatory names: "Bradley the Buyer. Best narcotics agent in the industry. Anyone would make him for junk. (Note: Make in the sense of dig or seize up.) I mean he can walk up to a pusher and score direct. He is so anonymous and grey and spectral the pusher don't remember him afterwards" (*NL* 14). In the next paragraph, Bradley loses his actual name and becomes simply The Buyer, whereupon he is exterminated by a flame thrower: "the court of inquiry ruling that such means were justified in that the Buyer had lost his human citizenship and was, in consequence, a creature without species and a menace to the narcotics industry on all levels" (17). Characteristically for *Naked Lunch*, but also due to the brevity of such character appearances, is that physical fragmentation happens over only a few pages. Or, it happens from one appearance to the next. The change from being merely a cognomen to a deathly or grotesque physical change is rapid and merciless.

In *The Ticket that Exploded*, the name does not only depict character traits, but also the possibility of controlling people through words. The first chapter mirrors pulp fiction and detective stories as the search for a man called Genial, suspect of enticing a hanging suicide, proves to be a much more complicated case of language infection. At first Genial is described as a young man, "arrested three times suspecting of breaking and entering . . . no convictions . . .", and as Mr. Lee enquires how the young man got his nickname, the answer is simply: "smooth talker . . . laughs a lot . . . well genial on the surface at least" (14). Genial is interrogated in relation to the suicide of a John Harrison, where the inspection also uncovered three tape recorders in his apartment. The content revealed Harrison to be obsessed with the sexual aspect of hanging. Burroughs moves from the simple characterization of Genial: "age 20 . . . 5 feet 11 inches . . . ten stone" (14), to let the character metamorphose into a single attribute held together by his nickname, proving not to be a person at all, but part of the nova conspiracy:

“Did you interview a young man named Terrence Weld in this connection?”

“Young ‘Genial’? Yes I interviewed that specimen.”

“He was genial?”

“Impeccably so. I considered him directly responsible for Harrison’s death.

When I told him he said

“‘What and me so young’?”

Exactly. And then he laughed. [...]

“I would suggest that ‘Genial’ is that laugh . . . only existence ‘Genial’ has.”

“Infectious laughter what? Yes he’s a disease . . . a virus.” (16)

In the end Genial is nothing but an image: “The sound track illuminates the image . . . Genial’s image in this case . . . almost tactile . . . [...] The sound track is the only existence it has no one hears him he is not there except as a potential” (19). The movement of images, avatars and identities in cyberpunk fictions unravels similar situations. As with Genial, centralized sources are shown not to be people at all, but functions.

While *Junky* and *Queer* predominantly take issue with societal identity categories and representation, *Naked Lunch* marks a shift where identification is scrutinized on the level of character names. The pseudo-anonymity facilitated by the use of nicknames in the criminal underground is not unproblematic to the question of naming and individuality. When a character is named, a footprint is established in the text, and the repetition of that name establishes character identity. Such repetition is questioned in *Naked Lunch*, where the notion of an idealized subject becomes trapped and mutilated by its signifier: “Such fixed subjects, [...] are in danger of becoming trapped in pure repetition, and, thus, co-opted into the control structures of the word virus” (Bolton 165). Pantopon Rose, referred to in *Junky*, appears again in *Naked Lunch*, along with multiple appearances by Bill Gains. The rest of the aforementioned group is now only referred to by their epithets: “Fag. Beagle, Irish, Sailor: old time junkies and lush workers of my acquaintance” (*NL* 169), but appear frequently throughout the texts. Although this would indicate that characters can be traced in the novels, or would provide an anchor point in his progressively experimental writing, the reappearance of names does not provide any continuous development of character identity. Rather, the idea of a representational character identity is broken down, so that the name is a continuation of the contextual factors: “‘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* 4).

The re-appropriation of the epithet as cognomen includes an apparent finite contextualization to the character. As fixed signs, the symbiotic factor of the virus alters its host:

The Shoe Store Kid (he got that moniker shaking down fetishists in shoe stores) say: 'Give it to a mark with K.Y. and he will come back moaning for more.' And when the Kid spots a mark he begin to breathe heavy. His face swells and his lips turn purple like an Eskimo in heat. Then slow, slow he comes on the mark, feeling him, palpating him with fingers of rotten ectoplasm. (*NL* 4–5)

The rotting effect of the accomplished moniker, shown in the quote above, puts the character within the violent effects of language –where the idea of finite identification literally disfigures the character. Mikhail Bakhtin presents the idea of a character as an “image of language,” where the speaking person in the novel need not necessarily be incarnated in a character. “A character is but one of the forms a speaking person might assume” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 335). In Burroughs’ prose, however, it is the singularized context that speaks for the character, and infests him. The ventriloquism that Bakhtin refers to in his literary theory differs from Derrida’s concept of ventriloquism, that I explained in the second chapter, in that the Derridean ventriloquist is not grounded in the idea of speaking for another person, but from a far more insidious source, the pre-programmed names that are utilized in different discourses. Similarly, context as a seemingly objectifying element is unveiled as a probable designator of stabilized identity, justified by the understanding of ourselves through contextualization.

One of Burroughs’ most famous anecdotes, which plays with the ventriloquism concept, is *The Talking Asshole*, a carny act that develops into a real transmutation where “the metaphorical ‘man is an ass’ becomes the metonymic ‘man is an asshole’” (Lydenberg 38). In *Naked Lunch*, two doctor characters, Schafer and Benway are talking, and Schafer states: “The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have an all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate?” (*NL* 110).

The carny man episode reveals that perhaps more thoroughly the violence and aggression in the act of naming. The narrative progresses from the implicit epithet (man is “an asshole”), to a comic performance (man in a dialogue with his anus). [...] the verb “to be” paralyzes individual life within a verbal label –“You are an animal. You are a body” —in *Naked Lunch* man is not even a body, but only a body part, amputated and dehumanized. The fate of the body as seen in *Naked Lunch*, reduced by surgical amputation or parasitic absorption, is already sealed

in name and image. (Lydenberg 39)

The anecdote as read by Lydenberg plays on the idealization of the name, where identification is performed as an end in itself –and literally disappears up its own asshole. The anecdote reads as the literal *violence* of the word, which arguably dominates *Naked Lunch*, and corresponds with Burroughs’ ideas of the “word virus” from which the identified being has no defense, except destabilization of signifiers, and an attention to the appropriated context. Significantly, the asshole controls everything “except for the eyes, you dig. That’s the one thing the asshole couldn’t do was see” (*NL* 112). The asshole falls into metonymic stasis blind to the Manichean position, and loses the ability to oscillate between positions.

As we have seen with Bradley the Buyer, Willy the Disk (a more elusive name until it is explained) concludes the metamorphosis in less than three appearances: “Well, the fuzz has my spoon and dropper, and I know they are coming in on my frequency led by this blind pigeon known as Willy the Disk. Willy has a round disk mouth lined with sensitive, erectile black hairs” (7). Willy’s distorted appearance from heroin addiction has left him blind and he can only eat it, you can “feel the terrible urgency of that blind, seeking mouth. When they move in for the bust, Willy goes all out of control, and his mouth eats a hole right through the door” (8). In a different section of *Naked Lunch*, Reptiles are described as addicts of Mugwump Fluid, vacant and expressionless, with similar characteristics as Willy the Disk: “The Reptile had a little, round disk mouth of brown gristle, expressionless green eyes almost covered by a thin membrane of eyelid” (47). The description of the character results in complete metamorphosis into a dehumanized creature.

The violence of the word as appropriated by Lydenberg, and Burroughs’ proposition of a “sealed word and image,” is relevant to the re-appropriation of the epithet as cognomen. Lydenberg argues that all the characters come from the “same vocal apparatus” (49), note that Burroughs writes “the common vocal apparatus,” and that the depersonalized and multiplied “I” means that “the ownership of language is communal” (50).

Sooner or later The Vigilante, The Rube, Lee the Agent, A.J. Clem and Jody the Ergot Twins, Hassan O’Leary the After Birth Tycoon, The Sailor, The Exterminator, Andrew Keif, “Fats” Terminal, Doc Benway, “Fingers” Schafer are subject to say the same thing in the same words, to occupy, at that intersecting point, the same position in space-time. (*NL* 186)

Lydenberg sees the *Nova* trilogy and the cut-up technique as writing style that “offers an antidote to this terminal paralysis in metonymic condensations that always lead to explosion, dissemination, expansion” (50). By making the characters decentralized from context, which allows them to “occupy, at that intersecting point, the same position in space-time,” does not, however, delimit the effects of the name. Although these “intersection points” achieve decentralization by fragmentation it is not the only way that Burroughs’ writing destabilizes identity recognition. It seems that Lydenberg presupposes that textual cut-up is the only resistance and deconstruction of the essentialist appropriation of the signifier, however, the contextualization that comes with naming also creates destabilization through the reading process. I will argue that to adapt an “enclosure of nothingness” (Derrida, *Dialogues* 124), as Lydenberg does here by suggesting that only fragmentation can show the arbitrariness of the word, and that this lack, this affirmation of the negative, destabilizes the idea of essence, evokes authorial control rather than dissemination.

