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# Monstrous Rhetoric: *Naked Lunch*, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties

Fiona Paton

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Heh, heh. I see you're hungry for horror again. Well, rest assured. Your appetite will be satisfied. In fact, when you're through with this putrid periodical, you will have lost your appetite entirely. So don't just stand there drooling. Come on in.

—The Vault Keeper, *The Vault of Horror* (1952)<sup>1</sup>

And some of us are on Different Kicks and that's a thing out in the open the way I like to see what I eat and vice versa mutatis mutandis as the case may be *Bill's Naked Lunch Room* . . . Step right up . . . Good for young and old, man and bestial. Nothing like a little snake oil to grease the wheels and get a show on the track Jack. Which side are you on? Frozen Hydraulic? Or do you want to take a look around with Honest Bill?

—William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (1959)

Mr. Chairman, I realize that I am discussing a very delicate subject. I cannot lay the bones bare like I could before medical colleagues. I would like to strip the fetid, stinking flesh off this skeleton of homosexuality and tell my colleagues of the House some of the facts of nature. I cannot expose all the putrid facts as it would offend the sensibilities of some of you. It will be necessary to skirt some of the edges, and I use certain Latin terms to describe some of these individuals. Make no mistake, several thousand, according to police records, are now employed by the Federal Government.

—*Congressional Record* (1950)

Entering the Vault of Horror and taking a look around with Honest Bill are roughly comparable experiences in terms of what the reader encounters: moldering flesh, vile odors, severed body parts, poisonous ooze, filthy creatures associated with darkness and disease. The horror material that

Burroughs read throughout his life provided him with a reservoir of abominations that he then refashioned through the dark alchemy of his own imagination.<sup>2</sup> That he should have distilled this material in such a concentrated, vitriolic way has outraged and perplexed critics for generations. John Willet's "Ugh" review of *Naked Lunch* for the *Times Literary Supplement* is a famous articulation of disgust, but even later and more reasonable critics such as David Lodge have dismissed the book as not only "very indecent" but also "very tedious" (Lodge 76). For Oxenhandler, "it would be presumptuous to claim to know what lies behind the horrendous scenes we witness" (Oxenhandler 140). More recently, Hume has said, "William S. Burroughs' fictions abrade humanist sensibilities and frustrate the impulse to seek meaning" (112).

Frederick Whiting addresses this frustration in "Monstrosity on Trial: The Case of *Naked Lunch*," in which he reviews both the famous 1966 censorship trial and subsequent critical interpretations. The novel's "fragmentary form," he argues, "created a kind of interpretive vacuum within the work itself; the lack of a unifying narrating consciousness meant that the novel's disjointed episodes neither valorized the monstrous [. . .] nor denounced it [. . .]. Instead, the monstrous was truly interstitial" (161). As Whiting explains, this interstitiality was so threatening that even the novel's advocates resorted to normative definitions of the monstrous, missing Burroughs's foundational critique of representation itself (162). Later criticism, caught up in the poststructuralist play of meanings, exhibited "reluctance to consider the constructive political implications of Burroughs' critique" (167), while current criticism, although more politically motivated, is still caught in the novel's "antagonistic meanings" (167), unable to decide whether the book dismantles or reinscribes the normative order.

This essay responds to the novel's interpretive challenges by unifying the political and the aesthetic through the interpretive paradigm of the Gothic. The three opening epigraphs intersect through their shared compulsion to display monstrosity, and the historical moment of this intersection illuminates the function of the graphic tropes of horror in *Naked Lunch*. When we connect the monstrosity in Burroughs's fiction with the official discourses surrounding communism, homosexuality, and national security at this time, a much more concrete explanation of the execratory excesses of the novel emerges. This was the era, for instance, when J. Edgar Hoover wrote of the U.S. Communist Party, "In the beginning it seemed little more than a freak. Yet in the intervening years that freak has grown into a powerful monster endangering us all" (Hoover 53). The Assistant Secretary of Labor, John Gibson, used even more colorful language: "Communism breeds in the slums of cities, in the bitterness of hunger. It grows like a mushroom on the dunghill of cheap labor and long hours. It is the illegitimate half-brother of freedom, a monster that masquerades in the family name to

lure the destitute to its false banners" ("Unions Rid of Reds, Says Gibson"). This was the era when Edmund Bergler, M.D., published two best-selling books, *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* and *1000 Homosexuals*. The latter stated, "There is no more glamour in homosexuality than there is in, let's say, a case of typhoid fever" (Bergler, preface). This was the era when fear of communism and fear of homosexuality merged within the Gothic register of monstrosity and disease, so that Senator Kenneth Wherry (R-Nebraska) could quite seriously ask his colleagues in the House, "Can [you] think of a person who could be more dangerous to the United States of America than a pervert?" (qtd. in Johnson 2). This Gothic language was so pervasive that it permeated the discourse of ordinary citizens. One woman wrote to the *New York Daily News* that "The homosexual situation in our State Department is no more shocking than your statement that 'they are uncertain what to do about it.' [...] Democrats or Republicans—we must rid our Government of these creatures" (qtd. in Johnson 19).

