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Get Off the Point: Deconstructing Context in the Novels of William S. Burroughs

Micheal Sean Bolton

“Ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs.”

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

One of the most unique features of William S. Burroughs’s experimental novels is the absence of any stable setting, any consistent geographical location or time period, through which to read these experimental texts. The material contexts of time and place shift, transmute, and turn back on themselves. Readers cannot find objective points of reference as the narrative perspective moves through time and space with no causal logic and no fully recognizable points of departure or arrival. What Burroughs offers instead amounts to a simulacrum of material context, settings that not only simulate recognizable physical and temporal locations but replace them. According to Jean Baudrillard, this movement from representation to simulacrum marks the conflation of the real and the imaginary as the fiction supersedes its “real” referent and reveals both as “neither real nor unreal: *hyperreal*” (125). The emergence of the hyperreal produces a world of “total simulation, without origin, immanent, without a past, without a future, a diffusion of all coordinates” (125). In like manner, the world of

Burroughs's novels destabilizes and diffuses all correspondence to real world locations, both temporal and physical, creating a simulation without origin. He thus achieves a hyperreal rather than a fictional or representational world, a world that emphasizes its own artifice in order to liberate readers from imprisonment within the constructions—both physical and ideological—of the “real” world.

Though many critics attempt to draw parallels between Burroughs's world and our own, the instability of his hyperreal world creates incessant complications for those who wish to read the novels as satires, manifestos, or societal prognostications. While Timothy Murphy asserts that to read Burroughs's novels “we must first establish a context, both historical and theoretical, for his creative activities” (15), he eventually concedes that “Burroughs's narrative is disconnected and de-chronologized, cutting across the lines that constitute the power network of the transcendent script” (177). Despite the strong temptation to stabilize and to familiarize Burroughs's world using familiar contexts in historical or cultural ideology, the novels always resist rigid connections to particular contexts. Even if “it would be possible to read the *Nova* conspiracy as a historical analysis disguised as prophetic fiction, to see in the Biologic Courts a version of the United Nations, in the *Nova Mob* an Imperial America, and in Hassan i Sabbah an avatar of Osama bin Laden” (Harris 193), ultimately “Burroughs accomplishes with words what the Dadaists did with objects; he cuts them out of the context that defines their use and that consequently binds us to the real world” (Vernon 216). The contexts provided in the novels are always in flux, transforming, merging, and disintegrating beyond recognition. Burroughs's project of disconnecting his narratives from stable contextual anchor points may be best exemplified by his careful dismantling of the material contexts of time and geography, both as points of orientation for readers and as a foundations for ideological interpretations of the novels.

The challenge for readers and critics of Burroughs is to cease relying on external frames through which to contextualize his narratives and, instead, to create contexts spontaneously during the act of reading. His contexts are not material, derived from contexts external to the narratives, but are associative and drawn from the associations and juxtapositions of various unstable temporal and physical dispositions within the narratives. Readers must therefore pay close attention to the novels' repetitions of

time and place, noting both congruities and contradictions, in order to create and re-create the world of the novels upon each reading. Following the associative method, this essay seeks to investigate Burroughs's deconstruction of material context not through a linear analysis of his development of images and ideas through his novels—the novels fail to provide such linear development—but through a progressive deepening of analysis by scrutinizing his project of deconstruction from the numerous angles by which he attacks material contexts.

Often in poststructuralist theory, as notions of truth and subjectivity are exposed as artificial and interested, theorists argue that the meaning of a discourse arises from its social-historical context, which is in turn determined by the material context—the temporal and physical location—in which the discourse occurs. These explorations of the interests at play in particular contexts are explorations of ideology. Louis Althusser observes, "Ideology has a material existence" in that "the 'ideas' or 'representations,' etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal (*idéale* or *idéelle*) or spiritual existence, but a material existence" (242). In other words, particular ideologies (in Althusser's language) exist in particular times and places and through these are connected to particular histories and cultures.¹ Ideologically focused readings thus depend upon the contexts that relate texts to the external—material—times and places in which ideologies exist and operate. By disintegrating material contexts, Burroughs seeks both to remove ideological positions from his narratives and to problematize ideological approaches to their readings.