### **3.4 Before the Name: Dr. Benway and the Grotesque**

It is important to note that metonymic contractions are not the only way that the text reflects problems with naming and identity. *Naked Lunch* also plays with the representational process through dissonance of name and function. The text arguably plays with different effects of the grotesque, from the Bakhtinian grotesque body, which “transgresses its own limits” (*Rabelais* 26) through body parts to the contextual that elucidates an attack on the logocentric hold on external reference to establish meaning. The ‘problem’ is a recurring character, named Dr. Benway, or simply Doc, who is one of the few in *Naked Lunch* that does not undergo a volatile manipulation of his character, but one who exerts these manipulations through mind control: “I deplore brutality,’ [Benway] said. ‘It is not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence gives rise, when skillfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt’” (19). This special guilt becomes impossible to localize, (as voices are often impossible to localize in the novel) because it is imbedded in the person’s brain and controls him or her, while wiping out whom or where it came from: “The subject must not realize that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity. He must be made to feel that he deserves *any* treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him” (19). The disconnection between source, voice, and self-identity is laid out as a neurological impediment brought on by psychological control, which results in passivity.

While Dr. Benway is often classified as the villain in the novel, which encourages readings of Burroughs as being opposed to the medical institution, there are numerous issues with Dr. Benway. There is an ever multiplying dissonance between his name and his function that plays with the centralization of the body, or more concretely, the naming of the body in function. The dubious presence on the page created by one of Burroughs' most popular characters, plays with the grotesque: "In always being both comic and tragic, humorous and horrifying, the grotesque is neither the one nor the other, and thus it is not actually in itself but in the difference of the terms of an opposition" (Meindl 172). Dr. Benway's name and title evokes this doubling sphere of the grotesque, which destabilizes the correlation between naming and performative identity.

Dr. Benway is a recurring character in Burroughs' writing, although his main performance is on the pages of *Naked Lunch*. This novel, which consists of numerous vignettes, allows for multiple characterizations, and agency is difficult if not impossible to locate. However, to identify Benway as doctor, does not solve this issue: "Doctors mostly sustain themselves in a medium of false ideas, the word 'doctor' casting about them, so they think, a sort of magical aura. They are all a set-up for some line of con. . ." (NL 248). Doctor, a protected title, evokes the idea of responsibility, and a failure to perform this responsibility is deemed unethical. Through Dr. Benway, the grotesque is depicted through a dissonance of character name and function. "'The citizens are well adjusted, cooperative, honest, tolerant and above all clean. But the invoking of Benway indicates that not all is well behind that hygienic façade: Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control" (NL 19). However, Benway's instability is also suggested by his face: "Benway's face retains its form in the flash bulb of urgency, subject at any moment to unspeakable cleavage or metamorphosis. It flickers like a picture in and out of focus" (NL 25). Even his name "Ben"-way promotes a sense of instability, and the use of "ben" meaning within, or even corrupt ("ben" *OED*) further coincides with his manipulative qualities; Doctor Benway creates cleanliness through unclean and uncertified methods, making him a highly unstable presence.

Benway's own statements show the uneasy atmosphere: In addition to the statements, the doctor's careless operation techniques are explained: "Doctor Limpf shrugs and begins the incision. Doctor Benway washes the suction cup by swishing it around in the toilet bowl . . .", and when the nurse says she cannot find the patient's pulse, he replies: "Maybe she got it up her snatch in a finger stall" (51). The doctor's sinister behavior and overall disturbing

presence is emphasized by his lack of ethics. His reasoning is not connected to any larger concepts, thus fit to change at any given moment to serve his experimental procedures. The absurdity of the situation arises from the juxtaposition of the clean and the dirty, the humorous and the horrifying, intellect and folly. Dr. Benway is a character that is created from this, however, his origin or goal cannot be exactly pin-pointed in the text. His grotesque appearance derives from being a doctor and a madman, a servant for what is good and clean, through the cruel and dirty; he is himself and his double.

Benway's methods have been met by socio-satirical readings that reduce the character to be merely a villain, which ignores the double textual effect of the character (Bolton 81). In the second chapter of this thesis, I showed how Burroughs' writing challenges the notion of moral dichotomies, and this problematization underscores the doubling function that Dr. Benway portrays, where evil can only arise from the idea that he should be good. Bolton explains the reductive comparison of Dr. Benway and concentration camp doctors during WWII:

Despite the undeniable inhumanity of these atrocities committed by the German doctors referred to by Calder, some of these atrocities led to great advances in medicine. Though labeling these doctors villains seems entirely reasonable, one must also grudgingly accept the contributions they made toward the good of humanity. Their case is more complex than we might be comfortable in admitting. Benway is such a troubling figure. (81)

To understand why a satiric depiction of the responsibility of doctors has received such attention from critics, and why Benway continues to be such a troubling figure as Burroughs dives into the most deplorable, disturbing, and morally repulsive paragraphs, I will suggest that the reason for the effect of this character is deeply rooted in his name. Dr. Benway's lack of ethics should not be read as the worst possible outcome of an anarchic character, but as Bolton suggests: a depiction of the poison and the cure. The scapegoat factor of the *pharmakeus* is a significant part of the paradigm: "Alternately and/or all at once, the Socratic *pharmakon* petrifies and vivifies, anesthetizes and sensitizes, appeases and anguishes" (*Dissemination* footnote 199, qtd. in Bolton 79).

An important effect of this is that the doubling feature of Dr. Benway — a figure of the medical institution that nevertheless operates without rules, whose name and actions show and comment on the historical significance of medical cruelty and its parallel advancements — shows that Burroughs' characters and their names appear in his novels, but also in our

historical context, our pre-established perceptions. His actions and sayings are often hilarious, but become, due to his doctor title, simultaneously horrifying. The reason why Dr. Benway has had such an effect on readers is because *something happens* when the reader is confronted with “pre-programmed names.” The doctor is not simply a pure creation of Burroughs’ because an intrinsic part of his grotesque feature and effect is the reactions the reader has to the name and what we put in its place. Derrida states that: “[R]esponsibility would be *problematic* to the further [*supplementaire*] extent that it could sometimes, perhaps even always, be what one takes, not for oneself, *in one’s own name* and *before the other* [...] but what one must take for another, in his place, in the name of the other or of oneself as other, before another other, and an other of the other, namely the very undeniable of ethics.” (*On the Name* 10-11, emphasis in the original) What we put in Dr. Benway’s place, a projection or extension of the sense of ethics and responsibility creates a disturbing character presence. Dr. Benway does exercise his responsibility by operating, by doing his profession, and achieving his results, yet he does not exercise a responsibility for the subject, or a professional ethics. He is a troubling figure, not only because of what he does, but because what he does not correspond with what we assume to be his responsibility, and the power given him through his title. Dr. Benway, the character, does not take his place to the ‘full’ or ‘pure’ extent, but continues to oscillate between good and evil. Dr. Benway, a contradictive and sinister doctor and persona, performs the instability of language through the effect of the grotesque as a differential structure that plays with such dissonance. As a result of the oscillating subject, the foundational precedence for our perception of ethics is morbidly distorted.

Dr. Benway’s returning appearances in different texts create an overarching destabilization of function, where his function is meditated from appearance to appearance rather than a conventional character development. Similarly, the appearances of Clem Snide, “private Ass Hole—I will take any job any identity any body—I will do anything difficult dangerous or downright dirty for a price” (*SM* 67) create such an ambiguous presence, most prominently in *Cities of the Red Night* in a story tangent to the revolution of the pirate collective The Articulated. Snide, although unscrupulous is not merely “snide” because of what he might do; the deception lies in not being tied to one persona, one identity, one point of view. This reaction against singularity that occurs in some of the most prominent characters in Burroughs’ writing is particularly interesting as “the concept of a definite, bounded, located, and embodied self is increasingly problematic” (Dolan 123). The limits between being and context are erased.

The intense and volatile descriptions, often used as character names, together with the fragmented contexts they appear in, create spaces in the novels where the intelligible and unintelligible converge. Burroughs' use of epithets, cognomens, and reiteration of names continually questions the authority of identity inscription and allows for cognitive dissonance. By working from the presupposition that fictional characters are artificial, and therefore not 'whole,' one would anticipate, or work from the presupposition, that a *true* subject can be found elsewhere, and that it is the written language 'itself' that is inadequate, not our predisposition to produce cohesion. In *Naked Lunch*, the comment on the artificial subject is not only committed to the fictional subject, but also the act of recognition:

Using a common vocal apparatus complete with all metabolic appliances –that is, to be the same person—a most inaccurate way of expressing *Recognition*: The junky naked in the sunlight. . . The writer sees himself reading to the mirror as always. . . He must check now and again to reassure himself that The Crime of Separate Action has not, is not, cannot occur. . . Anyone who has ever looked into a mirror knows what this crime is and what it means in terms of lost control when the reflection no longer obeys. . . (NL 186)

The word "recognition" is displaced, to be what allows contradiction rather than designating a point of view that supersedes contradiction. Furthermore, the act of *expressing* recognition is shown to be grounded in an ability to display unequivocal features that are structured in "a common vocal apparatus." The mirroring of the subject — which in writing entails the descriptive words: nouns, adjectives, adverbs — is sided with the "common vocal apparatus." Within the binary hierarchy, multitude is compromised or lost in the structure of recognition and naming. Burroughs' characters, although often divorced from context, take shape within the reader's comprehension; the reader must be aware of the common vocal apparatus, the order of words, which favors recognition. Our ability to recognize cohesive entities, and characters, is indebted to an act of ventriloquism, or pre-programmed names as discussed in the second chapter, where we can only name what we already know. Language, however, is not only the written form, but how we express recognition and identification, the foundation of communication. The proposition then becomes that the artificiality of identity construction is not based on insufficient or incomplete characterization, but on the attempt to define the univocal, and support the processes that will always favor consensus.