*Naked Lunch* is full of "these creatures," homosexuals who are usually (with a few exceptions) monstrous in their sexuality, despite the fact that Burroughs himself was openly gay at the time of writing. The novel's gay protagonist William Lee is a drug dealer and addict who, ultimately finding his habit unsustainable, undergoes a drug cure in hospital. The hallucinations he suffers during withdrawal comprise the majority of the novel's plot, and since his deranged consciousness is the medium for the action, there is nothing that cannot be represented. Thus the reader encounters a fiendishly perverse pantheon of creatures, most of which are homosexual. For instance, the Mugwumps secrete an addictive fluid from their penises and ritually hang young boys (68). Burroughs's claim to be satirizing capital punishment through these ritual hangings has some credence given that "mugwump" originally meant "leader" in Algonquin (Bryson 287), but clearly he is also satirizing the addiction to transgressive desire. Also monstrous are the homosexual clients of Hassan's Rumpus Room, who sexually violate the young male employees and "hang on their backs like vampires" (73). Desire itself seems monstrous, but especially homosexual desire: "Monologue from Male Hustler: 'I am fucking this citizen so I think, 'A straight John at last'; but he comes to a climax and turns himself into some kinda awful crab'" (113). While monstrosity is not exclusively sexual (The Sailor, "Fats" Terminal, Bradley the Buyer, Willy the Disk, even Lee himself are all rendered physically monstrous through their drug addictions), it is nonetheless overwhelmingly homosexual in its manifestations. Its grotesque sexual sadism situates *Naked Lunch* on the very margins of the literary and convinces many readers that it is merely self-indulgent psychosis masquerading as art. Yet when *Naked Lunch* is placed within the tradition of Gothic horror, its methods and motivations become much clearer.<sup>3</sup> Thus situated, the text becomes a compelling commentary on the 1950s, and the

reader's "Ugh" becomes a response to the demonizing excesses of the culture that produced it as much as to the text itself.

In *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noel Carroll identifies several recurring techniques utilized by horror writers in their creation of the monstrous, several of which are directly relevant to Burroughs's own cast of characters. One such technique is fusion, or the transgression of "categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on" (43). Such interstitiality gives rise to one of the essential traits of horror-inducing entities: impurity. Referencing Mary Douglas's study, *Purity and Danger*, Carroll notes that horror is often engendered when something crosses "the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture's conceptual scheme" (32). Mummies confuse the distinction between living and dead; viscous fluids reverse the distinction between inside/outside; severed heads and other body parts violate the category of completeness. Another recurring technique is magnification, either of naturally occurring entities (usually insects) or of beings that already inhabit the impure realm of fusion. Together, fusion and magnification represent the core of the horror aesthetic; they dominate all levels of the genre, from the cosmic terror of H. P. Lovecraft to the blood and guts of *The Vault of Horror*.

Carroll provides an excellent apparatus for the close reading of horror texts. However, in our cultural analysis of *Naked Lunch*, we also need a more socially inflected interpretation of Gothic horror. Since the 1980s, critical studies of the Gothic have increasingly focused on its ideological function within Western culture, revising earlier views of the Gothic as mere escapist fantasy. Now, Gothic is understood as a complex production of the Enlightenment itself, a necessary articulation of the repressed underside of its humanistic values. As Fred Botting has explained, "'Gothic' functions as the mirror of eighteenth-century mores and values: a reconstruction of the past as the inverted, mirror image of the present, its darkness allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection" (Botting 5). Judith Halberstam gives this ideological function a more specific application in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, in which she defines the Gothic as "a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known" (2). She links the formation of the Gothic genre with the pressing need to "define an essential English character" during the nineteenth century (16). Within such an interpretive framework, 1950s America also appears compellingly Gothic: the monstrous rhetoric of anti-communism set up a rigid opposition between American and un-American, and into the category "un-American" fell not only political but also ethnic and sexual difference. When approached from this perspective, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* falls readily into the existing tradition of American Gothic, although in doing so it also reconfigures certain elements of the genre as a whole.

Leslie Fiedler, in his frequently quoted essay "Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic," has stated that the American literary tradition "is almost essentially a gothic one" (125), which he attributes to "certain special guilts" produced by the creation of America (127). More recent critics have deepened and expanded Fiedler's discussion in relation to American identity. Teresa Goddu, for instance, argues that

American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are defined, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it. (270)

Meanwhile, Eric Savoy complicates the rather simplistic emphasis on "the past" in many definitions of the Gothic (including Fielder's), arguing that American Gothic is more properly about "historiography" rather than "history," in that it confronts "the often convoluted and blatantly constructed discourse of narratives that circle around themes and events that are rarely susceptible to direct exposition" (168). Savoy's elaboration of this point is particularly useful in relation to Burroughs:

Nor does the writer seize on history as a coherent field that is subject to authorial control. Instead, history controls and determines the writer. Gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national pasts to complicate rather than to clarify them, but mainly to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and deeds that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them. (169)

Burroughs, writing out of a cultural space that was intensely Gothic in its own fear of otherness, deploys highly inventive monstrosity against the paranoid discourse of nationhood. Yet even while satirizing the Gothic tropes that dominated official discourse, Burroughs's narrative internalizes monstrosity and appears to wield it as a weapon against itself. The text itself is a monster of appalling proportions, deviant on all levels from its unstable syntax to its misshapen narrative form.

Halberstam, noting that Mary Shelley referred to *Frankenstein* as "my hideous progeny" and that Stevenson called Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde a "Gothic gnome," argues that "the merger of book and monster is a typical Gothic strategy" (157). Undoubtedly, *Naked Lunch* belongs in this category by virtue of its own aberrant form, although it exceeds its predecessors so

totally that it makes them appear positively refined. But Burroughs is just as aware as Shelley and Stevenson of the deformity of his own text—in fact, he points this out numerous times: “You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point. . . . I have many prefaces. They atrophy and amputate spontaneous like the little toe amputates in a West African disease confined to the Negro race” (203). But what are the implications of this monstrous rhetoric for the text’s own project of emancipation? The Gothic form may “mutate” classic realism and the bourgeois values associated with that mode, but Halberstam also points out that “The Gothic monster is precisely a disciplinary sign, a warning of what may happen if the body is imprisoned by its desires or if the subject is unable to discipline him- or herself successfully. [ . . . ] The monster (from *de-monstrare*) encourages readers to read themselves and their own bodies and scan themselves for signs of devolution” (72). Or to quote Stephen King, one of Burroughs’s favorite authors, “Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us. We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings” (King 39). Is this then the reactionary role that *Naked Lunch* ultimately plays in its cultural moment?