Nevertheless, much of Burroughs criticism relies upon establishing underlying ideological perspectives in the novels in order to impose continuity onto otherwise fractured and chaotic texts. These readings suppose that without the structure provided by ideologies the novels descend into pure linguistic play devoid of meaning or relevance—in Murphy's words, "an endlessly deferred 'participation in language games' or an empty 'love for the world through language' à la John Barth" (3). According to Baudrillard, however, such ideological readings spring from an agenda "of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (13), a decidedly un-Burroughsian agenda. The novels, in fact, display an unquestionable distrust of all ideological discourse. As Tony Tanner points out in a discussion of *Naked Lunch*, "he has no desire to emulate the very thing he condemns

in the book, i.e. sending out a manufactured version of reality which takes over the reader's or hearer's mind" (121). Ideologies, for Burroughs, amount to these "manufactured version[s] of reality;" they "are the words of liars cowards collaborators traitors" (*TNN* 186), whose goal is total control. He warns: "'The' word of Alien Enemy imprisons 'thee' in Time. In Body. In Shit" (*TNN* 186). By extension, ideological readings constitute a threat of the intrusion of mechanisms of oppression and control. Jacques Derrida elucidates such wariness of ideological readings, explaining, "Once there is the exercise of force in the determination and the imposition of meaning, and first of all in the stabilizing determination of a context, it is inevitable that there will be some form of repression" (*Limited* 149–50). Burroughs responds to this threat with an order of "total resistance directed against this conspiracy to pay off peoples of the earth in ersatz bullshit" (*TNN* 188). This "total resistance" features significantly the disintegration of material context through the destabilization of temporal and physical positions.

Fixing positions in time and space engenders the same sorts of binaries as does ascribing absolute meanings to language. Burroughs's narratives always resist binary thinking, and so, context must always be as unstable and mutable as language. Material contexts are not absent from or eradicated by the experimental prose, but re-determined as internal relationships. Burroughs advises, "You will find that the intervals are as important as the so-called context" (*TE* 163). Rather than arising from pre-existing, fixed points that inform or locate the narratives from outside, the novels' contexts develop from within as the texts generate associations between variable and ever-shifting times and locations that "always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of a referral to the other" (*Limited* 137). The contexts of Burrough's novels are determined, then, by readers during reading and according to their own experiences of the "network of differences" created as the narrative juxtaposes and transmutes its temporal and topographic markers. Consequently, context can only be determined during each act of reading as the time and place of the reader, the author, and the narrative engage and merge with one another. The emphasis on difference and deferral rather than identity and signification, undercuts the strength and relevance of ideological approaches.

Time and History

Experiments with temporality are certainly not exclusive to Burroughs's novels. Flashbacks, stream of consciousness, and non-linear narratives have become relatively commonplace in twentieth century and contemporary fiction. According to Paul Ricoeur, such experiments amount to attempts to represent the chaotic nature of the world and are comparable to realism's efforts at mimesis. Ricoeur argues that "a jagged chronology, interrupted by jumps, anticipations, and flashbacks, in short, a deliberately multidimensional configuration, is better suited to a view of time that has no possible overview, no overall internal cohesiveness" (63). However, Burroughs's narrative experiments accomplish more than the creation of "a jagged chronology" reflective of modern society's lack of cohesion. In fact, his narratives defy strong connections to modern society, or to any other. Burroughs's novels destabilize chronology to such a degree that time no longer provides firm context. Distortions of temporality in the novels include the destabilization of the present time of the narrative, the inclusion of characters who are not bound by time, and the blending and blurring of genres, all resulting in anachronisms and temporal instabilities that sabotage attempts to make historical connections.