The seemingly cohesive presences that occur with the names in the midst of textual fragmentation are also shown to create instability. As Gibson's neuromancer calls up the

dead, while simultaneously being dead, so does the Burroughsian nomenclature disturb the hierarchy that puts presence before absence, intelligible before unintelligible. By utilizing descriptive names and functions, at times in form of mutilation of the subject, other times as the uneasy displacement of contexts and being, the nomenclature does not merely reverse the hierarchy of signification or claim it artificial, but blurs the presupposed divisive lines between text and reading, being and context. The space-time intersecting points (*NL* 186) where an utterance can be given to any number of different characters plays with Derrida's statement of naming (in general) as paradoxical in that it is dependent on *iteration* to function as a name/identification: "Iterability supposes a minimal reminder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable *in, through,* and even *in view* of its alteration" (*Limited Inc* 53).<sup>9</sup> Therefore it is repeatable in infinite contexts. However, an attention to the Burroughsian nomenclature gives an added dimension to the space-time intersection produced by textual fragmentation as naming shows to create another uneasy effect of intersection.

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<sup>9</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, selfsame is written with a hyphen (self-same) and I have used this throughout this chapter. *Limited Inc.* is translated by Samuel Weber, who uses fewer hyphens than Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her translation of the same words in *Of Grammatology*.

## 4 The “Irreconcilables”: Sexual Identity and Eroticism

*When I imagined I was he, making his  
gestures uttering his words: when I was he.  
People thought I was seeing double,  
whereas I was seeing the double of things.  
—(Genet, *Miracle of the Rose* 26)*

Thematically, sexuality has always played a significant part in Burroughs’ writing, whether through familiar socio-sexual rhetoric or more experimental styles and genres. Tytell describes this as Burroughs refusal to treat the subject of sex “naturalistically”: “The Beats believed that absolutely anything was suitable as subject matter. The idea of taste was something they distrusted entirely, seeing it as polite rationalization for elements of life that could not be faced artistically, the result of a legacy of Victorian prudishness that persisted far into the twentieth century” (123). First of all, Tytell’s use of the word “naturalistically” imposes a hierarchal order to the “natural” way of reading and writing sexuality, by adhering to established binary concepts. Secondly, however, as we see in the quote above, the use of taste and natural is not equated, and “taste” used as an evaluative measurement for depictions of human existence is deemed insufficient as it arguably veils the body.

This brings up the discussion of the separation of sexuality into psychological and social issues (as representative identities), and the sexual being; the former a “tasteful” method of discussing sexuality, and the latter a chaotic entity that continually challenges explanatory methods and rationalizations of human behavior and desire. Within studies on sexuality and language, there is a similar division between sexual identity and desire. The former argues for sexual identity read through the perspectives of “sexual ideologies, practices, and identities as interconnected issues without losing sight of power relations,” and the latter argues that sexuality is not limited to sexual identity, but displayed in a separate field of language and erotics that must “move beyond” identity issues (Bucholtz and Hall 471-2). I will argue that Burroughs’ depictions of sexuality suggest that the erotic field of sexuality does not “move beyond” identity issues, but simultaneously responds to and displaces the relationship between identity and sexuality. In my opinion, this takes place in the aforementioned chaotic and indefinable sphere, where sex, symbiosis, and violence intertwine.

In Derrida's reading of Heidegger in "*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*," he states that: "the neutral of *Dasein* [Being] is not the absence of sexuality but the originary power" (Derrida qtd. in Irwin 136, my brackets). Derrida suggests that Heidegger's attempt to de-sexualize *Dasein*, by omission of the word "sexual" as an adjective comes from "fearing no doubt to reintroduce the binary logic that anthropology and metaphysics always assign to the concept of sexuality" (388).<sup>10</sup> The binary logic is important, because, as we have seen, it reinforces hierarchies in language. Burroughs' texts, however, suggest that "splicing" creates an erotic charge, not tied to binary logic: "They both recorded a short text then the two tapes were cut into short sections and spliced together. This produces a strong erotic reaction. Curiously enough the content of the tape doesn't seem to effect the result. In fact the same sexual effect can be produced by splicing in street recordings recorded by two subjects separately" (*TE* 18, "effect" in the original). That "the content doesn't seem to effect the result" upsets the passage that can otherwise be read as affirmative of erotic linguistics; moreover, the effect as not dependent on the subjects equally upsets that sexuality is solely dependent on identity categories, and can only be read through a perspective based on recognizing identity categories. I will examine how Burroughs' novels *Queer* and *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* deconstruct sexuality by upsetting and destabilizing these seemingly separate "sites" of study. The destabilization that occurs in Burroughs' novels, should not be read as a neutralization of the inscribed subject, and ignore sexuality. Rather, the previous chapters arguably necessitate an examination of sexuality in Burroughs' novels.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, sexuality in Burroughs' novels have been read as disruptive of binary readings as "it is no longer clear who will occupy a passive or active role. Indeed, the terms are emptied of value; gendered readings of sexuality are exploded as each partner adopts both positions" (Russell 136). This mutual space, however, might not be as evocative of sameness as previously understood. While Burroughs arguably transgresses a binary reading, that does not mean the passages are devoid of tension. I will argue that sexuality and Burroughs' destabilized subjects answer to a Bataillesque eroticism, which is neither a double *subject*, nor a fragmented subject exposed as artificial, but evocative

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<sup>10</sup> I am using citations from Derrida to advocate an attention to the *sexual being* in theory from a different approach than binary identity categories. However, it should be noted that Derrida's further elaboration in the topic in "*Geschlecht*" evolves closely around Heidegger's prose of *Dasein* as being "neither of the two sexes" (387), and "the order of implications [shown above] opens up to a sexual difference that would not yet be sexual duality, difference as dual" (401, my brackets). I have only used the parts that can be said to be of more general use in studies of sexuality in Burroughs' works.

of what Jean Genet calls “a doubling of *things*” (*Miracle of the Rose* 26, my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Lee, the protagonist in *Queer*, and his homoerotic fantasies have been called narcissistic, resulting in “a profoundly narcissistic form of body fusion” (Harris 198, 107). However, in the sexual passages of this novel, we see that the character is not merely ‘doubling himself,’ but that the passages include double spheres of which to read sexuality: both through identity essentialism and its dissolution. In other words, I will argue in the “*Queer and the Depravity of Desire*” section that identity is destabilized in sexual passages in Burroughs’ text through the use of eroticism.

Bataille proposes a relationship between what he calls the “two irreconcilables,” namely taboo and transgression, as “[t]he contrast between the world of work or reason and that of violence” (*Eroticism* 40). The world of reason both structures and reinforces identity concepts, while transgression is the desire we have to break them. However, transgression, according to Bataille, is dependent on taboo to be transgressive. In other words, it both defies the structuralized logic, and protects it by being a reaction to it. He calls this tension eroticism, as a general term, and proclaims “the domain of eroticism of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (16). I must emphasize that eroticism is not the result of violence, it occupies two spaces simultaneously: “Neither cultures nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so” (Barthes qtd. in Lydenberg 163–4). Lydenberg discusses Burroughs’ cut-ups as “a method [that] produces the same discontinuity and transgression” (164), however Burroughs’ attentiveness to the inconsistencies or rifts in reality and representation is a highly destabilizing effect in his authorship, not limited to the cut-ups.