Interpreting *Naked Lunch* thus requires work on a number of fronts. The first step is to examine the ways that Burroughs’s own material overlaps the Gothic elements of official discourse in the 1950s. “Otherness” will be the guiding theme here, with particular emphasis on homosexual otherness, but with some initial attention also to race and national identity. However, we will then need to consider the rhetorical effects of this horrifying language, for as several critics have pointed out, *Naked Lunch* is a remarkably aggressive text for one that purports to have the reader’s best interests at heart.<sup>4</sup> Although designed to release the reader from various social control systems, for which junk is the overarching metaphor, the book itself is extremely controlling in its brutally invasive language. Finally, we will examine the ideological function of this language through Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. Rejecting the Russian Formalist view of literature as a specialized form of language, Bakhtin insisted that, “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 293). It seems particularly appropriate to talk about Burroughs’s language in terms of its “taste,” for his diction has a piquant and unforgettable flavor all of its own. That his words taste most often of the charnel house and sewer obviously indicates Burroughs’s debt to horror fiction. But his words also carry with them traces of other more “socially charged” contexts: the Senate floor, the government committee, the psychiatrist’s office, the military intake interview, the court of law. For Bakhtin, meaning in the literary text must be understood “against the



background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view, and value judgments" ("Discourse" 281). The background for the tortured utterances in *Naked Lunch* is the monstrous rhetoric<sup>5</sup> of the Cold War.

It will come as no surprise that Senator Joe McCarthy was one of the primary sources of official Gothic during the 1950s. James Darsey has identified certain recurring tropes in McCarthy's descriptions of communism—octopi, snakes, and spiders, for instance—and his frequent use of words such as "fantastic" and "monstrous" (Darsey 74). Noting that McCarthy's world "was a dark world where things were not always what they seemed to be," Darsey concludes, "As nocturnal creatures, McCarthy's enemies have an implicit association with witches, vampires, bats, rats, and wolves" (Darsey 75). The language of disease was similarly pronounced in discussions about national security. A particularly famous example comes from George Kennan's "Long Telegram" from Moscow in 1946: "Much depends on the health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is the point at which domestic and foreign policies meet" (Kennan 63). Similarly, Harry S. Truman's attorney-general, J. Howard McGrath, warned that "'Communists are everywhere—in factories, offices, butcher shops, on street corners, in private business, and each carries in himself the germs of death for society'" (qtd. in Smith 312). Andrew Ross, among others, has noted the tendency in 1950s discourse to connect social difference and disease: "Cold War culture is rich with the demonology of the 'alien,' especially in the genre of the science fiction film, where a pan-social fear of the Other—communism, feminism, and other egalitarianisms foreign to the American social body—is reproduced through images drawn from the popular fringe of biological or genetic engineering gone wrong" (45).

It was this cultural context that provided the catalyst for the mordant fantasies of *Naked Lunch*. For Burroughs, the impulse to homogenize society through a legislated "normality" is itself monstrous. All of the three main political parties of Interzone, the Senders, the Liquifactionists, and the Divisionists, articulate his horror of enforced conformity, but his description of the Divisionists is especially graphic:

They cut off tiny bits of their flesh and grow exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly. It seems probable, unless the process of division is halted, that eventually there will be only one replica of one sex on the planet: that is one person in the world with millions of separate bodies . . . [ . . . ] A cretinous albino Caid, product of a long line of recessive genes (tiny toothless mouth lined with black hairs, body of a huge crab, claws instead of arms, eyes projected on stalks) accumulated 20000 I.R.s [identical replicas]." (149)



A similar concern structures one of his most memorable routines, "Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry," which satirizes both psychiatry and political paranoia through one of the 1950s' favorite monsters, the giant insect. The routine begins with Doctor "Fingers" Schafer, The Lobotomy Kid, presenting to a group of colleagues his Master Work: *"The Complete All American Deanxietized Man . . ."* (94).

Blast of trumpets: The Man is carried in naked by two Negro Bearers who drop him on the platform with bestial, sneering brutality . . . The Man wriggles . . . His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede. Waves of unknown stench fill the room, searing the lungs, grabbing the stomach . . . (94)

Present at the conference is a "fat, frog-faced Southern doctor" who says, "'We must stomp out the Un-American crittah [. . .] Fetch gasoline! [. . .] We gotta burn the son of a bitch like an uppity Nigra!'" (95). The fact that the centipede is black (this is the only black centipede in the book) satirizes the idea of the racial other as monster while emphasizing the manufactured nature of American identity—the "all-American" individual does not exist unless artificially created by psychiatrists, politicians, or advertising. But the full satiric force is not felt until the court hearing that follows, in which the D.A. questions the reality of the centipede: "D.A.: 'Gentlemen of the jury, these 'learned gentlemen' claim that the innocent human creature they have so wantonly slain suddenly turned into a huge black centipede and it was 'their duty to the human race' to destroy this monster before it could, by any means at its disposal, perpetrate its kind'" (95). Calling this testimony a "tissue of horseshit," the D.A. names the victim—Clarence Cowie—and describes his death as "wanton murder." By identifying the monster as a man, the routine reveals the true horror of Cold War Gothic: the racist construction of difference as a monstrosity that must be destroyed.