Rather than fragment or even reverse the temporal order of his narratives, instead Burroughs frequently works to conflate present and past in his novels, leaving readers incapable of fixing the narratives in either periodic or relative time. In *The Ticket That Exploded*, he instructs:

It is time to forget. To forget time. Is it? I was it will be it is? No. It was and it will be if you stand still for it. The point where the past touches the future is right where you are sitting now on your dead time ass hatching virus negatives into present time into the picture reality of a picture planet. Get off your ass, boys. Get off the point." (TE 196)

For Burroughs, to remain fixed in or fixated upon time, whether a moment or a determined span of time, creates a binary—now is not then and then is not now. Though he does place many narrative events in recognizable time frames, and even occasionally offers precise dates, these time cues are ultimately arbitrary and narratives blend into and out of alternate timelines freely. The time cues that appear in the form of precise dates often

seem to be provided as reinforcement of their ineffectiveness in providing narrative anchors; they nearly always prove unstable. The absence of discernible time markers negates the possibility of establishing time-dependent contexts for the novels. Thus, the interpretations of these narratives cannot be effectively established in reference to social-historical conditions: those within the novels themselves, or even those existing either at the time of writing or of reading, as none of these is ever clearly or consistently reflected by the texts.

Burroughs's model for the oppression and imprisonment of historical, linear time is the Reality Film; liberation from the Reality Film is liberation from history. The Reality Film serves as Burroughs's metaphor for time as viewed from the outside, from beyond its linear constraints. In the same way as film, the movement of linear time is in only one direction and even this movement is only illusory. Burroughs writes, "When the projector stops a still picture is on the screen" (*TE* 160). The static, confining nature of time can be seen by those who escape the film and see the series of still images that comprise it. Mary McCarthy characterizes this view of time as a sort of map: "Seen in terms of space, history shrivels into a mere wrinkling or furrowing of the surface as in an aerial relief-map or one of those pieced-together aerial photographs known in the trade as (again) mosaics" (35). To be trapped in the Reality Film, to be locked into linear time, means moving only in a single direction that has been determined by the owners and operators of the Reality Studio. As Tanner recognizes, "To combat the manufacturers of the enslaving film we are taught to call reality, man has to develop immunity from the image virus and then attack the place where the film is made" (132). To develop immunity from the image virus one must alter the experience of time.

For Burroughs, such an alteration amounts to "breaking the so-called natural laws of the universe . . . the monumental fraud of cause and effect, to be replaced by the more pregnant concept of synchronicity" (*WL* 30). His alternative to the linear experience of time offered by the Reality Film is the fragmented and synchronic format of the Penny Arcade peep show, featured prominently in *The Wild Boys*. A viewer of the peep show explains how the technique operates:

I am pulled into the film in a stream of yellow light and I can pull people out of the film withdrawal shots pulling the

flesh off naked boys. Sequences are linked by the presence of some arbitrary object a pin wheel, A Christmas-tree ornament, a pyramid, an Easter egg, a copper coil going away and coming always in the same numerical order" (*TNW* 405).

Though presented in sequential order, the images of the peep show do not follow one another along linear or causal lines, but interconnect and overlap through association. And the viewer of the peep show, unlike that of the Reality Film, is not locked inside or outside of the film: "The structuralized peep show may intersperse the narrative and then I am back in front of the screen and moving in and out of it" (*TNW* 405–06). The viewer both participates in and observes the film at once creating a true freedom of movement as opposed to the Reality Film's one-track series of frames. Robin Lydenberg, referring to the "memory cut-ups" of *Ticket* (also an apt descriptor for *The Wild Boys*' peep show sections), notes, "We are no longer trapped in repetition but vibrated free of its constraints; the movement of the memory cut-ups is more explicitly a movement in and out of time" (87).

