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The Flight of the Junky: Existential Posthumanism and Immanent Life in Early Burroughs

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William Burroughs early book *Junky* is generally separated from his later experimental fiction. Stylistically it accords much more to realism than the postmodern aleatory method he later innovated. However, Burroughs' preoccupation with resisting all forms of subjectification, his disenchantment with bourgeois life and his simultaneous literal and tropic use of addiction as a form of flight from powers of normalization and conformity are strongly present in this early work. This paper explores *Junky* on three fronts. First, it shows the novel as an elaboration of a posthumanist existentialism by emphasizing the materiality of the body through Burroughs' explanation of the physiological mechanisms of addiction. Through this existentialist posthumanism, the novel critically responds to Sartrean existentialism, which was so fashionable at the time of Burroughs' writing, and repudiates the Jeffersonian idealization of the transcendental subject and its middle class figurations. The emphasis on the material body simultaneously challenges post-structuralist renderings of Burroughsian readings. This leads to a conception of strategies of flight from all forms of conformity by utilizing Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the Body without Organs and immanent Life. Junk is a vehicle of flight and self-affirmation, a means of highly individualized, libertarian modes of subjective deterritorialization. Addiction and habitual use are not mere uncontrolled thirsts, but forms of actualizing a wholly detached social and independent individual. But the danger of junk lies in its reterritorializing of the body through new assemblages of need and dependence, leading the protagonist to ultimately seek a different mode of escape. Junk illuminates our posthuman existential condition and leads Burroughs to seek new experimental forms of aesthetic expression.

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“The same goes for drugs: all melodramatics aside, what exactly do they protect us from, from what even worse scourge do they offer us an avenue of escape? (Could it be the brutalising effects of rationality, normative socialization and universal conditioning?)”

Jean Baudrillard, “Prophylaxis and Virulence”

Part I: Introduction

Early in William Burroughs’ first novel *Junky* (2003), the narrator, William Lee, stops by a friend’s home but is unexpectedly greeted by a woman named Mary. He describes the home in hard-boiled realist style: “The place looked like a chop-suey joint. There were black and red lacquered tables scattered around, black curtains covered the windows. A colored wheel had been painted on the ceiling with the little squares and triangles of different colors giving a mosaic effect” (18). The blunt observation of detail that hints at function, the emotionless delivery, speaks to a narrative performativity—Lee as voice-over to a film noir by Billy Wilder or Otto Preminger. Yet one page later, he describes Mary by totally departing from this realist detail: “There was something boneless about her, like a deep-sea creature. Her eyes were cold fish eyes that looked at you through a viscous medium she carried about with her. I could see those eyes in a shapeless, protoplasmic mass undulating over the dark sea floor” (19). This unusual metaphor, common enough in, say, Raymond Chandler, gives way to surreal imagery; laconic detail morphs to an hallucinatory conjuration as she is replaced by something utterly inhuman. Unlike Chandler, though, this is not simply a comparison. The referent temporarily becomes the subject. What’s interesting about this example is not the oddness of the association, but the literalizing of it. That is, the surrealness is not one which evokes unconscious associations or offers a psychological reality; rather, Mary’s eyes *are* this inhuman thing and point to something beyond a subjectivity organized by human impulses and drives. She is, briefly, not human but something else.

This study will focus on what one might call Burroughs’ materialist posthumanism and will offer an alternative to the idealist posthumanism that is generated through the poststructuralist renderings of Burroughs’ work, most notably seen in Robin Lynderberg’s *Word Cultures* (1987) but also most recently in Michael Sean Bolton’s *Mosaic of Juxtaposition* (2014). Posthumanism, a term to be developed over the course of this study in a specific sense, here refers to a conceptualization specific to Burroughs’ early efforts in *Junky* to move past certain notions of subjectivity that are rooted in anthropocentricity; addiction is Burroughs’ vehicle to elaborate this de-anthropocentric and materialist posthumanism. Therefore, posthumanism, despite some obvious

overlap, is not to be understood as anti-humanism, which has recently been the subject of two works on Burroughs by Guy Stevenson (2020) and Véronique Lane (2017). They generally focus on humanism as equivalent to the positive potential of human perfectibility as understood through the Enlightenment project and its emphasis on reason; anti-humanism, then, is how they see Burroughs challenging this optimism or faith in human progress.¹ While notions of subjectivity and humanity as a rational agent have an indirect relationship to my interests here, my goal is to locate in his first novel an abiding interest in the raw materiality of the body and the arbitrariness of the subject, not as a socially constructed entity but as a carnal object which is subject to the controls of substance and chemical—material interactions that defy or act despite the pervasive cultural forces that surround this material. Indeed, what I would call Burroughs' radical libertarianism and anti-conformity, his disruption of power and subversion of authority, are paradoxically located in addiction as concrete and real, not only metaphorical. His posthuman denial of the subject which grounds his libertarian politics is physiological and chemical.

Posthumanism is conceived rather narrowly for the purposes of this study. The term itself is of course subject to considerable debate, but I use it here not to argue for a broad or comprehensive theory along the lines of Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti, Stefan Herbrechter or Francesca Ferrando.² Rather, I am interested in Burroughs' particular formulation of a radical materialism that I see as a forerunner to current trends of speculative realism, in particular, assemblage theory³ and, to some degree, object-oriented ontology.⁴ Indeed, assemblage theory itself traces its lineage directly to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, both of whom play prominently in my reading of *Junky* as an expression of experimental escape, both as an activity of drug use and a literary strategy. The posthumanism that I aim to elucidate here has to do with what Graham Harman has called the problem of "human access." As Steven Shaviro explains it: "It gives a privileged position to human subjectivity or to human understanding, as if the world's very existence somehow depended upon our ability to know it and represent it" (280).

1 For instance, Stevenson notes that Burroughs "distrusted ideals and plans for collective improvement" or "ideals purporting to champion the freedom of the individual" (117); in addition, Burroughs reacted "against the perceived vanity in assuming that people—and the subjective self—can be rationally, decisively virtuous" (195).

2 There are a variety of interests in this unwieldy term, posthumanism: philosophical posthumanism, cultural posthumanism, antihumanism, transhumanism, animal studies, technology studies (particularly with issues concerning artificial intelligence), disability studies, environmental studies and ecotheory, to name some of the areas of interest.

3 See, for instance, any of Manuel DeLanda's books, but in particular *Assemblage Theory* or Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter*.

4 There are many figures associated with object-oriented ontology, but perhaps its greatest champion is Graham Harman. In particular, see *Object-Oriented Ontology, A New Theory of Everything*. Another seminal work is *The Democracy of Objects* by Levi Bryant. For a more comprehensive selection of the general trend toward speculative realism, which includes assemblage theory, see *The Speculative Turn, Continental Materialism and Realism*.

Correlationism, as Quentin Meillassoux calls this view,⁵ presumes that ontology can only be understood filtered through thinking—that is, human cognition—and thereby places human existence at the heart of being. Burroughs, in line with these other thinkers, I will argue, rejects correlationism and, as noted above, the post-structuralist variant of poshumanism that, in various iterations, proclaims there is no human subject except as constructed through language, discourse, power, semiotic systems, etc., each of which subordinates being in-itself, the raw materiality of the world absent the human presence, to a *tabula rasa* awaiting human agency or human socio-linguistic structures to mark it. Posthumanism in this study, then, refers to a particular facet of the more general theories available, aligns closely with Deleuzian ontology, and is used as an interpretive strategy to account for Burroughs' clear interest in how addiction points to brute matter as a generator of human subjectivity irrespective of human will or consciousness while simultaneously pointing to strategies of escape from coerced forms of subjectivity.