Historian Geoffrey Smith views America's sense of anxiety during the 1950s as almost inevitable given the country's sudden shift from isolationism to world dominance (307). Smith emphasizes the extent to which domestic issues were as much a matter of national security as external threats and describes an emerging national-security state that included not only the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency, but also the American Social Hygiene Association, physicians such as Benjamin Spock, "lawyers, clergy, and social workers, and—not least—psychiatrists" (310). Being gay at this time was almost equivalent to committing treason. Like communists who were enslaved by Soviet ideology, "Americans with divergent sexual lifestyles were pictured by security planners and most psychiatrists as slaves to their own overheated sexual appetites" (314).

Noting that the political events of 1949–50 “catalyzed official and popular anxiety about a monstrous enemy within” (315), Smith argues that “a huge, internal quarantine emerged to purify a culture many persons deemed contaminated” (317).<sup>6</sup>

This process of purification has been compellingly described by historian David Johnson. McCarthy’s extravagant claim in February 1950 that the State Department contained over two hundred communists also included mention of homosexuals. Although the State Department responded by denying the presence of communists, it admitted that of 202 employees dismissed as security risks, “‘Most of these were homosexuals’” (Puerifoy, qtd. in Johnson 17). The panic quickly reached hysterical proportions. Even those who resisted the gay purges did not dispute the underlying attitude toward homosexuality. Senator Millard Tydings (D–Maryland), given the task of investigating McCarthy’s accusations, tried to defuse the situation by arguing, “‘Obviously, a man may have the terrible disease which has been referred to, and yet may not be a party to foreign espionage or may not be a party to deliberately being disloyal to his Government’” (qtd. in Johnson 27).

The panic surrounding this “terrible disease” had in part been caused by the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), which revealed that 37 percent of males “had had at least one post-adolescent homosexual experience leading to orgasm” (D’Emilio 35). Johnson quotes a psychiatrist’s response to the data: “If these figures are only approximately correct then the ‘homosexual outlet’ is the predominant national disease, overshadowing in number cancer, tuberculosis, heart failure, and infantile paralysis” (qtd. in Johnson 54). Furthermore, Kinsey’s research revealed considerable instability in sexual orientation: “The data disputed the common assumption that all adults were permanently and exclusively either homosexual or heterosexual and revealed instead a fluidity that belied medical theories about fixed orientations” (D’Emilio 35). For the dominant culture of the Cold War, this fluidity evoked the Gothic horror of interstitiality as defined by Carroll, for it “cross[ed] the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture’s conceptual scheme” (32).

The homophobic metaphors of the “Homosexuals in Government” report of 1950, the source of this essay’s third epigraph, illustrates the full Gothic paranoia of this hostility. Here, Rep. Miller (R-Nebraska), author of the Miller Sexual Psychopath Law,<sup>7</sup> presents the House of Representatives with an amendment to bar the Economic Cooperation Administration from employing homosexuals (Johnson 29): “I realize that I am discussing a very delicate subject. I cannot lay the bones bare like I could before medical colleagues. I would like to strip the fetid, stinking flesh off this skeleton of homosexuality and tell my colleagues of the House some of the facts of nature. I cannot expose all of the putrid facts as it would offend

the sensibilities of some of you [. . .] (“Homosexuals in Government”). Burroughs himself mentions the State Department scandal in a letter to Ginsberg in 1954: “Do you know in the past two years 2000 people have been dismissed from the State Department Foreign Service—only twelve for Communism? The rest for being queer. What is the U.S. coming to?” (Burroughs, *Letters to Allen Ginsberg* 53).

Burroughs answers his own question in one of the funniest routines in *Naked Lunch*. The routine begins with William Lee in hospital, who, on seeing that his former room contains “Bedpans full of blood and Kotex and nameless female substances,”<sup>8</sup> thinks, “If someone comes to visit me in my old room he will think I gave birth to a monster and the State Department is trying to hush it up” (57). Thus the stage is set for the routine, which begins, “Music from *I Am an American*. . . . An elderly man in the striped pants and cutaway of a diplomat stands on a platform draped with the American flag. A decayed, corseted tenor—bursting out of a Daniel Boone costume—is singing the Star-Spangled Banner, accompanied by a full orchestra. He sings with a slight lisp. . . . (57). The Diplomat, who is reading an official statement denying that any male citizen of the United States is capable of giving birth, is constantly drowned out by the tenor singer, whose falsetto voice belies the masculine virility symbolized by the Daniel Boone costume.

The scene then cuts to the Technician in the control room who, realizing that the tenor singer is, in fact, gay, calls for a replacement. In desperation, he selects the only full-time tenor available, who happens to be a transgendered lesbian called Liz. Disguised beneath a *papier mâché* Arc de Triomphe (symbolizing, perhaps, the essential hollowness underlying military virility), she unleashes such a bellow that her disguise rips apart, and there she stands, exposed on the pedestal, “clad only in a leopard skin jockstrap with enormous falsie basket” (58).<sup>9</sup> The routine ends with an apocalypse of explosions that destroys the control room. Burroughs, while treating the State Department scandal with camp exaggeration, at the same time warns what will happen to a system that seeks to conceal, repress, and deny difference. This routine is asking us to rewrite the lyrics to “I Am an American,” that patriotic song of the 1940s, to include the lines “straight or gay” along with “rich or poor, young or old, I am an American” (“I Am an American”). That Burroughs is preoccupied with the attempted legislation of sexual identity is clear from several references to “gentlemen by act of Congress” (78, 83). That he is also horrified by the institutional programming of sexual identity is obvious from the descriptions of Benway’s Reconditioning Center and Dr. Berger’s Mental Health Hour.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Burroughs treats the policing of sexual identity in a more somber fashion elsewhere in *Naked Lunch*. In “The Examination” chapter, Carl Peterson is called in for an interview with Doctor Benway at the Ministry