#### 4.1 *Queer and the Depravity of Desire*

Homosexuality was in many ways a societal and political taboo subject at the time of Burroughs’ early writing (the publication of *Queer* was delayed due to the homosexual content); however, it is only briefly addressed as such. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Burroughs avoids the conventional ‘coming-out’ story, but recognizes its existence

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<sup>11</sup> The French writer and activist Jean Genet (1910-1986) was one of the few writers Burroughs held in high regard. “[T]he novels of Genet were among the first books Burroughs passed on to his younger friends” (Marler xvii), and Burroughs stated that he admired him “without reservation” (*The Job* 55). The writers share an emphasis on the erotic, the life of outlaws, and problematization of identity. Although Burroughs’ experimental techniques differ significantly from Genet’s more traditional narrative approach, he professed that Genet “seems to escape the imprisonment of words and to achieve things you think could not be achieved with words” (Ibid). Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida provide two very different readings of Genet, the former with attention to essentialism (Hassan 177; St. *Genet: comédien et martyr*), and the latter with its apparent deconstruction (*Glas*) (also noted by Irwin). Burroughs and Genet finally met at a demonstration in Lincoln Park, Chicago, 1968.

through reference to a “script” (*Q* 35). In the beginning of the novel, the narrator Lee chats up a German-born American named Carl, whose sexuality is undisclosed. After establishing contact, Carl professes: “Since I can’t change my mind about you, I will have to change my mind about other things” (*Q* 2). Carl is evocative of what Gore Vidal explains as “trade,” meaning men who participated in homoerotic seduction while proclaiming an essential heterosexuality: “sometimes they prostituted themselves for money; more often, however, they were homosexuals who had not yet realized it themselves” (Vidal 246). Burroughs, however, does not name this ambiguous position, similarly, the novel, despite its title, does not attempt to give a definition of what a “queer” is, besides as a contrast to those who are not considered “queer,” namely heterosexuals. As no progress is made between the two characters, Lee concludes that Carl is *not* queer, and although people can be “obliging,” as Burroughs calls it, the ultimate obstacle lies in meeting the expectations of a society that exercises what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality: “[Rich] argued that universal heterosexual desire and practice are certainly assumed, required, and mandated by the combined weight of dozens of social institutions and thousands of individuals from lawgivers and scholars to teachers and parents” (Kimmel and Aronson 382). In *Queer*, this is epitomized by a mother’s expectancy:

“What is the obstacle?” Lee finally guessed the answer: “What makes it impossible is that his mother wouldn’t like it.” Lee knew it was time to pack in. He recalled a homosexual Jewish friend who lived in Oklahoma City. Lee had asked, “Why do you live here? You have enough money to live anywhere you like.” The reply was, “It would kill my mother if I moved away.” Lee had been speechless. (2)

As I have shown in the second chapter, the narrator rejects a position where he would be influenced by a mother’s advice or expectations. Lee suggests that Carl’s decision is not necessarily based on a hetero-*sexual* preference, but on societal expectations, or “other things.” Although this aspect might not ultimately designate his sexuality, it will influence his sexual encounters based on whether or not it coincides with his other life choices. Although it is not explicitly stated, or perhaps *because* it is not explicitly stated, homosexuality is shown as a taboo subject in society at large. This passage, however, is not what dominates homosexual encounters in the novel, as Burroughs’ treatment of sexuality and identity takes on a more ambiguous discourse, namely eroticism.

Critics have noted that throughout the novel, “‘queer’ functions as an adjective rather than as a noun” (Caveney, qtd. in Harris 93). We see passages that comment on who is and who is not queer, often faultily: “He’s queer and you aren’t, Lee. You just go around pretending you’re queer to get in on the act,” to which Lee responds “‘Who wants to get in on your tired old act’” (*Q* 31). The “tired old act” both refers to Lee’s lack of attraction to Guidry, his conversation partner, but also arguably alludes to *the* act, of performing one’s identity and being easily classified. By avoiding essentialist identifiable factors in his use of the word “queer,” the interactions in the novel become uneasy, and “queer” in the sense of strange. Lee is continually faced with this problematic: “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 place, mutilated and hopeless” (15). This is followed by Allerton’s reaction to Lee’s advances: “Allerton was appalled. ‘Perhaps he has some sort of tic,’ he thought. He decided to remove himself from contact with Lee before the man did something even more distasteful. The effect was like a cut connection. Allerton was not cold or hostile; Lee simply wasn’t there as far as he was concerned” (15–16). Allerton, not yet aware of Lee’s homosexuality, misinterprets Lee’s awkwardness as a tic, an involuntary physical contraction, but due to Lee’s appearance, no one interprets his gestures as sexual advances.

There are several references to “fags” and “queens” in the novel, as people whose sexual identity is easily spotted. In regard to Lee, however, identity and sexuality is not primarily communicated through these sexual identity labels, but the through the establishment and effacement of the self in sexual encounters and scenes depicting sexual desire. I will argue that this is where the aspect of eroticism comes in, as a sexual identity discourse faces multiple problems, and is arguably indebted to essentialist labels and binary categories. For Bataille, man (or woman) rationalizes the world around him, but there “remains within him an undercurrent of violence” (*Eroticism* 40). This is where the person, within the structuralized and rationalized social sphere, recognizes the connection to the animalistic. An acknowledgement of society and nature, not as hierarchies, but as co-dependent instances “results from this duality, phenomena which also points to a problematicity at the heart of human existence” (Irwin 42). In *Queer*, the language used to describe sexuality and desire juxtaposes these two spheres.

Perhaps surprisingly (although not in the context of this thesis), there is also an instance where Lee recognizes the same co-existence in the easily-classified “fags”: At a bar, Lee observes three Mexican “fags”: “Lee watched them from an inner silence. He registered something archaic in the stylized movements, a depraved animal grace at once beautiful and repulsive. He could see them moving in the light of campfires, the ambiguous gestures shadowed out into the dark. Sodomy is as old as the human species” (16). The erotic space that these characters inhabit is inaccessible to Lee who does not identify with them, but he nevertheless recognizes it from a distance. Lee depicts the duality of social conduct and sexuality (similar to how Allerton described Lee’s tic), and refers to sodomy as part of human nature. Sodomy also alludes to bestiality, through the older definition of ‘unnatural’ sexual relations. Burroughs’ paragraph depicts bestiality as a connection to the animal in human nature, juxtaposed with their sexuality. Bataille postulates that: “Human nature may turn from that foundation in horror but allows it to persist at the same time, and so effectively that the expression ‘bestiality’ is continually linked with eroticism. It is false to imagine that breaking the sexual taboos means a return to nature as exemplified in the animals, and yet the behaviour forbidden by the taboos are that of animals” (*Eroticism* 94). The contrast that Bataille shows is described by Lee as an ambiguous play that has multiple interpretations: the stylized movements of overt display of sexual identity within a social context, the relationship between taboo and transgression, and a connection to nature. The depravity of desire, which results in a corruption of the being, both from the social and the natural, simultaneously, is recognizable to him as he experiences this with Allerton.

Harris states that Lee is narcissistic, meaning that he is self-absorbed and sees others through himself. If we look at the difference in how sex scenes are portrayed, however, we can recognize a more nuanced picture. Firstly, Lee picks up one of the young “fags” and takes him to a hotel room:

The boy smiled and lay down on the bed. Lee’s body was moving in rhythmic contractions, every muscle caressing the smooth hard body of the other, the amoeba effect to surround and incorporate. His body tensed convulsively rigid, sparks flashed behind his eyes and the breath whistled through his teeth. Slowly his muscles relaxed away from the other’s body. (*Q* 18)

These passages show the differences between the two men, where the embrace is depicted as “the amoeba effect to surround and incorporate.” As we have seen in the earlier chapters, the establishment of the self includes recognition of the “other,” and here the sex is arguably not

erotic, but mechanical. While they share an experience, they remain separate and distant. The boy is only identified as a body, even after the act with the impersonal “other’s body.” Lee “incorporated” the other’s body, but the hard outlines of difference and alienation are intact. Their shared sexual identity does not, in itself, create the erotic sphere as depicted between the “fags” in the bar.

A contrast to the sex scene between Lee and one of the “fags” can be found in the budding relationship between Lee and Allerton, which is depicted in less clinical terms. Allerton states that: “The man was somehow familiar to him. When Lee talked, he seemed to mean more than what he said. A special emphasis to a word or a greeting hinted at a period of familiarity in some other time and place. As though Lee were saying, ‘*You know what I mean. You remember*’ (21). Allerton recognizes Lee’s interest, but it is the emphasis on familiarity that is of importance; without logic or reason, the tension between the two men is described as something they *share*. Lee describes the attraction with a distance to sexual identity labels: “Lee had never heard Allerton talk like this before. The effect was like the possession of a medium. The boy had an inhuman gaiety and innocence” (22). Allerton continuously falls between labels in the story, and the evocation of something “inhuman” is regarded as positive, and “innocence” as something that cannot be labeled. Lee’s attraction to Allerton becomes problematic, however, as Allerton at times feels “oppressed by Lee, as though Lee’s presence shut off everything else,” although he does not recognize Lee’s interest as “queerness” because “he associated queerness with at least some degree of overt effeminacy” (24–5). Here, Lee does not yet become Allerton’s ‘other,’ because he does not exhibit the different qualities that Allerton associates with a queer sexuality. Therefore, his sense of self is not really challenged, because as far as he is concerned they occupy the same masculine space. However, later in a hotel bedroom, Lee suspects an underlying unease with the situation: “He loosened Allerton’s belt and unbuttoned his trousers. Allerton arched his body, and Lee pulled the trousers and drawers off. He dropped his own trousers and shorts and lay down beside him. Allerton responded without hostility or disgust, but in his eyes Lee saw a curious detachment, the impersonal calm of an animal or a child” (40).