One might see in Burroughs' early effort the same suspicion of the human that Rosi Braidotti (2013) voices: "The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. The human norm stands for normality, normalcy and normativity. It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as *the* human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity" (26, italics in the original). I will argue that Burroughs similarly eschews this anthropocentric norming in *Junky* on three broad fronts. He explicitly attacks the conservative post-World War II iteration of the liberal democratic subject—what I will call the Jeffersonian subject, where Jefferson stands as a proper noun designating the legal entity that guides in a particular fashion this post-War male, white subject who aspires to validate that subjectivity with ownership of property. In addition, Burroughs tacitly confronts the intellectual challenge to that American view of the subject argued by Jean-Paul Sartre, whose quick rise to intellectual stardom around the time of this book's authoring and publication made his articulation of an existential humanism quite influential. Finally, Burroughs poses a challenge to poststructuralist accounts of the body and the material world as primarily reducible to language or text. Burroughs notes a commonality in the avowedly humanist claims of the first two, even if their politics are fundamentally antagonistic. He also makes problematic the presumed posthumanism of poststructuralism, which, broadly speaking, sees subjects and bodies as socially

5 See Meillassoux's *After Finitude*.

constructed nodal points of language or power, genealogically mutated from its previous humanist conceptualization, but still retaining in their own ways a privileging of human-centeredness via culture and language. The nascent posthumanism in *Junky* is not a coherent ideological position, but an experimental praxis of seeking escape from structures of control, be they socio-political powers, coercive cultural forces, or aesthetic constraints on style and form. But this experimental praxis emphasizes an autonomous materialist ontology through addiction, thereby exposing the problematic humanist anthropocentrism, whether explicit, as in Jefferson and Sartre, or implicit, as in much post-structuralism.

Part II: From Textual Surfaces to Material Bodies

Much has been made, of course, of William Burroughs' experimental techniques in challenging modes of control, whether they be socio-economic, bio-political or linguistic. His cut-up or fold-in methods are generally seen as a means of releasing authorial control over the content of a work, thereby making interpretation and meaning contingent upon an aleatory text, what Micheal Sean Bolton has recently called "a mosaic of juxtaposition." This built-in randomness increases the possible signifying connections that might be derived within a given novel, intra- and intertextually, and in relation to the historical circumstances in which the text is read by a particular reader. It points the way to a simultaneous subversion of imposed meanings and an empowering of the reader in generating textual significance. As Bolton further explains, "Burroughs makes explicit the role of the text as a technology with which the reader interfaces and interacts. By altering the reader's position in relation to the text from that of observer to participant-observer, Burroughs' narratives transform readers' self-perceptions from the body-bound situation of liberal humanist subjects to the decentered and dispersed but integrated condition of posthuman subjects" (10). Burroughs texts become a kind of Heraclitean flux—both the text itself and the reader are never the same each time one dips one's readerly toe in. Such renderings of Burroughs writing are generally, and quite justifiably, poststructuralist and/or postmodernist in its orientation: they see the play of surfaces in an endless hall of textual mirrors; they note how Burroughs subverts through deconstructive tactics dominant narratives; and they expose the micro-physics of power in Burroughs' texts and subjects. In this view, Burroughs asserts an anarchic challenge to a dominant (particularly Cold War) reality with its value norms, pressures for social conformity and presuppositions of nationalist identity formations. Finally, his novels highlight the control society, particularly through the complex trope of addiction. Jason Morelyle (2004), for instance, notes that "as a figuration of power, addiction provides a means of understanding those *relations* of power that make

‘possible’ the range of ethics, knowledges, actions, and experiences that mold the field of relationships that circumscribes the process of subject formation, a procedure that points to the potential development of new forms of subjectivity” (Morelyle, 82-83, italics in original). In short, Burroughs unorthodox style and conception of literature is revolutionary without being a manifesto—what Timothy S. Murphy (1997) calls amodern: Burroughs “accepts the failure of modernist ends...and means..., without taking the additional step of homogenizing all remaining difference into some version of Ferdinand de Saussure’s negatively defined linguistic paradigm” (2). Hence, the endless possibilities of his experimental style act as a “disengaging [of] language and world...as metacritique,” a kind of assault on positionality of any sort, but particularly anything official, mainstream or ideologically presupposed (Walsh 2004, 70).

Burroughs’ first novel, *Junky*, is often left out of this discussion because of its seeming non-experimental, straightforward style. This early novel is seen as one setting up his later discoveries of methodology, beginning of course with *Naked Lunch*. And while some have noted this omission, it nonetheless remains an outlier of scholarly discussion in Burroughs studies. *Junky*, however, is curious in that it cannot so easily be characterized as straight-forward. As Oliver Harris (2003) points out: “It’s like reading two books simultaneously, one atypically straight, the other characteristically twisted. This is its paradoxical situation, its destiny...” (xi). Harris goes on to argue that “*Junky* is in embryonic form an exploratory novel, an *experimental* text, like all those Burroughs would write after it...” (Harris, xviii, italics in original). If the cut-up method or any other mode of experimental writing Burroughs used is the measure of experimentation, then certainly one can see why *Junky* appears straightforward and realist. And yet, one finds in the novel what might be described as a desultory plot, where linearity of action, cause and effect, gives way to somewhat loosely organized vignettes; characters come and go in likewise desultory fashion; the narrator is a fictional variation of Burroughs named William Lee who is at once an objective reporter and recorder of the underworld he inhabits, based on Burroughs own life, and a manipulator of information that points to the fictionality of this objective stance. For example, his journalistic style would seem to point to the improbable, making questionable that reporting, when he notes that “There is a type of person occasionally seen in...neighborhoods who has connections with junk” whose “place of origin is the Near East, probably Egypt” (110). Yet Lee presents this type in detail: “He has a large straight nose. His lips are thin and purple-blue like the lips of a penis” (110). This presents in the manner of reportage a culturally dubious caricature, tinged with personal bias. We also are only made aware that our narrator is married with children midway through the novel in an unobtrusive and even evasive manner; their surprising appearance and disappearance from the

narrative suggests facts are being hidden for some unknown reason. Even the realist narration and the hard-boiled reporting tone, as the opening example illustrates, is intruded upon by surrealist descriptions.

While it is tempting to note a nascent exploration for what would later be identifiable poststructuralist tactical and critical operations in his experimental style in *Junky*—a writer already beginning his authorial efforts in the vein of dismantling the text and exposing the indeterminacies of language, structure, cultural signifiers, etc.—such interpretive lenses also misrecognize a key concern of the novel: namely, the sheer materiality of the addiction that Lee so relentlessly documents and the consequences of such a focus. Poststructuralist interpretations observe the textual play and surface operations of discursive regimes, epistemological uncertainties or power dynamics; but the tendency, as with most poststructuralist thought, is to see the material as a space of inscription or a surface of semiotic play. The body itself, despite the insistent focus on the abject: spontaneous orgasms, vomiting, cold sweats, DTs, or the documentation of the chemical interaction between drug and body—this body is often left out of critical commentary. The body is transformed into text. The idealist bent of poststructuralism, which converts the materiality of the world into a passive, inert surface upon which linguistic, discursive or nebulous ideological and cultural forces dazzle like so much prismatic reflection on a rippling ocean surface, tends to conceive of Burroughs' work along the same lines.