of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis (Freeland). The purpose of the interview is initially unclear, but the atmosphere is sinisterly Kafkaesque. The doctor (who is never thereafter identified as Benway) proceeds by defining sexual deviation as illness: "We regard it as a misfortune . . . a sickness . . . certainly nothing to be censored or sanctioned any more than say . . . tuberculosis" (170). He stresses the need to protect "other individuals who are not so infected" (170) and, again comparing homosexuality to tuberculosis, asks that Carl take "a psychic fluoroscope" exam. This exam is, however, of a very physical nature: Carl is required to produce a semen specimen for "The Kleiberg-Stanislauski semen flocculation test . . . a diagnostic tool . . . indicative at least in a negative sense" (173). Burroughs seems to be giving his satiric wit free rein here, yet the routine is not so far from reality. In his summary of one government hearing into homosexuality, Johnson notes that a senator asked, "'There is no quick test like an X-ray that discloses these things?'" (Johnson 114). Perhaps Senator Smith was aware of the urinary hormone-secretion test used by the U.S. Army during World War II, a test that sometimes revealed "a higher degree of estrogens (female hormones) than androgens (male hormones), just the opposite of a normal man. But this test was too uncertain and too expensive to try on every inductee" ("Homosexuals in Uniform" 54).

Although Carl's semen test is negative, he is required to take another test involving photographs of pin-up girls. Afterward, he is questioned about homosexual encounters while in the military. This questioning triggers the return of a repressed memory in Carl:

A green flare exploded in Carl's brain. He saw Hans' lean brown body—twisting towards him, quick breath on his shoulder. The flare went out. Some huge insect was squirming in his hand.

His whole being jerked away in an electric spasm of revulsion [. . .]. (178)

The horror devices used here (both fusion and magnification), in the image of the penis transformed into a giant insect, reproduce the dehumanizing rhetoric used in Cold War America about homosexuality. The routine concludes with Carl's angry departure from the Ministry, but the doctor's voice taunts him as he leaves "'Where can you go, Carl?'" (179). When Carl answers, "'Out . . . Away . . . Through the door,'" the doctor sardonically quips, "'The Green Door, Carl?'"<sup>11</sup> At moments like this, Burroughs's satiric distance diminishes, and we feel instead the pain of a divided consciousness. After years of psychoanalysis, Burroughs developed a bitter disdain for the psychiatric profession, but his letters often reproduce aspects of the medical discourse of the time. For instance, he writes to Ginsberg in 1957, "I feel myself closer and closer to resolution of my queerness which would

involve a solution of that illness. For such it is, a horrible sickness. At least in my case. I have just experienced emergence of my non-queer persona as a separate personality" (Burroughs, *Letters of William S. Burroughs* 369).

Burroughs's preoccupation with physical disease is the source of some of the novel's most sickening imagery. As with his tropes of monstrosity, the targets of such imagery are often those who abuse power, or control systems more generally. However, we should note Burroughs's tendency to merge physical disease with sexuality in a specifically gendered way. His discussion of Bang-utot (or Bangungot) is a startlingly clear example of this tendency: "Victims often know that they are going to die, express the fear that their penis will enter the body and kill them. Sometimes they cling to the penis in a state of shrieking hysteria calling on others lest the penis escape and pierce the body" (66). Bangungot, like the other diseases described by Burroughs, is, in fact, a documented syndrome in some Asian countries, and is known also as "sleeping death."<sup>12</sup> The syndrome began appearing in American medical journals in the 1950s when it was noted among Filipino soldiers in the U.S. Navy. It is associated with nightmares, but also with pancreatic and heart disorders, and it does tend to affect males more than females (Tan 1–3). However, the sexual aspect of the disease, specifically the fear of that the penis will pierce the body, is of Burroughs's own invention. Even tuberculosis is given a homosexual dimension when the doctor examining Joselito says to Carl, "'It is always the lungs here . . . pneumonia and, of course, Old Faithful.' The doctor grabs Carl's cock, leaping in the air with a coarse peasant guffaw" (43). Like the psychiatrists and politicians of the time, Burroughs repeatedly, one might even say obsessively, associates homosexuality with disease.

Jamie Russell's study *Queer Burroughs* clarifies the rhetorical complexity of Burroughs's narrative voice by connecting it to the social milieu of the 1950s. Russell's work is illuminating because it shows the extent to which Burroughs was scripted by the homophobic discourse of his time even as he sought actively to resist it. Building on Harris's earlier analysis of *Queer*, Russell argues that William Lee's own reactionary attitude toward the Other "becomes an index of the conformity inherent within Burroughs's masculinization" (26). In other words, Burroughs's own identity as a masculine queer is shaped by the dominant culture even as he opposes it. This masculinization is a reaction to a 1950s episteme that constructed the gay man as effeminate, an identity that Burroughs strenuously rejected. Russell sees *Naked Lunch* as "obsessed with the deployment of the effeminate paradigm by the heterosexual dominant, and it is this cultural formation that Burroughs seeks to expose in order to undermine the creation of gender-schizoid gay subjects" (43). However, in ridiculing the feminizing of gay men, Burroughs often reproduces the monstrous rhetoric of his homophobic culture and therefore creates in *Naked Lunch* the

“schizophrenic fragmentation” that is “the very mark of the regulation of the gay subject by the heterosexual dominant” (Russell 13). The text itself is schizophrenic in that while it mocks the metaphorical monsters created by the dominant culture, it simultaneously generates the same fear and revulsion toward impurity, or interstitiality, that characterizes conservative responses to the Other.

The tropes of disease and monstrosity that Burroughs deploys against the wielders of power spread and multiply throughout his text on all levels, including those levels that articulate the narrator’s own self-professed queerness. But furthermore, the horror of impurity that Carroll theorizes as a crossing of boundaries appears as the transgression of grammatical boundaries in Burroughs’s prose. The text thus enacts the monstrosity that it satirizes, and with a surprising degree of concreteness that becomes clear only when we do a close stylistic analysis. When we examine the syntax itself, we find that Burroughs’s language is itself interstitial in its refusal to maintain consistency in voice, register, point of view, or tense.