Ricoeur observes, "Contemporary experiments in the area of narrative techniques are thus aimed at shattering the very experience of time" (81); but contends that while "[t]he time of a novel may break away from real time . . . it cannot help but be configured in terms of new norms of temporal organization that are still perceived as temporal by the reader" (25). He characterizes this kind of experimentation as "games with time" resulting from fictive narratives' "split between utterance and statement" (61), or (in terms he credits to Günther Müller), "the time of narrating and narrated time" (77). Ricoeur clarifies the two forms of fictive time as follows: the *time of narrating* is "the time taken to tell the story which is comparable to the interpretation that the orchestra conductor gives to the theoretical time of performing a piece of music" (79); the *time narrated* is "the fictive experience of time, such as is undergone by the characters, themselves fictive, in the narrative" (76). Manipulation of the interplay between these two temporal levels has been a feature of experimental and frame narratives at least since Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760). In contemporary experimental fiction, Ricoeur notes a condition of heightened discord between these forms of fictive time that generates the fragmentation,

confusion, etc., which characterize them. However, he argues that even these narratives are grounded to the temporal position of the narrator who “in fact determines a present—the present of narration” (98). The “present of narration” offers readers a context within which to engage the temporal games of the narrative and to order the fragments and confusions they create.

Burroughs’s games with time, however, exceed those of most experimental authors, who tend to adhere to the assumptions Ricoeur makes. His narratives are not simply nonlinear, as nonlinear narratives still operate in terms of a recognizable present and past, but are essentially atemporal. Though some nonlinear narratives may obscure which narrative strain represents present or past, the difference between the two is almost always discernible as the position of the narrator determines the present. However, the stable present of the narrator/narrative simply does not exist in Burroughs’s novels. Narrators or, more to the point, narrative perspectives do not maintain stable temporal positions, do not hold onto or remain within a “present of narration.” Readers are confronted with narrators and narrative forms that not only have no control of the narrated time, but do not occupy any fixed narrative present.

As Cary Nelson notes, “Burroughs’s fiction attempts to make *this* instant a spatial experience of all time, to make the present a radical implosion of the beginning and the end of time” (129). In *Ticket*, Burroughs exemplifies this narrative complication using a journal entry format, a format featuring explicit time markers of entry dates. The journal is introduced by an anonymous narrator speaking in quotation marks that disappear when the journal entries begin. The narrative perspective appears to shift with the disappearance of the quotation marks, which do not reappear until the end of the chapter. As the frame narrative gives way to the embedded narrative of the journal, its author (also unnamed) is leading an expedition to explore Ward Island. The journal’s entries are each dated, beginning with entries on July 7 and 8 of 1862. The 1862 narrative represents a past time being reflected back upon by both the frame narrative and the journal form, a record of past events. The present time of the narrative seems to be that of the frame narrative. However, Burroughs complicates the temporality of the narrative dating the third journal entry July 9, 1962 rather than the expected 1862 (*TE* 97, emphasis added). The 1962 date likely represents the present time of the frame narrative, which here is confused with

the past time of the journal narrative. The timelines are not simply juxtaposed, but are conflated and ultimately become indistinct from one another. The journal's coalescence of the two timelines, a century apart from one another, continues through the chapter, subverting the temporality of the embedded journal narrative while simultaneously conflating it with the frame narrative. Such confusions challenge the notion that the "present of narration" can be relied upon as a stable temporal location by which readers can orient themselves within the novels. The time of the events being narrated and the point in time from which they narrated are equally dis-solute.

The temporal slippage is further signaled by a change in the narrative style from the sort of linear report commonly found in journal writing to the absence of linearity in the cut-up technique. The first two entries are characterized by clear, descriptive accounts of the expedition: "We got an early start poling and paddling our canoe up the river—There seems to be little wild life about" (*TE* 97). But the clarity of the journal decays in the 1962 entry: "Disease of the image track—The onset is sudden voices screaming a steady stream—I had forgotten unseen force of memory pictures" (*TE* 97–98). The transformation to the cut-up technique at the moment of the temporal shift indicates an essential unreliability in the temporal positions of the narratives. As the "memory pictures" of the journal's past exert their "unseen force," the past intrudes upon and subsumes the present that should contain it.