Robin Lydenberg (1987) also notes Burroughs' insistence on the abject with respect to the body, particularly digestion and procreation. But while she deconstructs the binary opposition between the visceral body, its fluid and unseemly excretions to the idealized wholeness of a body coded, marked and delineated by discourses of power, her opposition generally finds Burroughs' obsessions with the body as counter-inscriptions, excremental purgings of the word virus, and therefore excruciations of linguistic and discursive modes of control. She notes, for instance, "Although for Burroughs it is the machinery of power (language) which enters the body instead of the body which is fed into the power structure, his ultimate goals are identical with those of Foucault: to expose the anonymous and invisible forces which manipulate individual life" (136). The body is a tactical tool in Burroughs' writing. Burroughs, she argues, offers a counter-semiotics wherein what is privileged is the abject in contrast to the sanitizing idealizations of the body for the purposes of maintaining a discrete object of control through language: "If the power of the word depends on its invisibility we must make it visible, force it to take on the body we have cast off" (137). The word virus infects the body making it always-already linguistic; therefore, the carnal body, with its purgative excretions that confuse the clear boundaries of bodily subjectivity, becomes

a subversive language: “This extreme physicality...is part of Burroughs’ project to dissolve the body and exhaust the language parasite, to push linguistic strategy and physical sensation to their limits” (137). Not surprisingly, Lydenberg focuses primarily on the radical experimental books which aesthetically perform these radical counter-discourses of bodily semiotics.

As both Lydenberg and Bolton show, poststructuralist readings of Burroughs are *ex post facto* with respect to much of his work. At the time of its publication (which, as Oliver Harris documents in his introduction to *Junky*, is fraught with complications that serve the poststructuralist readings of Burroughs with much fodder, but will not concern us here), Burroughs was primarily concerned with a different kind of posthumanism than the poststructuralist variant that emphasizes textual surfaces: he articulates a posthumanism that casts into doubt the centrality of the human, indeed casts doubt on what “human” might even mean. He does so via the body *qua* body, absent of human perspective, not dependent on an anthropocentric imposition of meaning. The body, as expressed in *Junky*, is a conglomeration of autonomous material processes that escape signification but also casts radical doubt upon the notion of choice and freedom as grounding human exceptionalism. *Junky* develops this latter concern as a response to the intellectual fad of the day, Sartrean existentialism. In addition, by tacitly, if not explicitly, challenging the humanist proclamations of Sartre’s philosophy, he is also auguring a notion of flight from forces of American conformity by trying to, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s terms, make himself a Body without Organs. That is, he uses his body and drugs as a vehicle to dismantle the stranglehold of post-War pressures to aspire for middle-class conformity or be injected into burgeoning Cold War paranoia at the level of material and corporeal engagement. In this sense, he is also complicating the Jeffersonian ideal of the subject endowed with inalienable rights. In other words, Burroughs radically critiques the humanist basis that both Sartrean existentialism and Jeffersonian liberal democratic idealism tacitly share in common. In examining addiction, Burroughs “acknowledg[es] that [the human] is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” (Wolfe 2010, xxv). The posthumanism of *Junky* is an early rendering of rebellion against humanist presuppositions that are historically demarcated to this post-War moment, even as they pave the way for later conceptualizations.

For Burroughs, the material is an active milieu or what Jane Bennett (2010) calls a “vibrant matter,” namely “materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind” (10). Out of this dynamism of materiality, examined through drugs and

addictions, illusions of choice and subjectivity emerge like a semi-coherent distillation. *Junky* offers a view toward a world of matter which functions independently of human impositions, and is subversive precisely because the material cannot be contained. There are then two parallel tracks of Burroughs' early iterations of a posthumanism: on the one hand, he reorients Sartrean existentialism toward a posthumanism rather than, as Sartre explicitly states, a humanism predicated on radical freedom and choice. At the same time, and because both project a transcendental essence of the subject, though in markedly different ways, Burroughs also critiques the Jeffersonian free subject. On the other hand, Burroughs' embraces this posthumanism in order to make himself a Body without Organs or a fleeing "subject," an ungrounded body which/who subverts in an effort to detach from social expectations and conformist pressures via heroin, morphine, weed, alcohol and, ultimately, yage (ayahuasca). This effort to deterritorialize, to disentangle from all that the poststructuralists concern themselves with in the generation of a subject, effected through the body and chemical interaction, ends up ironically being the trap of a new territorialization, namely addiction. Thus, Burroughs points to the paradox of the material or what Christopher Breu (2014) calls "the insistence of the material": the material as a refusal of "full symbolic recuperation—in its contingency, obduracy, and recalcitrance yet also its vulnerability and fragility" (ix). Burroughs, then, is in opposition to humanism in its various guises: its American variant that depends on a transcendental notion of a free individual with all middle-class rights that are due that essence, the Sartrean brand of subjectivity predicated on a being reduced to and condemned to radical freedom, and the post-structuralist variant, which never removes the anthropocentric bias of signifying and signified meanings that map onto a material that forever recedes into obscurity as an amorphous space of inscription.

III. Existentialism is a Posthumanism

Junky was initially published in 1953 but begun as far back as 1949.⁶ This places it only 4 years after Jean-Paul Sartre's (in)famous lecture delivered at Club Maintenant in Paris (published a year later as *Existentialism is a Humanism* and translated into English in 1948). The lecture propelled the French philosopher to international stardom.⁷ Though a watered-down version of *Being and Nothingness* and later dismissed by Sartre himself, it nonetheless enjoyed massive appeal to the post-WWII generation, espousing radical

6 See Oliver Harris's Introduction to *Junky* for a complete history of the novel's complicated generation and publication history.

7 See Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre's preface to the 1966 French Edition reproduced in the 2007 Yale University Press English translation of Sartre's speech, edited by John Kukla.

freedom, universalizing humanity's capacity for self-definition and outlining an imperative of ethical responsibility divorced from theology. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) notes, "Existentialism stressed Humanist conscience as the source of both moral responsibility and political freedom" (19). Sartre's purpose is to show that moral responsibility is inescapably in the hands of each individual and that this responsibility is a function of irreducible freedom stemming from human subjectivity. My purpose is to contextualize *Junky* vis-à-vis Sartre's conception of humanism espoused here. This section, then, will explore how *Junky* directly challenges the assertion of a radical freedom predicated on a humanist ontology, despite Burroughs' own indubitable radical libertarianism. If Sartre wants to merge historical and material contingency to radical subjectivity and freedom, Burroughs cynically undermines this effort precisely in the pursuit of the freedom Sartre claims to be irreducible. In doing so, he hints at what I have called his posthumanism.

Sartre (2007) asserts that one must begin with individual experience to describe properly the factual content of existence and existential meaning. "Man," he says, is "unable to transcend human subjectivity" (24) and is intrinsically bound by the limits of the human perspective. Sartre clarifies this with three concepts that denote conditions of human existence (and not psychological states): anguish, forlornness and despair. Anguish refers to the irreducibility and inescapability of choice and consequently moral responsibility. I cannot avoid my "full and profound" responsibility in everything I do and I implicate all humanity in each choice (25) because I alone must make the choice and cannot do otherwise. If I lie to another or vote for a candidate, my choice tacitly suggests all ought to do likewise. That is, my choice confers a universal value upon the lie or the vote. But I have no assurance, nothing outside of me to confirm the righteousness or correctness of this choice, so I also exist in forlornness. I am alone with my choice and cannot ground it in a predetermined and fixed source. I can find no *a priori* ground upon which to confirm my eventual choice; consequently, it is in action that I confirm my choice, an instinct or feeling which compels me one way or the other to interpret my situation in such-and-such a manner. But this human dimension exists in a world to which I must comport myself. Despair refers to the fact that my choice is limited by the ensemble of probabilities before me and that even believing in a God doesn't change that fact, just as a God that commands me to act does not change the fact that I alone must decide to follow that commandment or not and that I cannot confirm absolutely the moral correctness of the act by appeal to this external source. Sartre concludes, "man is nothing but a series of enterprises, that he is the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute each enterprise" (38). I am the sum total of all choices I have made, I organize those choices into a coherent set of projects toward a future endeavor or goal, and I undertake those projects by hurling

myself toward a future to accomplish that project, all within the delimiting constraints of a world to which I must comport myself.