In Lee’s overpowering erotic attraction to Allerton, we see the same language as used in the sex scene with one of the “fags”, namely “other’s body” and “amoeba.” However, it is used differently to depict closeness rather than alienation. In the movie theatre while watching Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus*: “Lee could feel his body pull towards Allerton, 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 to feel his viscera and genitals. Allerton shifted in his seat. Lee felt a sharp twinge, a strain or dislocation of the spirit” (33). The seeming effusion of self that Lee experiences takes form as a connection to Allerton on both the emotional and physical level. However, it is not complete effusion of self as Lee is obliquely present in the line “to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn to feel his viscera and genitals.” Burroughs continuously reminds the reader of the binary separations indebted to identity essentialism, such as heterosexual/homosexual, and the self/the other, while he simultaneously transgresses them. Allerton is not Lee’s double, as Lee wishes to “learn” to feel what Allerton is feeling. Bataille argues that: “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separated individuals” (*Eroticism* 18). Such discontinuity and separation of being, however, is challenged by the uneasy element of eroticism:

Physical eroticism has in any case a heavy, sinister quality. It holds on to the separateness of the individual in a rather selfish and cynical fashion. Emotional eroticism is less constrained. Although it may appear detached from material sensuality it often derives from it, being merely an aspect made stable by the reciprocal affection of the lovers. (*Eroticism* 19)

The lack of stability, which could have been created by overt reciprocity of Allerton’s and Lee’s emotions, is not there due to the limited narrative voice. Nevertheless, within this voice unfolds an important juxtaposition. The scene depicts the emotional erotic attraction that Lee feels for Allerton fused with the sinister and violent aspect of physical eroticism that recognizes the separateness of the two, but nevertheless transgresses both emotional and physical spheres. There is both inversion of ‘otherness’ through the violent intrusion of the other’s sphere, and a displacement of the possibility of transgression: where the one is not substituted with the other, but co-exists. Therefore, Burroughs is not a Bataillean writer, but Bataillesque in that he includes the problematic of eroticism in his depictions of sexuality and identity.

Immediately following this scene is a discussion of the movie *Orpheus* while Allerton and Lee are drinking at a bar: “‘The innaresting thing about Cocteau is his ability to bring the myth alive in modern terms.’ ‘Ain’t it the truth?’ said Allerton” (*Q* 33). The themes of death and unrequited love in the Greek myth re-told by Jean Cocteau, is modernized by using contemporary settings, and the medium of the cinema, which allows for simple special

effects. In the introduction to the novel, Harris states that “the parallels with the myth of Orpheus are inviting—in Ovid’s version (but not Cocteau’s), the poet is torn to pieces because, after the death of his wife, Eurydice, he gives up the love of women for the pursuit of boys” (*Q* xvii). This is a biographical analysis that inserts information from Burroughs’ life and juxtaposes it with Ovid’s version. However, I will argue for the parallels of representation in Burroughs’ passage with Cocteau’s visual effect in the film.

The apparent ‘mirroring’ of Lee and Allerton in Lee’s erotic fantasy alludes to Cocteau’s replacement of the use of mercury instead of water to represent the descent into the underworld. The cinema illusion made from mercury reflects the fluid spheres of being and death (one could travel to the world of the dead, and possibly come back) as it appears in mythology, whereas the modern world separates the two. One of Cocteau’s effects in the movie is the use of mirrors, and then mercury as a replacing reflective surface where the actor’s hands can go through to the underworld. This necessitates the use of gloves, and Cocteau was asked why he did not just use water: “Because mercury shows only the reflection and not the part that has penetrated into the mirror, as water would have done. In mercury the hands disappear and the gesture is accompanied by a kind of shiver, whereas water would have produced ripples and circles of waves. On top of that, mercury has resistance” (Cocteau 113). The visual effect can be said to have made an impact on the erotic fantasy. For Lee, the visual image of penetrating mercury is more pertinent than that of water reflection, which creates a mirroring effect, because the latter would have portrayed a mere duplicate, or double self, whereas Cocteau’s mercury allows for the illusion of disappearance. Yet, mercury has resistance and leaves a shiver, but not the disturbing ripple effect. This shiver is a rift that creates a juxtaposition of maintaining the idea of ‘self’ with its disappearance into the ‘other.’ As Lee finds himself inside Allerton, simultaneously alive and dead as he wants to “learn to breathe with his lungs, learn to feel his viscera and genitals.” He is not seeing himself in Allerton, he is fantasizing disappearing into Allerton’s body.

Accusations, or interpretations, of narcissism in Burroughs’ novels are quite common. Either as auto-eroticism that has no connection to reality, or that Burroughs’ solipsistic fantasies disengages the sex scenes from any attachment to the real world (Murphy, *Wising* 142). Especially as the erotic aspects becomes increasingly fantastical. Another example of narcissism, as we have seen from Harris, is that that homosexual desire (by its prefix *homo*) perpetrates an idea of sameness. When confronted with an essentialist Freudian take on homosexuality: “that homosexual people are looking for a narcissistic double of themselves,”

Burroughs stresses that this is one aspect, but very often “homosexuals are looking for the *opposite* of themselves” (*Conversations* 100). Identifying characters and their relation to other characters by their sexual identity will mostly lead to tautological criticism that is ‘correct’ because it takes one factor of sexuality to reinforce the established dichotomies. In turn, these dichotomies influence what we are looking for in a text. What is interesting in Burroughs’ novel *Queer*, however, is the constant oscillation between the self and the other in the scenes I have discussed.

The displacement of the word *sexuality*, as we see in Derrida, as a “power” rather than something that is regarded in dual categories allows for a double reading of sexuality and identity in Burroughs’ infamous sex paragraphs: sexuality as a social phenomenon that relies on cohesive identities, but also mediated as something less easily separated into binary categories, as a *force* within his stories. As we have seen in the previous chapters of this thesis, identity categories are continuously formed and re-formed in language. Derrida asks: “What would a ‘sexual’ discourse or a discourse ‘on-sexuality’ be that did not evoke farness [*éloignement*], the inside and the outside, dispersion and proximity, the here and there, birth and death, the between-birth-and-death, being-with and discourse?” (“*Geschlecht*” 401, brackets in the orig.) While Burroughs does not articulate this in interviews (from where much of the criticism of sexuality is taken from), it appears frequently in his novels. He introduces the unstable erotic aspect to situations depicting sexual desire, which renders explanations and rationalizations of sexual identity through labels inadequate.

#### **4.2 The Miracle of the Rose and Sexual Embodiment**

The chapters of *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* play out as a series of movie projections, courtesy of The Great Slashtubitch. In this novel, Burroughs creates a landscape that elaborates the problematization of representative media in *Naked Lunch*’s “Ordinary Men and Women.” The title of this chapter alludes to the image of the common, or what is projected as ordinary through the media. The chapter takes form from several routines where even the characters cannot keep up: “[American Housewife] And the Garbage Disposal Unit snapping at me, and the nasty old Mixmaster keep trying to get up under my dress . . . I got the most awful cold, and my intestines is all constipated” (*NL* 104). After visiting the Salesman, County Clerk, the Male Hustler and Doctor Benway we are told:

That’s the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between bureaus,  
because there’s always 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. (NL 112)

Murphy points out “the insidious effects those conventions have even on those who cannot possibly fit into them. A homosexual identifying with the protagonist of Hollywood romances is like an African American identifying with the cowboys rather than the Indians in westerns, yet such identifications happen all the time” (Murphy, *Wising* 90–1). Murphy’s simile emphasizes the situation of the minority or marginalized: where Burroughs’ authorship in the beginning is situated within normative culture (where his characters are outsiders), it develops into different worlds where these distinctions are upset. This has been used to dismiss Burroughs’ fantastical depictions as irrelevant, or limited to reality and genre depictions, however, I will argue that in *The Wild Boys* we see a continuation of the various implications of sexual identity, where the ideas of sameness and difference, reality and representation, are not opposite, but increasingly difficult to separate.

*The Wild Boys* is divided into eighteen chapters, five of which are titled “The Penny Arcade Peep Show.” In one of the peep show chapters, we learn that the character Audrey visits a peep show and takes notes of how the four screens present various scenes “according to an underlying pattern” (WB 40), which are the so-called “blue movies.” The underlying pattern, which structures the cinematic set-up, is numerous instances of portraying sexuality through imagery and themes. These movies are directed by pornographer The Great Slashtubitch, where Burroughs is parodying Ernst Lubitsch (Murphy, *Wising* 91), known for “The Lubitsch Touch”:

Ernst would use Max Reinhardt’s blending of script, setting, and performance even on material generally thought too insubstantial to warrant such painstaking care. The result would be a foundation of grave, methodical intent supporting a blithe, carefree, beautifully textured surface structure. In time, this construct would be come to be known as “The Lubitsch Touch.” (Eyman 85)

This use of such surface structure, and creative imprint, is vividly described in “The Miracle of the Rose,” where the setting is reflected in the depiction of the characters’ bodies. In the previous chapters, I have dealt mostly with established identity categories and naming. Derrida has been criticized for “reducing everything to language, which is to say signification, ‘meaning’ and its absence” by “failing to see discourse as production” (Nealon 161;

Grossman qtd. in Nealon 161). Jones Irwin, however, argues that the understanding of deconstruction as predominantly exhorting “an affinity with discourse (understood exclusively as ‘theory’)” by being identified as its opposition does not recognize Derrida’s attention to the “non-discursive, visual, spatial or performative dimensions of embodiment and sexuality” (Irwin 13). In “The Miracle of the Rose” chapter, Burroughs uses the cinematic references to depict embodiment of sexuality through visual, spatial and performative dimensions, which expands the contextualization of identity and representation. The imagery in “The Miracle of the Rose” equates the body and its surroundings, seemingly allowing the very outlines of our bodies to be erased, which could be read as an escape from the separation of the self and the other, the body and our existence. However, it can be argued that the escape is “deferred in the quest for and consolidation of form” (Irwin 19), emblematic in pursuit of cohesive imagery, and the sexual body. While the sexual body arguably “taking possession of itself” (Irwin 18) through erotic ecstasy and the conflation of the body and the mind, it nevertheless suffers the violence of sameness; the attempt to avoid alienation through cohesive signs.