A July 9, 1862 entry immediately follows that of July 9, 1962, intensifying the confusion of the timelines and returning to the linear narrative style. This style continues in the following entry, but the timeline remains uncertain: "July 11? 12? 13? 1862" (*TE* 99). The question of which day the entry recounts leads, in the next entry, to the merger of three days into one: "July 11, 12, 13, 1962" (*TE* 100). Again, the cut-up narrative returns to announce the complications of locating the narrative in time. Though "[p]resent time leads to an understanding of knowing and open food in the language of life," eventually "[w]ind of morning disintegrates present time" (*TE* 100). The subsequent entry from July 14, 1862 begins, typically, with a linear narrative, but soon disintegrates into cut-up: "A young male face of dazzling beauty moved in and i was free of my body—The orchid girl floated over the pool toward me and i rushed her stuttering back sex words that tore her tentative substance like bullets" (*TE* 101). The "tenta-

tive substance” of the linear narrative, rendered as the orchid girl, is overcome by the “stuttering” and “dazzling beauty” of the cut-up method, freeing the narrative’s “body” from the constraints of temporality. The following entry seems to reinscribe the primacy of the narrative of the present time, dating the entry “July 14, 1962–Present time” (*TE* 101). However, Burroughs confirms the indeterminacy of the “present time” as 1962 is also “future time” (*TE* 101). The final sentence of the chapter reminds us once again that “[w]ind of morning disintegrates present time” (*TE* 102).

The indeterminacy of the present in the novels strengthens the possibility of time travel, a common occurrence in the novels. As Murphy writes:

Neither the structure of the past nor the structure of the future is given in advance; either can be manipulated in the present to produce different states of affairs. This is the role that artworks can play in the present, the role of fantastic structures that alter the direction and speed of the present moment by altering the past trajectory on which the present would have to travel. (44)

The cut-up and fold-in methods create not only a confusion of narrative linearity, but also create the possibility of time travel. Burroughs writes, “Now when I fold today’s paper in with yesterday’s paper and arrange the pictures to form a time section montage, I am literally moving back to the time when I read yesterday’s paper, that is traveling in time back to yesterday” (*TNS* 82). Here, “the ‘fold-in’ method is itself a means of time travel” (Enns 110). The conflation of past and present disrupts linear time creating a condition of atemporality that opens the possibility of movement backward as well as forward; if time is fluid, then so are movements in and through time.

Burroughs employs time travel for two purposes: one being the manipulation of the past in order to effect change in the present; the other being the release from the constraints of linear time. John Vernon notes that for Burroughs time “exists at two polar extremes”:

At one polarity, temporality is the experience of boundlessness, specifically a release from the boundaries, the gravity,

of the past. . . . At the other polarity, time is a being completely bounded, a being trapped, specifically by the body and by the decay of the body" (219).

In addition to its concerns about the corporeality of the time-bound human body, the latter polarity views time itself as a "being" bounded by the "body" of the past. This view of time trapped in a decaying body relates to the Foucauldian notion of historicism, which "calls on the past to resolve the question of the present" (359). Returning to the conditions of the past, according to this view, can cure the maladies of the present. Foucault characterizes this notion as an "ideology of the return" that leads to a nostalgic attachment to an idealized past (359). In Burroughs, the ideology of return extends to a supposition that the present can be altered by returning to the past and changing events, as in the declaration from *Port of Saints*, "We will rewrite all the wrongs of history" (*PS* 33). In *Cities* also, Burroughs presents a typical return strategy through one of his ubiquitous doctors who proposes "to remove the temporal limits, shifting our experimental theater into past time in order to circumvent the whole tedious problem of overpopulation" (*CRN* 21). But this strategy still keeps one trapped within Vernon's bound time. Derrida advises that such "repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*]*—that is, in a word, a history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of a presence*" (*Writing* 279). Even though alterable, under this view time is still bound by the notion of a stable and distinct history to which one can return. Burroughs must work through this complication in order to release his narratives from the ideology of return.