The humanism of Sartre's existentialism, then, is to place meaning and value strictly in the realm of human experience, wherein the physical world external to humanity is a material medium which constrains and delimits human action, defines its contours, in a strictly amoral and disinterested way. The world is not seen as dynamic and self-generating so much as an inert, mechanical vessel into which we are cast and thus is meaningful only in relation to an anthropocentrism. The human being, this peculiar kind of being that is aware of itself and fashions its own essence, is able to do so precisely because of its radical freedom or its choice as the condition of possibility of all action. The world is merely being-in-itself, but I am a being-for-itself, the ground of my own being, and a being-for-others, constituted by or subjected to the radical freedom of others. Being-in-itself, the external world, is inconsequential except in so far as I, in despair, see my limitations in it. I emit value and the brute facticity of the world reflects it back to me. One might say that Sartre is the last cry of the modernist: in an uncaring universe that everywhere marginalizes the previously assumed centrality of humanity, Sartre, like Camus, proclaims the dignified struggle against nothingness by asserting the radical freedom that nothingness sets into relief, which is subjectivity.

If Sartre calls existentialism a humanism, then Burroughs elaborates a posthuman existentialism. It is not only the obvious concern with addiction that would make Burroughs question the notion of choice as fundamental to human being-ness, but that for Burroughs what addiction reveals is in fact the existential condition of human being-ness as one irrevocably captured within structures of unfreedom; this is not to be understood as a deterministic entrapment, but as disinterested networks of material connection that passively delimit choice, as in Sartre's notion of despair, and simultaneously actively give rise to choice; that is, addiction points to a webwork of material and social entanglements that complicate radical freedom as the ground of action. In Ole Bjerg's (2008) words,

The craving drug user's relation to himself is not mediated by meaning. His Being is instead exclusively dictated by his condition as a physical body and this condition announces itself with such all-encompassing, immediate and compelling force that there is no room for meaningful interpretation. There is no room for the subject to transcend himself so to speak. (12)

On the one hand, what junk elucidates is the modulated and variegated forms in which the individual hurls herself toward a future through distinct layers of existential temporality that highlight how the dominant reality, the conformist pressures of post-

War America, for instance, structure and corrode human life at its core. On the other hand, Lee ceaselessly describes the cellular dynamic of addiction, that addiction takes place on a plane of cellular multiplicities that give rise to and steer choice from its physiological base toward its material need.

Burroughs formulates a tension between a humanist brand of freedom that operates by coercive forces geared toward lifelessness on the one hand, and the vital, creative need of addiction, which is organized toward life as growth, as ceaseless movement on the other. In doing so, Burroughs actively challenges the Jeffersonian ideal of the liberal democratic subject and, simultaneously, demonstrates a kinship of this principle with Sartre's essentializing of choice. He frames the issue of addiction so as to critique conformity, articulate a desire to escape from the American dream which forms clear demarcations on acceptability, and to promote junk as a life affirming activity. "Why does a man become a drug addict?" Lee is frequently asked (4); "You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction. Junk wins by default" (5). For Lee, it is precisely the expectation of motivation that is life-denying. Willpower has been corrupted to a kind of social-ideological determinism. The prologue sets up a biographical context for how Lee becomes an addict. He describes "the dullness of a Midwest suburb where all contact with life was shut out" (2). This operates in tandem with a line much later, when he declares, "Death is the absence of life. Wherever life withdraws, death and rot move in" (105). Thus, for Lee, it is precisely this idealized world of the sub-urban American middle class, its expectations and luxury, that is a form of rot, a degradation of life. Going to school "with the future solid citizens" (2), having "no compromise possible with the group" (2-3): these are life denying. "When you stop growing you start dying," Lee goes on to say. "An addict never stops growing...A user is in [a] continual state of shrinking and growing in his daily cycle of shot-need for shot completed" (5). The American dream-life strives for something static, to reach the frozen position of suburban property ownership where individuality is a simulacrum and one becomes a "future solid citizen": that is, white, heterosexual, propertied, etc. If suburban life is static, then it is rotten. Death creeps in and choice is concentrated to conformist expectations, materially instantiated in frozen economic assets. Thus, we have a classic Derridean deconstruction of the American dream, a flipping of the binary privileging of values. On one side is the metastatic Suburb, an absence of life. The American dream *as reinforced by* the principles of life, liberty and property is, in reality, a rotting of life and liberty, perhaps for the sake of property. On the other side is the continual throbbing of life in the junk addict, whose agony of withdrawal confirms his existential aloneness, provides what the narrator calls a "cellular stoicism," namely, that "There is no key, no secret someone else has

that he can give you” (6). Junk gives meaning because it declares all forces external to its own calculus to be manipulations.

Burroughs counters humanist idealism, which really is an ideological basis for lifeless suburban sameness, by consistently pointing to the material basis of addiction and the ethics that derives out of this—a strictly inhuman or, better, de-anthropic, characterization of choice. Further in the prologue Lee states in his typical matter-of-fact and neutral tone: “You don’t decide to be an addict. One morning you wake up sick and you’re an addict” (5). While Sartre would point to the idea of an original choice or an original project which can fix a set of choices, Lee suggests that there is a material basis for choice that junk highlights or brings to our awareness. Lee stresses the materiality of addiction: “Junk is a cellular equation that teaches the user facts of general validity. I have learned a great deal from using junk: I have seen life measured out in eyedroppers of morphine solution. I experienced the agonizing deprivation of junk sickness, and the pleasure of relief when junk-thirsty cells drank from the needle. Perhaps all pleasure is relief” (5-6). The addict does not operate at the level of a single ontology of being, but, rather, at a plurality of ontologies at levels of scale that erode the notion of a core being organized by choice. There is no human-centeredness, no human ontological essence, but the articulation of a post-humanism described through a multiplicity of interactive materialities. Each cell is its own addiction—the body thrums with a chorus of cellular need such that life is not measured by virtue of an individual with a centered consciousness, but by the drops of morphine that reintegrate that consciousness into a choice. In other words, where Sartre presumes the totality of the subject as a subjectivity, a point of view, that coherently accretes around choice, which erupts out of what he calls a nihilation, a nothingness or lack at the heart of being, Burroughs defies the unity of being and therefore choice and sees choice as arising out of an assemblage of physiological imperatives that coagulate into a molecularly delimited choice.

This consistency in pointing to the cellular nature of addiction belies the idea of choice as the origin of action and instead flips the scenario: the material or molecular event in each cell of the body in its multiplicity of locations and at multiple levels of scale (cell, tissue, organ, body) accretes a choice such that choice is steered through this stratified layer of physiological activity. For instance, in this passage Lee speaks of withdrawal:

It is possible to detach yourself from most pain...so that pain is experienced as neutral excitation. From the junk sickness there seems to be no escape. Junk sickness is the reverse side of junk kick. The kick of junk is that you have to have it. Junkies run on junk time and junk metabolism. They are subject to junk climate. They are

warmed and chilled by junk. The kick of junk is living under junk conditions. You cannot escape from junk sickness any more than you can escape from junk kick after a shot. (97)

Heroin, morphine or opiates in general are their own ecology, their own environmental imperative which houses the physiological entity within it. The individual body is usurped as if by a virus, taken over from within. But more so, the molar body—that is, the body *in toto* as opposed to its molecular constituent assemblages—adjusts, re-adapts, as it were, to its exterior environment. Time and space alter, new chemical regimes organize bodily activity which in turn rearrange physical rhythms, and, again, adjust desires, choices, habits, appetites, relationships, and social interactions. Thus, the phenomenological experience of human being-ness (of *Dasein*, to use Heidegger's term) is not predicated on an anthropocentric consciousness which organizes by fiat, but is directed through the assemblage of physiological activities which function at various levels of organic scale to yield a junk-temporality, an existential dimension whose rhythms are like tides, ebbing and flowing in proportion to cellular-addictive need. Later, Lee states, "The decision to quit junk is a cellular decision, and once you have decided to quit you cannot go back to junk permanently any more than you could stay away from it before. Like a man who has been away a long time, you see things different when you return from junk" (149). The return from junk is not a return back to some authentic and originary mode of choice, but a return to the self with a difference, what Derrida might call the trace of the self, a familiar presence that is no longer there. But, whereas Derrida would see the trace as the endless recapitulation of the signifier supplementing this lost presence, Burroughs sees the body as an emergent material; the residue or remainder of the addicted body instigates a sense of déjà vu in its formation of a subject by containing the material history of its here thirsty, there sated addict-cells.