The first part of this chapter is a linear narrative that takes place in the desert, where the narrator is accompanied by two guides: Ali, who is described as “a Berber lad with bright blue eyes and yellow hair a wolfish Pan face unreadable as the sky,” and Farja “of a dusky rose complexion with long lashes straight black hair gums bright red color” (WB 71). They reach a deserted city in the desert, where nature has taken over what people at one time created: “Like so many so-called deserts it is far from being a desert [...] cracked and broken weeds growing through houses and villas all empty overgrown with vines the scent of flowers always heavier in the air like a funeral parlor and no sign of life in the ruined court yards empty hotels and cafés” (71–2). In what would be expected to be a barren place, dried up by the lack of water, is instead a setting that juxtaposes the carcasses of social constructions and the virility of nature. “The Lubitsch Touch” is shown through the ubiquity of roses: the smell, their complexion, the setting, and their bodies. Ali, Farja, and the narrator reach the rose room, covered by rose wallpaper and rose petals on the ground, whereupon Ali gets excited and plays the flute, like the aforementioned mythological creature Pan, and whispers a word to Farja. The word is not written, as the narrator cannot hear what is being said. In the second section of the chapter, the script describes this as “*The Proposition*: a ruined wall with rose paper the bed. Ali points to the bed. Farja stands there sullen eyes downcast long lashes” (74), and “*The Agreement*: Farja looks at the bed blushing to his bare feet” (75–6).

The simple word makes Farja blush, and they both undress, their bodies translucent, mirroring the rose color of the room and the sepia color of old film. The omission of the operative word, encourages attention to what happens between the lines, and the ubiquity of representation of the roses that encourages identification and sameness in the film: “Like all so-called boy lay down with his knees up gasping late afternoons deserted streets slow pressure of semen rectal smell of flowers two naked bodies bathed in smoky rose of the dying sun phantom bed from an old movie” (73). The sex scene that follows paints the two characters as an extension of the rose room:

Both phalluses stiffened to the blood drums and throbbed erect. On the tip of each phallus a pearl of lubricant squeezed out. [...] The sepia fumes cleared and Farja’s rectum was quivering breathing rose of flesh. With a quick movement Ali stepped over the bed stand and kneeled in front of the rose breathing deeply his lips swollen with blood. The rose pulled his loins forward and breathed his phallus in. Red fumes enveloped the two bodies. A scream of roses burst from the tumescent lips roses growing in flesh tearing thorns of delight intertwined their quivering bodies crushed them together writhing gasping choking in an agony of roses sharp reek of sperm. (WB 73)

The Lubitsch Touch is ubiquitous in the shape of roses, which envelop all the senses. The result is a synchronization of their bodies, which alludes to symbiosis. As stated earlier in the novel: “Red fumes envelope the *two bodies* (47), and repeated in this scene as “crush[ing] them together” (73). This physical factor implies that symbiosis does not occur without some form of violence to the being; that the depiction of sameness is no less violent than that of otherness. The silence in this scene shows that lack of words spoken does not diminish the violent effect. As the adjectives move from the setting to their bodies, and is replicated in the erotic sensations, there is an embodiment of sexuality coerced by the all-encompassing Lubitsch Touch.

In the chapter, this scene is juxtaposed with depictions of Mayan slavery, where the sex scene is replicated and controlled by monks: “The Monk is wrapping flesh sheets around the two skeletons. Two youths have been formed. Mouth rectum and penis sealed” (75); “with a crystal rod he rubs a drop on the lips. Where the fluid touches nitrous fumes arise sepia orange dusky rose. The lips part rectum quivers phallus spurts. The youth is breathing” (75). As we see here, by perpetuating and constructing sameness and symbiosis (a factor of co-existence of which Burroughs was skeptical), the results is an equally controlling factor that effaces the multiplicity of being. The objectification of Ali and Farja is created and depicted

from multiple sources: from four different film projections, the Mayan slavery scene, the narrator's observation, the setting, and the use of colors in the scene, not isolated to one source.

The narrator is also depicted as a reader in the novel: "I turn the page each picture framed in roses," and a spectator: "my flesh : : : I could : : : the film breaks : : : jerky silent film : : : look at the fading body : : : I looked about nineteen. 'But not that one word?'" (74). The breakdown of reality and media representation as we see here necessitates a distinction of the term simulacrum. Baudrillard's definition of simulacrum posits that a copy has no original, and simulation dominates the discussion: "Simulation" [...] stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (Baudrillard 6). Derrida's reading of simulacrum, however, provides a helpful distinction that can moderate the criticism of Burroughs' work as fantastical and merely detached from, or subversive of, reality, and therefore irrelevant: "The 'I' is the name of the full force of writing which, in one blow [*d'un coup*], triggers off the tale and keeps it in progress, but it is above all the simulacrum—and that simulacrum must be understood as a force—of an identity that is ceaselessly dislocated, displaced, thrown outside itself, precisely by this kind of writing by force" (*Dissemination* 358). Rather than being an inversion of original and copy, simulacrum displaces the "conceptual identities" (*Dissemination* 107) of which we name the inverted meaning. As Murphy states, Derrida's reading of simulacrum emphasizes that: "The logic of the simulacrum does not invert the relation between original and copy, thus making the copy primary [...] but rather inverts or suspends the judgment between copy and simulacrum that validates the former and condemns the latter" (Murphy, *Wising* 41). With this in mind, representation does not rely simply on external controlling factors, from which we can escape, but how we recognize these factors of visual and textual representation is in turn indebted to what we can name.

In "The Miracle of the Rose," and elsewhere in the novel, the sex scenes depict embodiment of sexuality through multiple sources. The spatial, temporal and performative aspects elucidate the force of contextualization and setting, through the multiple manifestations of the rose image. The construction of reality is not based on what is true and what is artificial, but how depictions are utilized and constructed. The sex act: "He heard John

unscrew the jar then felt the greased finger slide up him. He gasped and threw his head back... ‘You ever been rosed, Audrey?’ . . . Thumbs prying his buttocks apart as John squirmed forward” (80); the flower and color: “Red bed cover sprinkled with rose petals” (67); the referential: “I turn the page each picture framed in roses” (74); the body: “An Indian boy with rose-colored flesh” (44). The simulacrum of the “blue movies” suspends and defers the possibility of isolating representations of sexuality.

Ann Douglas writes that Burroughs regarded homosexuality as “inherently subversive of the status quo” (“Punching a Hole in the Big Lie” xvii). However, it is important to note that the status quo is arguably not heterosexuality *per se*, but the unstable power relations that it tends to form between men and women. Murphy suggests that “homosexuality is not an inherently revolutionary form of desire but an ambiguous one that can fit into both radical and reactionary political groups. [...] [H]omosexuality is only revolutionary when it escapes the model of normative heterosexual love, which constructs the self as a subject by reducing the loved Other to an object” (Murphy, *Wising* 159). The latter part of novel *The Wild Boys*, the titular group escapes from such a model by largely attacking all systems: “We intend to march the police machine everywhere. We intend to destroy the police machine and all its records. We intend to destroy all dogmatic verbal systems. The family unit and its cancerous expansion into tribes, countries, nations we will eradicate at its vegetable roots” (139–140). Their agenda, however, is not voiced directly by the group, but seemingly from other established characters, leaving them simply denouncing power. All forms of relationships are referred to as “talks,” implying that repetition of pre-programmed names, as I have discussed in chapter one of this thesis, is inevitable: “We don’t want to hear any more family talk, mother talk, father talk, cop talk, priest talk, country talk *or* party talk. To put it country simple we have heard enough bullshit” (139–140). Interestingly, the group avoids this act of ventriloquism, as their agenda is named through other characters, thereby being ventriloquists for the group. There is no affirmation from the Wild Boys themselves.