The opening pages establish several stylistic patterns that characterize the work as a whole: unstable syntax, inconsistent subject-verb agreement, shifting point of view, and conflicting registers. The first paragraph begins with a simple declarative sentence, “I can feel the heat closing in” (3), to which are attached several participial phrases describing the narcotics officers: “feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station (3). But suddenly, the narrative action has telescoped vertiginously. With the simple present tense verb “I throw,” the narrator makes an ongoing situation contingent on an action that is only now happening. How can the heat already be crooning over a spoon and dropper that he only now, this instant, throws away? Given the deliberately oral quality of the narrative voice, such grammatical inconsistencies are to be expected and might even be viewed as part of the text’s authenticity, consistent with the persona of the socially marginalized hipster. But this reading is immediately undermined by the much more sophisticated parenthetical asides: “(Note: Catnip smells like marijuana when it burns. Frequently passed on the incautious or uninstructed)” (5). This parenthetical, authorial voice feels almost like a comforting arm around the reader’s shoulders, offering a guided tour of the streets. But suddenly, the authorial voice and the narrative voice merge; the objective parenthetical asides are invaded by the stylistic markers of the narrator: “(This is an African practice. Official known as the ‘Leader Out’ has the function of taking old characters out into the jungle and leaving them there” (11). Now, perhaps, we wish to unobtrusively disengage ourselves from the authorial arm around the shoulder, but it is too late. Honest Bill has taken us inside.



As the narrative progresses, boundaries are continually transgressed in overt ways that advertise the text's own monstrosity. The streetwise, colloquial voice of the narrator frequently morphs into fluent and evocative poetry. Meanwhile, phrases used by the narrator and the author of the "Deposition" occur in the reported speech of the characters, while the same lines of dialogue are repeated by different characters. For instance, the authorial "I was only roused to action when the hourglass of junk ran out" (xxxix) becomes Benway's "'He is only roused to action when the hourglass of junk runs out'" (33). Old Ike's speech beginning "'I was traveling with Irene Kelly'" (18) reappears as spoken by Joe in the cafeteria (181). And, of course, the boundaries between genres are ruptured almost immediately. What begins as a gritty, realist confession in the style of *Junky* mutates grotesquely into horror with the description of Willy the Disk and the "terrible urgency of that blind, seeking mouth," which "sometimes sways out on a long tube of ectoplasm" (8). The novel's constant refusal to observe linguistic and discursive boundaries is a crucial component of its monstrosity; *Naked Lunch* is monstrous not only in what it speaks, but also in how it speaks.

It might seem initially that this plurality of voices in *Naked Lunch* is dialogic as defined by Bakhtin. However, Bakhtin is very specific about what constitutes dialogism. Polyphony must be present in the form of different voices, and these voices must possess their own identity, "as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 5). To emphasize the dialogism of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin compares him with Tolstoy:

Thus, despite the multiple levels in Tolstoy's story, ["Three Deaths"] contains neither polyphony nor (in our sense) counterpoint. It contains only one cognitive subject, all else being merely objects of its cognition. Here a dialogic relationship of the author to his heroes is impossible, and thus there is no "great dialogue" in which the characters and author might participate with equal rights; there are only the objectivized dialogues of characters, compositionally expressed within the author's field of vision. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 71)

Obviously, Tolstoy and Burroughs are light years apart in terms of subject matter and style; however, beneath the apparent clash of voices on the surface of *Naked Lunch* we also find "only one cognitive subject," who owns the language of his characters so totally that their words, syntax, and inflections are also his, dispersed randomly but persistently through the text. Particular phrases migrate from the "Deposition" to other parts of the novel; "make with" occurs in "the intestines make with sit-down-adhesions"



(xlili) and then in *The Prophet's Hour*: "Now some citizens really wig when they make with the New Religion" (103). Other phrases associated primarily with the narrator, such as "rusty load" (107) reappear in the rambling monologue of Doc Parker (158). Particular words such as "innarest" are used by the narrative voice (207, 209), Benway (31), and a street boy (111). The marked linguistic deviance of Burroughs's constant subject-verb disagreement also cuts across all levels of the text, from author to narrator to characters including Benway (26), a police officer (15), the Professor (78), Mary (83), the Party Leader (110), the American housewife (112), and Clem and Jody (145). Given even this brief sampling, it is difficult to maintain that *Naked Lunch* is a "carnivalistic polyphony" (Fowler 156), especially given Bakhtin's insistence that "*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices*" (emphasis in original) is the main characteristic of the polyphonic novel (*Problems* 6). It is this monological quality that Hilfer responded to when he observed, "The novel acts as a medium for the transference of fantasies to the reader-host. The reader is not so much affected as infected" (257).

Yet Burroughs's text is a long way from the unitary language that upholds the "linguistic center of the verbal-ideological life of the nation" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 273). The same porousness that creates a monological narrative also resists "the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 271) through its own deformity. If the text objectifies its multiple voices in a Bakhtinian sense, we might say (punning on Kristeva) that the text also abjectifies itself, in that it "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). Furthermore, the effect of *Naked Lunch* on the reader is exactly the experience of abjection; the text creates a sense of the helplessness that Kristeva associates with the pre-symbolic realm, a realm that is both alluring and repulsive in its liminality: "One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones" (Kristeva 9). *Naked Lunch* goes far beyond the monstrosity of form noted by Halberstam in *Frankenstein* and *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* because in its own abjection it also abjectifies the reader, through a narrative voice that is both monologically controlling ("Gentle reader," says Burroughs archly, tipping his hat at Poe, whose phrase this is) and indeterminately open. As Oliver Harris puts it, "Control and its terrors are *present* rather than represented in this writing, *produced by* as much as reproduced in it. We grasp these terrors by the experience of being grasped by them" (37, emphasis in original). For Harris, Burroughs is "*Un Dracula par Lettres*" (196). And this is precisely the dilemma that Burroughs's monological voice raises in a text that professes to be liberatory, a "How-To extend levels of experience by opening the door at the end of the long hall" (*Naked Lunch* 203). As Hilfer has asked, "how can [he] not be tarred with his own brush?" (257). Can abjection and liberation coexist in the same text?