Agency or choice, then, is subordinated to the material. It is not just that Burroughs is pointing to addiction as an unquenchable thirst, but that that thirst arises in an amorphous substratum of the body at levels inconceivable to consciousness. Junk points to an existential condition and not simply a material activity because junk steers choice, gives choice its contours in the way Sartre spoke of despair. But what is missing here is the anguish that accompanies choice since choice is not, in fact, an assertion of being. "I have learned the junk equation," Lee says. "Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life" (6). Life here seems to be an impersonal thing, an assemblage of material events organized through a body that gives rise to a way of acting that also, secondarily, acquires

self-consciousness retroactive to these processes. Burroughs, then, offers a variation on Sartrean forlornness, where the aforementioned “cellular stoicism” and “separate misery” belie the “key” or “secret”—some external assurance—that would ease the physiological fact of our existential isolation. What junk telescopes into our sight is the degree to which this is happening at the level of material life in general. If the facts that junk teaches are of a general validity, it is because we are confronted, in junk, with the degree to which what Lacan called the Real operates as an unrepresentable force that forever undermines my agency and defines my being as a coagulation of self out of an impersonal assemblage of material events. Choice is not originary and may not even be human. It may be cellular.

In addition to an insistence on the material, it should be noted that Burroughs also denies a possible psychology of the addict that could recoup addiction into the realm of the anthropocentric. The Prologue to *Junky* is a tour-de-force of the understated, at once using a matter-of-fact tone and deploying a narrative insouciance, while simultaneously providing commentary and critique of the great American preoccupation of making or finding oneself as a function of a control society. It is satire without any of the recognizable rhetorical flourishes of satire, for it eliminates acerbic wit, hyperbole or direct ridicule. Instead, Burroughs opts for an emotionless, anti-sentimental statement of facts about his early life, a kind of minimalist anti-*Bildungsroman*, told by a semi-autobiographical narrator. In addition, he frequently opens up the possibility of a psychoanalytic hermeneutics only to remove the gesture by an abrupt shift of topic or simply a refusal to provide any further detail or context. For instance, after explaining that his childhood had “all the props of a safe, comfortable way of life” (1), succinctly declaring his privileged childhood was a simulacrum, he immediately explains how he was subject to nightmares in the form of “a supernatural horror [which] seemed always on the point of taking shape” (1). The narrator offers a hint at psychological depth, an internal condition that intruded on his ability to enjoy the American dream to which he was fortunate enough to be born. However, he immediately disarms such psychological explanations by casually changing the content and direction of the recollection: “I recall hearing a maid talk about opium and how smoking opium brings sweet dreams, and I said: ‘I will smoke opium when I grow up’” (1). The reader is, in effect, set up to have revealed some primal scene, some early childhood trauma, only instead to have a child recollecting one of his earliest memories: a desire to smoke opium. The child is not diseased, the situation is. Since the nightmare is merely informational, no significance, either psychological or thematic, is derivable. At the same time, we are confronted with a narrator who matter-of-factly speaks of a child desiring opium and additionally removes the moral shock that normally would accompany such a statement through

its flippant tone. One is apt to simply read by it as an uninteresting parenthetical fact. Immediately after this the narrator states that as a child he was subject to hallucinations, describing seeing “animals in the wall,” only to shift abruptly to his schooling and again offering no commentary or further explanation of the significance of mentioning these so-called hallucinations. They are merely declared as neutral facts and emptied of any further content.⁸ The psychoanalytic interpretive impulse is negated instantly and exploring the psychological depths is removed as a source of textual meaning.

Just as Lee casually lists facts concerning his childhood that frustrate efforts to generate psychological depth, he also lists emotional states in similar fashion, subverting efforts to impose a moral evaluation that could either justify or otherwise explain the narrator’s cavalier dismissal of right and wrong. He recalls how “One aggressive little Lesbian would pull my hair whenever she saw me. I would like to shove her face in it right now, but she fell off a horse and broke her neck years ago” (2). Here, Lee’s hostility is given voice free of pathos, remorse, or empathy. He simply states the feeling and immediately moves on. The fact is removed from narrative development and provides only the barest of context, so the reasons for their hostility and the purpose of bringing up this particular aggression among any possible others is left indeterminable. Or again, he tells us, “I formed a romantic attachment for another boy and we spent our Saturdays exploring old quarries, riding around on bicycles and fishing in ponds and rivers” (2). The introduction of his early homosexual desire is so without affect that one is likely to miss its significance. But the lack of sentiment, which is found throughout the novel in his casual homosexual affairs, effectively nullifies one’s own moral and emotional response. The events appear unremarkable and arbitrary, stripped of nostalgia and poignancy. One is tempted to call these anti-memories: flattened of affect or latent meaning, they are mere events that are arbitrarily cited.

Indeed, there is only a single instance in the novel of what one might call romantic or sentimental affect, but its expression lies by way of contrast to Lee’s normally cynical, cool style. Or, rather, the stylized coolness is refocused onto objects and seemingly non-agential gestures to generate the affect. While in Mexico, Lee enters The Chimu Bar, a “queer bar,” where, as in the previously quoted passage describing Mary of the “cold fish eyes,” Lee moves from clipped realist narration to surreal imagination:

⁸ It could be argued that this is Lee’s attempt at droll humor. Indeed, this would be consistent with the hard-boiled narrative voice that Lee adopts, which often is expressed through an ironic, dry and darkly humorous tone. This, however, only adds to the unreliability of a psychological portrait given the general aim of the prologue in particular and the book overall. Lee seeks to provide authoritative facts concerning the nature of addiction which always emphasizes the physiological and refuses (or perhaps avoids) a depth model of psychology as the source of addiction. If anything, if these brief and occasional statements are read as humor, they satirize psychology and only help to emphasize the more developed and serious later physiological explanations.

“Three Mexican fags were posturing in front of the jukebox. One of them slithered over to where I was standing, with the stylized gestures of a temple dancer, and asked for a cigarette. There was something archaic in the stylized movements, a depraved animal grace at once beautiful and repulsive. I could see him moving in the light of campfires, the ambiguous gestures fading out into the dark. Sodomy is as old as the human species” (111). Lee’s focus is not on human subjects so much as animals performing an ancient, instinctive mating dance that is fundamental to the species. That Lee equates this mating dance with a temple dancer suggests not only something pagan, but that religious ritual is itself merely another form of instinctual behavior, a slithering of the body toward its animal aim. When Lee returns home with a boy to have sex, the tone makes a subtle shift while still keeping the quality of psychological aloofness:

I folded my pants and dropped them over a chair, placing the pistol on my pants. I dropped my shirt and shorts on the pistol. I sat down naked on the edge of the bed and watched the boy undress. He folded his own blue suit carefully. He took off his shirt and placed it around his coat on the back of a chair. His skin was smooth and copper-colored. The boy stepped out of his shorts and turned around and smiled at me...Later we smoked a cigarette, our shoulders touching under the covers. (112)

Lee seems to employ Eliot’s objective correlative, displacing the intimacy onto the mute propinquity of objects, precise gestures and static poses. His narrative voice remains completely absent of emotion or expression of desire. Folded pants on chairs and shoulders touching or the deliberateness of the act of undressing makes this scene oddly poignant in its mechanical buildup, particularly when juxtaposed to the otherwise lack of any emotional connection in this book; but this brief flash of poignancy is accomplished by removing the subjects themselves, indeed the actual sex itself. Lee and the boy are corporeal machines, and Lee is a recorder of mundane actions; the expression is carried in the things around them or in their calculated movements. What is intimate is not two men engaging in the intimacy of sex, but an assemblage of objects and body parts gathered toward an aim. While the scene is initially set up as a kind of instinctual mating ritual of the species, it eventually moves toward the sole moment of intimate human contact in the novel precisely by eliminating the subjects involved in the intimacy, negating any psychology involved, and instead showing their objective actions.