Furthermore, their transition from social constructs and human limits is primarily achieved through dismantling the normal form of reproduction, between man and woman. Instead they perform masturbatory acts that result in offspring called Zimbus, and also, through sexual acts resurrecting boys who have previously died. The chapter calls for suspension of gendered societies and the possibility of reawakening the dead, as the novel is *A Book of the Dead*. This happens because they transcend the separation between humans and animals: “Each group developed skills and knowledge until it evolved into humanoid

subspecies. One of the more spectacular units is the dreaded Warrior Ants made up of boys who have lost both hands in battle” (147). Even as Burroughs writes out the extreme possibility of a complete homoerotic existence, he avoids using ‘human’ as a noun. Bataille writes that human life cannot escape from a continuous evaluation of the subjective and the objective:

With human life we are fairly and squarely inside subjective experience. The objective elements we perceive are finally reduced to their subjective terms. I believe that the transitions from this continuity to continuity in eroticism are what they are because of the knowledge of death that from the words go connects the rupture of discontinuity and the consequent glide toward a possible continuity with death. (*Eroticism* 103–4)

Humans cannot escape the internalization of their surroundings into prospective identities, and Burroughs avoids this inevitability not just by not giving the Wild Boys a voice, but by dismantling the barriers of being. This rift in human existence is accompanied by their sexual activity: ”The first obvious thing about eroticism is the way that an ordered, parsimonious and shuttered reality is shaken by a plethoric disorder. Animal sexuality brings out the same plethoric disorder but no barrier of resistance is raised against it” (*Eroticism* 104). Similarly, the Wild Boys have no barriers, and due to their reproductive abilities through masturbation, they are not dependent on the co-operation of others to sustain their group (*WB* 160). As Derrida’s reading of Genet’s silent characters, we see that the interchangeable factor is equated with letters on a page, the Wild Boys formation to infinity: “[They] stand up straight, resembling each other and substituting for another in silence like letters on the page, one in place of another, one counting for another” (Derrida, *Glas* 38). Substituting is the operative word, as the Wild Boys can, by their constant movement and shifting, offer only one thing: continuous deferral of locating power structures.

### **4.3 The Articulated and Women**

The ways that the self and the other are constructed are, as we have seen, a prominent feature in Burroughs’ writing. The prefixes (homo/hetero) of sexuality, however, do not necessarily equate sameness and difference, as sexuality is inscribed in multiple ways. Burroughs’ fiction features very few women, and due to the dominating homosexual theme that is not surprising. Although there have been attempts to denounce his work as misogynist, Murphy has

meticulously shown that most examples are at best taken out of context, and at the worst been statements wrongfully attributed to Burroughs (Murphy, *Wising* 10–14):

Burroughs has never demanded the subordination of the feminine to the masculine [here: women and men], as many heterosexual male chauvinists have; he has argued, rather, for the total separation of the masculine from the feminine, as befits his theory that men and women are actually separate species that cannot be united under the rubric of an expanded, and therefore abstracted, definition of ‘humanity.’ (147)

‘Human,’ as shown in the second chapter of this thesis, is not something Burroughs regards as a noun describing essentialist traits. That is not to say he did not like women, or did not have any women friends (the shooting of his wife has been covered in many works, and I will leave that to biographers), or did not regard them as human, rather that the noun ‘human’ does not really say anything, and should be avoided. Although women are far in between in his writing, *Cities of the Red Night* is a notable exception.

A breeding-scene is orchestrated to ensure longevity of the revolutionary regime of the Articulated. Firstly, the unusual inclusion of a woman’s point of view warrants a closer look at this section. Secondly, critics such as Murphy have, perhaps with good intentions, interpreted the unusual scene as the sexes working together. I will argue that Murphy attributes strategy to the body of women, and the identity of the sexes, rather than recognizing it as a purely strategic move which does not so easily transfer to an overarching conclusion. *The Cities of the Red Night* is an ambitious work that incorporates totalitarian regimes, ritualized death, sexually transmitted diseases, and reconstruction of social order through a mixture of genres. However, I will focus on the part that I believe has been blatantly misconstrued in criticism.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, attention to the various ways that Burroughs destabilizes identity in his works makes political and/or ideological readings difficult. That is not to say that he was not in any way political, rather that his writings problematize political and ideological rhetoric perpetrating essentialist paradigms. Burroughs’ general distrust of ideology plays out in *Cities of the Red Night* and the story about the pirate collective The Articulated, where characters are in opposition to oppressive regimes. However, their opposition is not confined to institutions and government, but extends to an all-encompassing notion of power, including essentialist values that determine whether or not a person is fulfilling their role in life. The Articulated practices true freedom meaning: “Your right to live

where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree” (*CRN* xv), exemplified by the new utopian social organization set forth by Captain Mission. The laws are arguably liberating, such as “Article Five: No man may interfere with the sexual practices of another or force any sexual act on another against his or her will” (187). They could have continued their “lawless” existence at sea, however, they do not only want this option for themselves, but to extend it to other societies, so that not only will this be a lifestyle option, but one that is protected through acceptance and naturalization of all lifestyle choices.

To ensure longevity of the cause, however, the men are required to participate in a mating ritual with “a number of women [...] who have come for the purpose of becoming impregnated” (101). Burroughs’ general skepticism of heterosexual co-existence is shown in this novel in the way that procreation is depicted, but as enforced, dictated and overseen. Even ‘true freedom’ as posited by the articles, is to be regarded with skepticism. The reorganization of a utopian vision that we see in the introductory chapter (xiv), should not be confused with actual political vision on Burroughs’ part. In *The Western Lands*, Burroughs writes: “Writing, if it is anything, is an act of warning” (*WL* 213). Performance by script, as we have seen earlier in this thesis, will always adhere to notions of essentialism, in that actions are provoked by identification to specific categories. Throughout the *Red Night* trilogy, the characters are constantly writing their versions of history, and being written by it.

The chapter “Mother Is the Best Bet” depicts a breeding scene that involves all the supporters of the Articles, except from those who are married. Here, the reader is made aware of a woman’s perspective in the process: “I am a sorceress and a warrior. I do not relish being treated as a breeding animal. Would this occur to Skipper Nordenholz? No force, he says, has been applied—but I am forced by my circumstances, cast up here without a peso, and by my Indian blood which compels me to side with all enemies of Spain” (111). By including a woman’s private thoughts about this event, they are no longer silent characters for the reader; however, they are still silent for the leaders of the commune. These thoughts are of no interest to the Captains, or to the longevity of the communes. They are reduced to silence to serve the greater cause.

Murphy reads Burroughs’ inclusion of women in this chapter, both as sexual participants, and having a voice through the aforementioned paragraph as positive: “The two sexes demonstrate, for the first time in Burroughs’ writing, that the sexes are not destined to be at war with each other, but can form alliances against a common enemy: irresponsible and coercive state and corporate power” (Murphy, *Wising* 184). Whether this is grounded in his

project of re-establishing political readings of Burroughs' works, or to open up the novel for women readers, it is still a disturbing conclusion. Spivak emphasizes the consistency and persistency needed for "looking into how truths are produced" (Spivak, "Bonding in Difference" 27). Arguably, Murphy's 'truth' here is produced by illusion of choice. Being "treated like a breeding animal" is not "forming alliance," but coercion based on the aforementioned essentialist values that require a person to fulfill a gendered role in life, here in the name of revolution. Furthermore, the 'truth' in the novel, where "my Indian blood which compels me to side with all enemies of Spain" (111), exposes that one's belonging, status and blood dictates what one should do with their life, a notion that Burroughs actively rejected in his personal life as well as in his novels, and boils down to perpetuating essentialist roles.

If we read "Mother Is the Best Bet" with a larger view of how power is enforced and maintained, that it transcends institutions and corporations (the latter of which Murphy eagerly attributes and centralizes control), we recognize that the scenes in the novel are not restricted to an activist ideology that questions institutionalized control, but also depicts the production of truths. The Iguana sisters let the character Clem Snide in on a "secret" when he asks for the author of the *Cities of the Red Night* text: "Changes, Mr. Snide, can only be effected by alterations in the *original*. The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the pre-recordings themselves. The copies can only repeat themselves word for word. *A virus is a copy*. You can pretty it up, cut it up, scramble it—it will reassemble in the same form" (166). In other words, the dismantlement of the "word-locks" that are a theme throughout Burroughs' writing must be addressed as way of reading, producing and using truths. Otherwise we are moving them around, without addressing the consequences.

Furthermore, the privacy of the woman's confession distinguishes a separation between private and official truths, although the former is also indebted to action based on automatic thinking: "As we produce the official explanations, we reproduce the official ideology, the structure of possibility of a knowledge whose effect is that very structure. Our circumscribed productivity cannot be dismissed as a mere keeping of records. We are part of the records we keep" (Spivak, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia" 108). To address critical approaches, the critic is responsible for the production and reproduction of consensus, and in a more Burroughsian manner: the records we keep are a part of us, describing us, and providing an illusion of choice.

Depictions of heterosexuality remain unfavorable in Burroughs' writing, but depictions of women evolve from being a mother's expectancy of compulsory heterosexuality in *Queer* to a more nuanced depiction of the consequences of finite identities in *Cities of the Red Night*. Depictions of heterosexuality and women (as Burroughs being homosexual, many critics have equated the two) should be attentively contextualized. The bodies of women and men are continuously inscribed with various factors that designate and attempt to stabilize choices, and the equation of body and rhetoric has dire consequences.