Hilfer has perceptively analyzed the contradictions inherent in the novel's narrative voice, arguing that the narrator is just as guilty as the Senders of manipulation through symbol systems: "The narrator even boasts of the control he believes he has achieved: 'Gentle Reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunistic land crab [. . .]'" (Hilfer 259). For Hilfer, the text is complicit in the process it seeks to expose, "since the narrator's own technique is far closer to sending than that of the traditional novelist" (257). I agree with this interpretation overall, for a Bakhtinian analysis reveals the extent of the text's single-voiced, monological discourse. But I would like to suggest a slightly different reading of the "leopard man" passage quoted above, one that allows us to pinpoint the ultimately liberating function of the text. Consider the possibility that when the narrator warns the Reader about The Word he is not describing the language of his own text, but instead referring to authoritarian, official language, or the "linguistic center of the verbal-ideological life of the nation" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 273). The use of the upper case in "The Word" suggests this contrast with his own language, which is represented by the lower case "word": "Now I, William Seward, will unlock my word horde . . . [. . .]" (208). The allusion to Beowulf here is appropriate, for the narrator is presenting himself as the heroic slayer of monsters—not Grendel, in this case, but The Word. By "unlocking" his word horde, he is freeing language from its authoritarian constraints, but at the same time warning the reader, as Beowulf does the coast guard, what will happen if his heroic gesture is refused. Note that Burroughs uses the same tropes of horror that have dominated the novel's critique of addiction—amputation and dismemberment, sexual hanging, rancid ectoplasm—to describe this authoritarian Word. The fact that, a few pages earlier, the narrator has told us, "I don't have the Word . . . Home in my douche bag" (205) should clarify the distinction between "word" and "Word" in Burroughs's linguistic scheme of things.

Critics and causal readers alike are already aware of Burroughs's preoccupation with the dangerous power of language, for it is an issue he returns to again and again in his fiction, essays, and interviews. But the image of the leopard man is a particularly potent encoding of this theme. In H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the Leopard Man is the most dangerous beast-man on the island.<sup>13</sup> He reverts, long before Moreau's other creations, to hunting, lapping water, and running on all fours, and as a lesson to the other beast people, Moreau has him killed. He is dangerous because, despite the "gift" of language (bestowed in Moreau's House of Pain), he is still a beast: "For the Leopard Man, released from Moreau's eye, had risen straight to his knees, and now, with eyes aflame and his huge feline tusks flashing out from under his curling lips, leaped towards his tormentor" (180). Language, on Moreau's microcosmic island, does

not represent innate reason, the humanizing force that separates us from animals; instead, it is a function that is grafted onto the physical body and becomes part of the animal drive for dominance. Wells, one of the authors Burroughs acknowledged as especially influential (Burroughs, "Hallucinatory Operators" 82), sees language as another conduit for Darwinian power struggles, not as the divine gift that lifts human beings above such struggles. Burroughs clearly shared this view; furthermore, he is aware of his own rhetorical power and the potential for abuse that lies therein. He is also aware of the ways that the "heterosexual dominant" (Russell 13) speaks through him, and this inevitable channeling is the source of the schizophrenic struggle that produced *Naked Lunch*.

*Naked Lunch* may not be polyphonic, but it is still subversive in its refusal to reconcile or mask its own schizophrenic form. This schizophrenia is less baffling when we recreate "the concrete social context of discourse [. . .] as the force that determines its entire stylistic structure" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 300). The schizophrenic form and content of *Naked Lunch*, which attacks and yet employs homophobic tropes of horror, is a profound and ultimately moving representation of Burroughs's own fight to the death against the Word. By contrasting "The Word" with "this book" (207), Burroughs demonstrates the painful necessity of subverting authoritarian discourse from within, of using monstrosity against itself. Possessed by the Word, and by its demonic power to script individual identity, the narrator must exclaim, only half ironically, "Gentle reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner" (37).<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the narrator's voice is that of the "hypnotic bard, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner" (Hilfer 254). But on the other hand, for Burroughs the Ancient Mariner is actually the enemy, the carrier of the Word, the Wise Man who converts "live orgones into dead bullshit" (105): "Are we never to be free of this grey-beard loon lurking on every mountain top in Tibet, subject to drag himself out of a hut in the Amazon, waylay one in the Bowery?" (105). Burroughs, speaking through the persona of William Lee, embodies the masculine hero-warrior who "will quell the Loch Ness Monster" (205) with authority and yet, at the same time, will give up that authority by unlocking his word horde (208). He is, in a way, the Wise Man who has abdicated.<sup>15</sup>

Is it not inevitable, then, that in satirizing the monstrous rhetoric of the Gothic 1950s, Burroughs should employ such rhetoric himself? To return briefly to Harris, "Burroughs finds himself, to recall the situation of Lee in *Queer*, condemned to transmit the discourse transmitted to him, forced to pass it on like a curse" (Harris 198). Yet in passing it on, Burroughs also seeks to dismantle it, to scramble the transmission. The book's importance resides in the deeply painful vision it gives us of an individual heroically struggling to free himself from the crippling rhetoric of homophobia, in the process showing the reader that we are all scripted (interpellated, Althusser

would say) by the cultural norms we have absorbed since birth. The burden then falls upon the reader to step back from the hypnotic presence of the Ancient Mariner, in whatever guise he may assume, and “Let go! Jump!” (201) into a new cognitive space of personal agency. Herein lies the beauty of Burroughs’s postmodern monstrosity—as Hilfer puts it, “The novel’s paradoxically enabling gesture is to create readers capable of rejecting its most seductive overtures” (265).