The cumulative effect of Burroughs stylistic method is to flatten characterization, plot development and even setting to a series of affectless actions, desultory sequencing, phlegmatic observations and journalistic commentary. The “subject” is reconfigured as an organic machine whose subjectivity does not stem from radical

choice, but is organized by assemblages of material (although, to be sure, social and ideological) corporeal concentrations arrayed in a certain way, thereby producing a certain affect. The world of *Junky* is a world of material emergent bodies in a variety of situations whose primary purpose is not to give a story of a man, William Lee, but of a way of life: junk. Junk discloses that freedom is never radical, never in-itself or auto-originary, but produced, a becoming constituted immanently by an assemblage of material factors, an effect; indeed, junk is a production of freedom through the cyclical cellular rebellion of corporeal need against the static, homogenizing social forces of a control society. Lee's human relations operate through this way of life, even his intimacies. Psychology, emotion, morality, politics, law all become subordinated to the neutral demonstration of this way of life and what it reveals about what we can call a posthuman existentialism. Junk is a way of life, an impersonal flow that can be structured into a convoluted web work of patterns or series, reterritorializing the subject against the territorial subjugations of the cop, the lawyer or the politician. It is a rebuke of Jeffersonian subjectivity with its claim that freedom is given from a transcendental source and inalienable to an essential human subject. And it is an ironic reversal of Sartre's humanism: a Burroughsian posthumanism. Where Sartre's disinterested world of brute facts, of the world in itself, provided the dignified ground of being as radical choice, Burroughs sees impersonal life as an accretion of raw facts that give rise to a semblance of radical choice. Where Sartre sees despair as the condition by which humanity must freely act in comportment with a world that everywhere resists its will, Burroughs sees despair as the impossibility of radical freedom in a world which denies the primacy of the human because choice is materially organized as ontologically prior to consciousness. Finally, where Sartre sees anguish in the inescapability of choice in every enactment of my being, Burroughs sees anguish in precisely the fact that such radical freedom is unattainable and always subject to something beyond my will that, indeed, produces my will from the outside and the inside simultaneously.

IV: The Strategy of Addiction

The foregoing section demonstrated the way in which Burroughs develops what I have called a posthuman existentialism, either directly or tacitly in opposition to Sartrian notions of radical choice as the ground of freedom and Jeffersonian conceptions of endowed, innate freedoms. This was introduced by differentiating a materialist, "corporeal-centric" posthumanism from the post-structuralist emphasis on semiotics, discourse and linguistic inscriptions. The body is the body and not Freud's mystic writing-pad. His posthumanism not only critiques humanism as a problematic anthropocentric exceptionalism, but he sees addiction as the corporeal experience

that exposes these humanist errors. Burroughs seeks the foundation of life in its impersonal and immanent unfolding. Freedom is not radical choice because choice is always embedded within and emerges from an assemblage of material configurations; freedom is not self-evident because freedom is produced. *Junk* reveals the manner of its production and simultaneously describes subjectivity as a materially emergent event. The narrative style and technique also serve to develop this critique, at once eschewing psychological explanations, which recoup the subject into a self-organized transcendental ego, and insisting instead on matters of fact or what he calls matters of “general validity.” Jennie Skerl (1985) describes Lee’s narration in the following way: “The inhabitants of the drug world are observed, recorded, classified, and generalized into types and symbols of abstract forces. The experience of addiction produces a different view of ‘character’ in life and art from the conventional one. People are not seen as complex personalities but as the locus of external and internal forces that are impersonal” (25-26). These characters, reduced to impersonal forces, suggest modes of flight from their embedded, limiting conformist situation and offer an alternative conception of a non-humanist morality.

One not only discovers a resistant mode of freedom in *junk*, but one discovers that the source of values is rooted in the body, what one might call a *Physiology of Morals*. The *Physiology of Morals* engenders a bio-ethics, an ethics of addict need, the aforementioned “cellular equation that teaches the user facts of general validity” (5). This idea is alluded to in the dialogue between two doctors who are treating Lee after he has been arrested and going through withdrawals. One doctor, who wishes to deny Lee care, says to another doctor, “After all, doctor...there is the moral question. This man should have thought of all this before he started using narcotics”; whereupon the second doctor responds, “Yes, there is the moral question, but there is also a physical question. This man is sick” (95). Sickness trumps the moral question. The general validity here is one rooted in material contexts and in opposition to an extra-experiential principle, a categorical imperative, or a blueprint for moral action. *Junk* points to an ontology of becoming, of ceaseless assembling of desire, organized at the cellular level, and therefore stands in stark contrast to the transcendental idealizations of middle-class America: “A junkie runs on junk time,” Lee says. “When his junk is cut off, the clock runs down and stops. All he can do is hang on and wait for nonjunk time to start. A sick junkie has no escape from external time, no place to go. He can only wait” (87). Kant argued that time and space are the necessary conditions of possibility for human cognition; Lee argues that this is not an objective condition of possibility, but a physiologically rooted, chemical assemblage at the level of cellular thirst for relief from pain. The condition of possibility is not an empty form, but a mutable aggregation

of molecular parts. If “[t]he kick of junk is living under junk conditions” and if one “cannot escape from junk sickness any more than you can escape from junk kick after a shot,” then Lee points to an ontology of desire not as a lack, as a hole in the heart of his being, but as a productive force that seeks to assemble connections in endless variation along a rhythmic pattern of junk intensities (97). He does not act, if, by “he” we mean a *cogito*, an autotelic “I”; rather an assemblage of body and junk do. And if, as the post-structuralist argues, we do not use language, rather language uses us, it pre-exists us and we inhabit it, flow along its syntactical structures and disperse across its semantic strata, then Lee suggests the same of junk. The addict comes to inhabit the fragmented, non-linear territory of junk, oscillates along its temporal intensities, and stands outside of the territorializing constraints of the law. The addict discovers in his removal from social expectation, propriety, conformity and ideality, from bio-powers that, in Foucauldian micro-physical fashion, ceaselessly territorialize a subject into a static model, a delimited subject turned object; the addict discovers a realm of chaotic productivity, desire as synthetic force, which always-already operates beneath, around and within the dominant reality. The “way of life” of junk is a flow of neutral force, a movement along lines of flight away from the Symbolic and the Imaginary, asymptotically toward the Real.