The 'mutual space,' whether occupied by two men or man and woman fighting for the same goal, is problematic when it does not stand as a conclusion, but used as a point of view in the novels. The notion of a 'mutual space' does not in itself, by proclaiming that it is found and inhabited, neutralize difference or become a democratic opening of active and passive positions. The tension that Bataille emphasizes, as a violent undercurrent problematizing these positions, occur between emotional and physical eroticism, and the establishment of the social being. In other words, destabilization does not occur by eradicating juxtapositions and proclaim sameness. Through desire, obsession, and the sexual body, the urge for continuity create tension within this problematic, and one should not dismiss the notion of continuity for the sake of disruption. Rather, the idea of essentialism proclaimed through words, such as mutual space, sameness, and continuity, can be adapted as sites of study rather than being isolated and archived as conclusions.

Sex scenes and depictions of sexuality are not confined to the novels I have examined in this chapter, but a ubiquitous theme in Burroughs' authorship. However, these novels challenge ways of reading sexuality, within the themes of homosexuality and erotic desire. They also point to some key problematizations of what happens to one's establishment of self within this so-called mutual space. While the immediate textual point of *Queer* is the denomination of "queer" as a title, a theme, and how it stands vis-à-vis other categories of the homosexual subculture, such as "fag" and "queen," we can also recognize that there is simultaneously a tension between establishing a sense of self, and connecting to the other in erotic encounters. Here, it is useful to look at the different sites that address sexuality, as the narrator of the novel does not necessarily gain control over himself by rejecting categories of sexual identity. The mirroring that is claimed to happen in *Queer*, and used to read Lee as merely narcissistic, is destabilized when the text conjures multiple situations of the violent aspect of both losing and attempting to maintain a sense of self.

The problematic of the mirror as an analogy appear again in *The Wild Boys* and *Cities of the Red Night*. I chose Genet's re-appropriation of mirroring as a factor that shows the doubling of things, thereby functioning as a kaleidoscope rather than a one-way reflection. There are multiple references to projection and script in Burroughs' "The Miracle of the Rose" as well as throughout the novel. Here, the controlling factor is depicted "off-screen," while nevertheless manifesting in the silent sex scenes. The erotic aspect of the films are not located to stable referents, or unified in one mode of representation; even the medium of the film is made for viewing and the underlying structures influences what we see, while simultaneously depends on being seen to work.

While Burroughs himself is a main referent for critics to read sexuality in his novels, transferring the apparent solidity of the author to the texts is difficult. Whether self-representation was intended or not, unifying the characters as stable voices consequently minimizes the number of sites of which sexuality is portrayed and problematized.

## 5 Conclusion

*This violence is a calm that disturbs you.*  
—(Genet, *The Thief's Journal* 14)

The attention towards Burroughs' name and persona has established an image of a countercultural icon, whereupon his novels have become meta-narratives of opposition and revolt. This presents a possible contradiction: that the opposition towards totalization can itself be established as a localized and transcendental signified. Derrida writes that domains of objectivity also present an elucidation of meaning "to account for it from within a historical totality, that is, from within a factual totality, a finite totality all of whose manifestations and cultural productions are structurally solidary and coherent, and are all regulated by the same function, by the same finite unity of a total subjectivity" (*Writing and Difference* 160). Cultural opposition does not function as dispersal of universal truths *in and by itself*, but inhabits the structures it wishes to expose and dismantle. In other words, destabilization of identity concepts cannot *escape* essentialism. However, if we examine predicates that facilitate how we structure our sense of self and the other, recognition and alienation, we illuminate the constant production of cohesion and desire for meaning.

In *Junky* and *Queer*, Burroughs upsets mainstream culture by giving socially deviant characters the main roles in his narrative. However, this is not what upsets the manifestation of identity categories. Criticism, even in the postmodern vein, attempts to justify *Junky's* significance by calling it a documentary, an objective anthropological study of the movements of the criminal underground, or even moral as it unveils the degradation of addiction. Subsequently, the narrator is established as a "finite unity" that (rather than *who*) provides this seemingly objective point of view. The cohesive focal point is conflated with the meaning of the narrative. However, the character inscriptions in both *Junky* and *Queer* play with different roles, which destabilize the notion of identity as 'pure presence' through juxtaposition of opposites and the instability of identifying terms.

An interesting factor is how Burroughs uses the apparently impossible medical juxtaposition "junk-sick," and the problematic identity category as reflected in "being an addict," to show how moral and judicial discourses are dependent on stable subjects to produce essential truths about a situation or identity. Although the novel situates the characters *outside* normative culture, they do not escape language structures. My use of

Burroughs' name in this thesis (and the value it designates in *Burroughs incorporates* and *Burroughs inscribes*) addresses the problem of inscriptions. The repetition of the author's name shows that a source does not necessarily produce cohesion. Although one attempts to locate a center of inscription, it "spill[s] off the page in all directions" (NL 298). While Burroughs' name appears to be a source, we see that the relationship between the author's theories and the characters do not necessarily create cohesive identities in the characters as representative of meaning. In other words, his novels problematize the use of characters as platforms of generators of meaning, and truth. The dissemination of identity shows the limits of essentialist rhetoric, and the impossibility of pure self-representation. The bias that is presented in these novels lies in how we all use language to classify and segregate and represent. The author cannot, even by his own disavowal of essentialism, escape these structures. I apply this to the discussion of unreliability as *textual intention*. In Burroughs writing, this discussion is modified to incorporate concepts that we perceive as stable and use to expose unreliability, rather than being an exercise in 'exposing the narrator.' Burroughs' ability to utilize how we make assumptions and see traits as representative of identity categories destabilizes both the characters and the role of the writer.

The conflation of name and function plays with essentialism as centralization and validation of qualities in the characters. The Burroughsian nomenclature is composed by epithets, cognomens, and reiteration of names, and questions the authority of identity inscription and allows for cognitive dissonance. Metonymic contractions, as an effect of naming, show how a trait becomes decisive for the character's identity. This results in physical mutilation and grotesque paragraphs. However, cognitive dissonance, which occurs when the conflation of name and function is *not quite right*, or alludes to opposite qualities, shows another side of Burroughs' ability to write the grotesque. As the nomenclature does not merely reverse the hierarchy of signification or claim it artificial, it blurs the presupposed divisive lines between text and reading, being and context. Textual and contextual fragmentation produces points of intersection where reiteration and production of meaning come into play.

Character presence is depicted through juxtaposition of opposites, both of traits and contexts. Burroughs' style incorporates the volatility imbedded in the being. This is important to note, as it emphasizes that the proclamation of 'sameness' or 'mutual space' does not eradicate tension between people, or provide a fixed source of which to make comparisons. Burroughs' treatment of sexuality in his novels depicts this tension between the desire to be

‘whole,’ and connect to other people. The sites of ‘sameness’ and ‘mutual space’ are unstable and volatile, rather than harmonious results of Burroughs’ focus on homoerotic and homosexual themes. The oscillation of the characters’ ability to create a sense of ‘self’ and ‘the other’ problematizes ideas of reading sexuality as identity with the uneasy sphere of Bataillean eroticism. What we can derive from the aforementioned volatile depictions is that the use of ‘mirroring’ to explain erotic desire centralizes infatuation and attraction in an undivided self, whereas Burroughs’ prose depicts an inability, or the corruption of, proclaiming such as source.

Furthermore, Burroughs addresses the multiple sources of depicting sexual embodiment in *The Wild Boys*. While the sexual body, arguably “tak[es] possession of itself” (Irwin 18) through erotic ecstasy and the conflation of the body and the mind, it nevertheless suffers the violence of sameness; the attempt to avoid alienation through cohesive signs. This is emblematic in Burroughs’ use of the cinema, where the production of images elucidates the force of contextualization and setting, through the multiple manifestations of the rose image. Lastly, my examination of the notion of identity essentialism brought me to a socio-political site, where the proclamation of sameness and mutual space has produced critical claims of a possible ideological shift in Burroughs’ perception of cooperation and revolution. However, coercion based on performing one’s ‘essential’ identity, whether it is through being a man, a woman, or through blood, family, or politics, has dire consequences. It does make a difference in the story, which is important to note, and emphasizes the attention one has to give to the selections of source material and production of truths.

For Burroughs, the liability of our ability to create truths is the ignorance of its multiplicity and unavoidability: “We make truths. Nobody else makes it. There is no truth we don’t make” (qtd. in Douglas xxii). Burroughs’ deconstructive abilities as a writer are not confined to his cut-ups and play with signifiers, but challenge the sites we use to recognize and thematize, such as the author, counterculture, characterization, naming and sexuality. Burroughs’ uneasiness towards being classified shines through in his writing, and while his historical significance shows his rejection of political rhetoric and societal expectations of how to be a good citizen, he addresses the claim that “[t]he Beat movement was more a socio-political movement than a literary one,” with a parenthesis exhorting: “(What a crippled sentence. It should crawl away and die.)” (217). Comparably, the characters who are subjected to essentialist rhetoric become crippled, mutilated, or volatile beings. However, if we attempt to put the literary ‘I’ as a source, or center of purity from which all discourse or all

other identities are constructed, and argue that the surroundings lead to the mutilation of the 'I,' we are back to where we started. Constitution and appropriation of identity do not simply result in violence, but spring from violence.



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