The ideological function of *Naked Lunch* is not, then, so much as a “disciplinary sign” that “encourages readers to read themselves and their own bodies and scan themselves for signs of devolution” (Halberstam 72)—at least, not in a reactionary sense that maintains a controlling fear of otherness. Instead, it asks readers to scan themselves for signs of the crippling passivity that comes from holding the Ancient Mariner’s gaze too long and being seduced by social symbol systems. As Whiting has put it, “Burroughs removes the monstrous from an organic or developmental disruption of nature at the personal level and makes it a pervasive structural feature of the social system” (166). Since we are shaped by the discourses we inhabit, Burroughs must fracture his own message even as he transmits it. The alienation that the reader feels when assaulted by Honest Bill in his Naked Lunch Room is a necessary part of the reader’s emancipation. The reward is being able to see “what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* xlii), regardless of whether that newspaper is from 1958 or 2008. William S. Burroughs thus stands as one of the great progenitors of what Halberstam calls postmodern Gothic, a mutated form that “warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence” (Halberstam 27).

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## NOTES

1. Quoted in David Skall’s *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 229.

2. In an interview conducted in 1982, Burroughs identified horror as one of his favorite genres (Burroughs, “Fast Frames, Slow Draw” 568). As a boy, Burroughs had been an avid reader of pulp fiction (Grauerholz 5), penning his own versions of Westerns, crime thrillers, and gothic horror, citing Edgar Allen Poe as one of his earliest influences (Burroughs, “From *Junky*: Prologue” 17). Elsewhere he enthusiastically recalled his immersion in magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories* (Burroughs, “A Moveable Feast” 633).

3. Jennie Skerl has noted that, in terms of its registers, *Naked Lunch* “depends mostly on the detective story, the gothic tale, older science fiction of the mad doctor variety, and pornography” (Skerl 8). However, she does not explore any of these genres in detail.

4. See Anthony Hilfer's "Mariner and Wedding Guest in William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*," Ron Loewinsohn's "'Gentle Reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner': Narrator(s) and Audience in William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*," and Oliver Harris's *William S. Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*.

5. Edward J. Ingebreetsen uses the same phrase in *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*, although we arrived at this wording independently.

6. The trial of State Department official Alger Hiss, who was accused of espionage by the homosexual and erstwhile communist Whittaker Chambers, took place at this time.

7. In June 1948, Truman had signed the Miller Sexual Psychopath Law, the initial rationale for which was the necessity of increasing penalties for sex crimes against children. But it also legally defined sodomy for the first time, and in a way that did not limit the act to sexual crimes against children. The penalty for sodomy was "a fine of up to a thousand dollars or twenty years in prison" (Johnson 58). Repeat offenders would undergo compulsory psychiatric review and would often find themselves labeled as a sexual psychopath, defined as "'a person, not insane, who by a course of repeated misconduct in sexual matters has evidenced such lack of power to control his sexual impulses as to be dangerous to other persons'" (qtd. in Johnson 58).

8. Kristeva writes of "the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (54). Burroughs's representation of the female body fits with uncanny precision into Kristeva's paradigm of abjection, the psychological place of refuge from devastating otherness.

9. In *Washington Confidential*, a sensationalist exposé of the capital's civil service, journalists Lait and Mortimer luridly discussed "the 6000 fags in government jobs" (126) and described the city itself as a "'femmocracy'" (99) where "there are at least twice as many Sapphic lovers as fairies" (121).

10. Burroughs's Dr. Berger seems a clear reference to Dr. Edmund Bergler, who in 1957 published a book entitled *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* followed by *1000 Homosexuals* in 1959. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Bergler concluded that homosexuality was a disease. He offered a cure based on intensive therapy, for which he claimed a high success rate.

11. The likely reference here is to H. G. Wells's story "The Door in the Wall," in which a young boy discovers a magical garden behind a green door and is punished by his father for both wandering and lying (Wells, "The Door" 151). As the boy becomes a man, he occasionally sees the green door again, but he never finds the courage to open it. The language of the story constantly emphasizes desire and transgression; hence a queer reading is easily generated.

12. See Kaluag-Liboro.

13. When Benway's Reconditioning Center breaks down earlier in *Naked Lunch*, "Leopard Men tear people to pieces with iron claws, coughing and grunting" (208). The brutal chaos perpetrated by the escapees strongly echoes the horror felt by Pendrick in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*: "Imagine yourself surrounded by the most horrible cripples and maniacs it is possible to conceive, and you may understand a little of my feelings with these grotesque caricatures of humanity about me" (Wells, *Moreau* 148).

14. Both Hilfer and Loewinsohn have discussed the importance of the Ancient Mariner in relation to Burroughs's narrator, and certainly the relationship between narrator and reader in *Naked Lunch* is very close to that of the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest in Coleridge's poem. In my reading, however, the Mariner is a pernicious element that must be exorcised through the writing of the book.

15. In reviewing this manuscript, Jennie Skerl suggested that Burroughs viewed himself as a Prospero figure. Indeed, he makes frequent use of fragments from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in subsequent works, particularly Prospero's famous lines in Act IV, Scene 1: "these our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (148–50). Towards the end of *The Ticket That Exploded* Burroughs reiterates versions of "These our actors bid you a long last goodbye" and at the end of *Nova Express* he repeats "melted into air" (152) numerous times.

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