I have interpreted Burroughs’ conception of life here as an impersonal flow, materially comprised and expressed in various assemblages at different levels of scale. Gilles Deleuze (2001) speaks of a transcendental field, a plane of pure immanence, that is *a* life—the indefinite article signifying that this field “doesn’t refer to an object or belong to a subject...[but is] a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without self” (25). Consciousness is subsequent to the production of a subject “at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as ‘transcendents’” (26). Transcendent here does not refer to a noumenal realm that somehow intrudes into the Real and organizes from an infinite distance, *eidos*-like; nor is it an *arche*, creating *ex-nihilo*. Deleuze rejects this Platonic legacy. Rather, a life is an always-already becoming that actualizes a subject through its corporeal instantiations and assemblages. It is the virtual material ground through which a subject accretes and takes on its singularity, its unique realization. The virtual here refers to what inheres in the material organization of an object, even if it is never actualized. A shard of glass, for instance, might cut and therefore is virtually a weapon, even though it may never be used for that function and so is never actualized as a weapon. It isn’t a lurking potential, waiting for its essentiality to be realized, but a physical reality of its atomic configuration that may or may not come to pass. So too is *a* life a virtual subject, an impersonal pre-reflective consciousness that actualizes into

the singularity of this individual as opposed to that one along a plane of consistency. “A life” Deleuze goes on to say,

is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments...but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn't just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness. (Deleuze's italics) (29)

Addiction brings to awareness a life. As Lee so carefully lays out, the “shot-need for shot-completed” cycle, the oscillations of the addict life, reveal the impersonal life from which that oscillation derives—the creative source of subjectification that opposes the control-society territorializations of conformist, capitalist, ideologically driven post-War America. The suburb is the space of lifelessness because it reduces the creative capacity of a life toward the stultifying non-creativity of homogeneity: the “future solid citizen.” In this circumstance, the intensities that comprise such a solid (that is, static, highly territorialized) subject are reduced to a low level of dynamism and affectivity; put another way, the affectivity and dynamism of the virtual subject is territorialized toward a controlled and redundant aim: the American dream, wealth, property and uncritical belief in those structures. Conformity, for Lee, opposes life because it is pre-assembled territorialization; the concern is not so much a function of ideological introjection as it is the immanent material configurations of desire—its social, corporeal and institutional structures—that engenders the subject in this rigid way and which drugs resist at the material level.

Thus Lee gives voice to a strategy of flight; by seeking the impersonal ground of life, he experiments (through drugs) with the possibility of fashioning a different kind of freedom, one in which the individual can aspire to Sartrean choice by virtue of being detached from social entanglements entirely and discovering a non-humanist, non-anthropocentric ethics rooted in a life via a different and new set of intensities. Lee seeks to make himself a Body without Organs. The Body without Organs is Deleuze and Guattari's term, borrowed from Antonin Artaud, of the totally deterritorialized amalgam of multiplicities that flow neutrally, without imposed controls. It is the “relatively unformed and unstructured matter-energy flows from which strata and meshworks emerge, this flowing reality animated from within by self-organizing processes constituting a cauldron of nonorganic life” (DeLanda 1999, 130). The human body is a stratified, macro-organized materiality, in which the organs all function in

interconnected ways to construct a single individual. That individual is subjectified through a complex meshwork of social, physiological, psychological, cultural and economic forces, to name a few of the machines into which the body is plugged. Thus, in a move toward liberation, a move toward escaping the subjectivizing forces of the molar aggregate—the authority of the State, the coercion of the American middle class, etc.—one might seek a line of flight through a radical deterritorialization toward the Body without Organs, the escaping of control mechanisms that impose a conservation of the heterosexual, financially viable, nationalistic body—in a word, conformity. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe the line of flight toward the Body without Organs in this way:

You invent self-destructions that have nothing to do with the death drive. Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor. (160)

Different bodies—the masochist body, the paranoid body or the schizo body—seek different manners of escape from their particular stratified or demarcating confinements. The drugged body enacts through physiological and chemical experiment the quest for a line of flight from the strictures of bio-power—that is, those institutional and ideological forces that construct, delimit, segregate, demand, hierarchize and reproduce bodies of a particular type that conform to (or are forbidden from) the mainstream. The drugged body is a line of flight from the constraints of a social order antagonistic to homosexuality, lack of motivation, disinterest in middle-class morality, dismay at capitalist exchange, etc. Burroughs ontologizes the junk experience: addiction is, at this early stage of his writing, a pointing of the way to an immanent mode of libertarian flight, radical and dangerous, to be sure, morally cavalier, without doubt, but nonetheless a method of flight. It is no surprise, then, that William Burroughs plays an illustrative role for Deleuze and Guattari in how to make oneself a Body without Organs, how to use one's body as a flight from all forms of territorialization and seek a freedom that is libertarian *in extremis*.

What Lee recognizes in drugs is a change of perception, a creative cracking open of territorialized life in order to see in alternative, anti-conformist ways. “A Drug assemblage,” Deleuze and Guattari argue, “...is a line of perceptive causality that makes it so that (1) the imperceptible is perceived; (2) perception is molecular; (3) desire directly invests the perception and the perceived” (1987, 282). Like Keats' (1899) negative capability—that is, the aim of “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts,

without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”— Lee’s addict reveals rather than interprets, experiments rather than re-presents (277). This power of perception that drugs fuel is not only, as we noted in the first section, concerning the individual’s mode of material subjectification, but extends to the social in all of its concrete manifestations. Perceiving the imperceptible is as much a perception of the effects of individualized drug flight in their aggregated or grouped form as it is of the individual fleeing from social conformity. The junky creates material zones of interaction, an economy that subtends the mainstream economy and defines new economic territories, forming heterogenous fusions between licit and illicit trade, local and state or corporate controlled capital, sub and mainstream cultures.

Lee’s description of the junk neighborhood foreshadows his more radical imaginative spaces like the Interzone in *Naked Lunch* but serves as an example of those marginal or liminal urban territories frequented by the addict or the drug seeker, all of whom invent new forms of life: “I don’t spot junk neighborhoods by the way they look, but by the feel, somewhat the same process by which a dowser locates hidden water. I am walking along and suddenly the junk in my cells moves and twitches like the dowser’s wand: ‘Junk here!’” (70). This is perception by a different mechanism—the chemistry of drugs operates as an intensive social affect, an assemblage between junk-thirsty cells and the concrete urban space in which the drug economy is situated. Junk affects and intensities are realized in this material lifeworld. In fact, these urban spaces are interzones in that they are between spaces, transition neighborhoods, constituted by an eclectic set of businesses matched by a miscellaneous throng of people. “Junk is often found adjacent to ambiguous or transitional districts...Stores selling artificial limbs, wig-makers, dental mechanics, loft manufacturers of perfumes, pomades, novelties, essential oils. A point where dubious business enterprise touches Skid Row” (110). This odd assortment of trades are all prosthetic, a fusion of the body and objects which get integrated into, adorn or extend the body, as drugs themselves do. And they are found along the margins of the acceptable, making problematic the borders of the body as a corporeal and a social unit, an assemblage of the legitimate and illegitimate which ironically are a co-dependent meshwork.

The line of flight then operates at two levels in *Junky*: the individual, who seeks alternative subjectivities by radical self-deterritorialization, seeking the intensities of the Body without Organs where “the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, foldings, and recoiling that compose an organism—and also a signification and a subject—occur” (1987, 159); and the social, wherein immanent to the dominant reality, with its concretions of American power structures, is the revealing of another economy, another America, whose aims and desires are plugged into a different

material structure subjacent to the hegemonic system, the system that seeks to mass-produce “future solid citizens.” Drugs preclude this social demand in at least two ways. They defy the organizing rules of proper conduct because the addict always privileges junk over money, power, or prestige as an aim in itself. Furthermore, junk as a way of life becomes a strategy of escape from the fetish of commodities and capital and the consumerist ideologies that supplement this material organization. Ole Bjerg notes that the demand for pleasure insisted upon by the relentless ideological machinery of capitalism is subverted by drugs because of their immediate intervention in the brain’s pleasure centers, thereby “circumventing the symbolic principles of regulation” of consumerism (9). He further argues, “The addicted drug user’s desire for the Real makes him independent of that symbolic reality where most other people live” (18); but junk also installs an alternative capitalist market within the broader spectrum of capitalism such that this broader spectrum is revealed in fact to be what Manuel DeLanda (1998), following Fernand Braudel, calls an anti-market. Burroughs’ journalistic approach objectively describes the emergent market economy of drugs, with its own anti-establishment sub-culture, and its sub-cultures within sub-cultures (teaheads versus junkies versus lushes, for instance), and its own patois. It is its own self-organized market nested within legally sanctioned markets and therefore acts through independent forces of supply and demand. In this sense it is in direct opposition to monopoly capitalism, which then is really an anti-market, that is, “large scale enterprises, with several layers of managerial strata, in which prices are set not taken” and which are further steered by massive state and inter-state agencies such as the Federal Reserve or the World Bank (pars. 9). Thus, junk reveals a different state of posthuman operations in the way the junk market constructs subjects of a different sort that stand in contrast to, if not opposition to, a conformist American subject of the anti-market, seeking the legitimation of the monopolistic markets through good credit scores, on-time mortgage payments, and investments in those monopolistic markets.

Despite all of this, what *Junky* equally points out is the failure of junk as a deterritorializing flight: where on the one hand it is productive of a new set of intensive assemblages that reject or confound the American dream, exposes its lifelessness in its push toward stasis, and makes problematic its claims to freedom, on the other hand it merely reterritorializes the body into new and potentially more lethal corporeal constraints. It creates a new subject who is subjugated to the drug, making a body machine enslaved to the dynamics of addiction: “The causal line, or the line of flight, of drugs is constantly being segmentarized under the most rigid of forms, that of dependency, the hit and the dose, the dealer” (1987, 284). Lee is constantly being recouped within the system he seeks to escape precisely because the drugs bring him

back to it. Ironically, the drug addict and its economy is an assemblage that meshes with the law, the police, the detox center, the medico-pharmaceutical-industrial complex thereby uniting Lee with the very institutions he abhors: “Drug addicts continually fall back into what they wanted to escape: a segmentarity all the more rigid for being marginal, a territorialization all the more artificial for being based on chemical substances, hallucinatory forms, and phantasy subjectifications” (285). In his flight from middle-class conformity, Lee becomes a slave to a new master, the drug itself, which eventually territorializes his body into a one-dimensional assemblage stratified entirely by addict need. He documents the long withdrawals, the incontinence of the body as it violently seeks to reclaim a homeostatic physiological balance, with the same aloof reportage as he provides with the drug market, the inhabitants of the drug world or the spaces of exchange. Having broken the meshwork of conformity with all its material configurations, he entrenches more firmly into another, the chemical body. There is no deterritorialization without a new territorialization. Consider, for instance, when Lee, fighting off heroin withdrawals in Mexico by bottoming out with alcohol, gets in an altercation with a bartender and pulls a gun on him. A policeman enters and Lee points the gun at the cop to warn him: “I was not talking to a solid three-dimensional cop. I was talking to the recurrent cop of my dreams—an irritating, nondescript, darkish man who would rush in when I was about to take a shot or go to bed with a boy” (128-129). The alcohol induces an unconscious activation of a generic cop, the clotting of all the forces that control him in the form of a single prohibitory agent, the grand Negator of his efforts at autopoeisis. The Mexican cop, who lets him go, is merged with the American cop, who would never let him go. Ironically, the presence of this haunting force is precisely because of his enslavement to addiction, which steers his actions and invites the intrusion of the law and makes America follow him, despite his flight south. At the level of material chemical-to-body organization, his flight has led him back to re-actualizing within him the presence from which he so insistently seeks escape.

While Lee recognizes his increased entrapment in a new mode of control, he nonetheless does not give up on the possibility of a different kind of drug which will provide an ultimate, idealized form of freedom. At the end of the novel, Lee learns of yage, a drug which is “supposed to increase telepathic sensitivity” (149). These final pages move the quest to a deeper form of liberty, of deterritorialization, where one is free from the constraints of the body itself. The body, as we have seen, is not, for Lee, just the site of some nebulous inscription of power, a passive vessel for ideological manipulations, but its own concrete, immanent assemblage that can be the site of enacting deterritorializing freedoms or the means of curtailing that freedom through reterritorialized chemical controls. The body is plugged in to the social machine, but

also operates by its own internal causal factors which operate at a cellular, therefore decentered, level. Thus, at the end of the book, Lee seeks to flee the body: “What I look for in any relationship is contact on the nonverbal level of intuition and feeling, that is telepathic contact” (149). He sees in this drug the potential for a new level of deterritorialization, where even language, with its own stratifying orders, can be bypassed. Here, the body supersedes itself and a wholly new kick can be attained, a subjectivity that can be created via a new route that is quite literally post-human.

But Lee is not so idealist as to presume the materiality of this goal is somehow overcome, nor that agents of control are absent. He immediately notes that “The Russians are using this drug in experiments on slave labor...to induce states of automatic obedience and literal thought control. The basic con” (149). But, always recognizing that there is no assemblage that does not have its line of flight, he quickly rebuts this effort: “The deal is certain to backfire because telepathy is not of its nature a one-way set-up, or a set-up of sender and receiver at all” (149). In other words, total control is never possible because the multiplicities that comprise the subject, arising out of a life, is not organized by top-down processes or centers of control. No mode of control is absolute, despite State powers that would seek such monopolies of control. A life can actualize in its immanent becomings new lines of flight that creatively escape the control society. Heroin and morphine are Lee’s initial effort to create a material assemblage to do precisely that in the American context, but addiction fails him. Thus, he says, “I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk” (150). Recognizing that the body is its own controlling machine, and that it is a social machine requiring the instruments of the state to alleviate the abuses of addiction, Lee seeks literal flight further from the U.S. and a new kind of experiment to radically deterritorialize. “Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh. I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix” (150). Thus, he hopes to find in yage a line of flight toward the Body without Organs that gets to the primordial level of immanent unfolding, where no appropriations, divisions, restrictions or subordinations exist. This defines an early expression of posthumanism—one which defies anthropocentrism, critically interrogates various humanist notions of freedom and centralizes the body as an assemblage of chemical, cellular, socio-economic and linguistic multiplicities that immanently and dynamically unfold.

Deterritorialization to the point of total dispersal, of course, is death; libertarianism *in extremis* cannot be brought about without dying. Therefore, radical aesthetic experimentation offers flight by other means. William Lee’s quest to be a Body without

Organs is William Burroughs' quest to create a deterritorializing literary machine, a literary Body without Organs. Just as *Junky* explores addiction as an exploration of our existential condition as immanently produced through material assemblages, so too is his literary style an effort to find a means of expressing the text as a signifying machine that can be materially manipulated in aesthetic experimentation. But, as with addiction, this early effort toward deterritorialization, seeking to become a Body without Organs, does not deterritorialize enough. The experiment fails in the same way morphine and heroin fail. Addiction recoups the individual into an even more territorialized subject, a more restricted and slavish subject; similarly, this early effort at experimental fiction uses the realist mode and seeks to deterritorialize the novel by internally manipulating its formal design while simulating that design. The novel eschews psychological development, linearity, contains sudden injections of the surreal into the realist mode, etc. But the text is recovered easily into a coherent and reterritorialized whole, is "accessible," and becomes easily mistaken with realist fiction—the most conformist of literary modes, at least at the formal level. The book ends in the same way Lee describes the new kick he seeks, opening out and not narrowing down. The quest is left *in medias res*, inconclusive, with only open vistas of possibility for reconstituting or redefining himself; but stylistically, aesthetically, Burroughs will move beyond this early form of experimentalism and have an eye toward his famous cut-up method. By 1960, Burroughs is responding to Allen Ginsberg in a letter by instructing him to take his letter and cut it up into sections: "Now read aloud and you will hear My Voice... Read aloud. I can not choose but hear. Don't think about it. Don't theorize. Try it" (70). Just as yage gives the promise of superseding the body, so too does the cut-up method give the promise of superseding the hegemony of plot or the author/narrator on the reader. The aleatory experimentation that will define his later work is a sublimation, as it were, of the drug quest, into the literary sphere and opens the way to a literary Body without Organs.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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