The strategy of returning to the past in order to rescue the future sees its execution in "The Mayan Caper" chapter of *The Soft Machine*. The chapter's time traveler, Joe Brundige, returns to the past of ancient Mayan civilization to sabotage the control machines that forecast their influence toward the oppression of present societies. As Anthony Enns notes, "[L]ike the Mayan priests, who exercise a monopoly over written information in order to control and manipulate the masses, the Trak News Agency [in Brundige's "present"] similarly controls people's perception of reality through the use of computers" (102–03). The Trak News Agency

has become the new priesthood, employing IBM machines, in the same way as the Mayan calendar, to control “thought feeling and *apparent* sensory impressions” by monopolizing and manipulating the flow of information (*TNS* 148–49). For Burroughs, the subversion of the Mayan control mechanisms of the past resonates in all times and the sabotage of the Mayan machines is duplicated on the present day IBM machines. In the past: “A great weight fell from the sky. . . . Tidal waves rolled over the Mayan control calendar” (*TNS* 93). In the present: “Symbol books of the all-powerful board that had controlled thought and feeling and movement of a planet from birth to death with iron claws of pain and pleasure—The whole structure of reality went up in silent explosions” (*TNS* 160). The events parallel one another because, for all practical purposes, they are the same event occurring at once across time.

But, to use time travel as a corrective for the issues of the present leaves one still constrained within the code systems of time and history. As Murphy notes, Burroughs views historical time as “a rigidly determined succession of abstract and eternal structures” and “as flat repetition without the possibility of novelty” (134). But this historical notion of time reflects only one of Burroughs’s polar extremes of time. At the other extreme lies atemporality: “explosion, being cut out of a context, the experience of total transportation out of oneself, out of a location, out of materiality” (Vernon 219). For Burroughs, then, time travel represents not merely a means to correct events of the past but also a complete release from bound, linear time and a transcendence of the constraints of history.

Brundige’s mission in the Mayan past is, in fact, to reprogram codes of control that are specifically linked to time: “Mayan control system depends on the calendar and the codices which contain symbols representing all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals living under such limited circumstances” (*TNS* 91). The calendar consists of codes of control that constrain “human animals” in time. Burroughs imagines, “The Lord of Time surrounded by files and calculating machines, word and image bank of a picture planet” (*TE* 104). These calculating machines produce the words and images of power structures; and subsequently, they also produce time, which is itself a product of language. “Well time is getting dressed and undressed eating sleeping not the actions but the *words* . . . What we *say* about what we do” (*TE* 114). Furthermore, “What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of *that* history was the

word" (*TE* 50). Time, and thus history, constitute codes and, as such, cannot be separated from word.

But, just as time can imprison through the codes imposed by the calendar, time can be transcended by subverting those codes. Vernon writes, "The cut-up world is the final condition of time, . . . time as a series of separate instantaneous flashes, time objectified and shattered into pieces, thus *no time at all*" (222, emphasis added). Burroughs demonstrates the way in which the cut-up method shatters time in a passage from *Ticket*:

That's the clock if you set it two hours in advance the last of the last like we are in London a sentence words together in and out you know Manic Goddess 18 of 19 was done the painting was never done never look at a model uninhibited by disease by us astonishing we had done it without ever having a model starlet trapped in the sentence with full stop young painter are models myself look have you been there already?" (*TE* 12)

This cut-up passage achieves atemporality even as it describes its own process. Hours can be shifted, removed from one context and grafted into others, just as words can. Juxtapositions of time, like those of words, create new associations: new models in new paintings. The models within the passage are "not trapped in the sentence" but are freed to inhabit multiple paintings that are "never done" and are "there already."

Cities of the Red Night offers Burroughs's most developed criticism of the ideology of return. In this case, the return motif provides structure for a substantial share of the novel. In one of the book's two main narrative lines—the eighteenth century pirate adventure narrative of Noah Blake—Burroughs employs revisionist history as a corrective for a dystopic, disease-ridden world. The pirate narrative represents an attempt to retrieve the possibility for a democratic utopia based upon "[t]he liberal principles embodied in the French and American revolutions" and "put into practice by pirate communes" (*CRN* xi). Burroughs models the novel's pirate commune on that of one Captain Mission² claiming, "Had Captain Mission lived long enough to set an example for others to follow, mankind might have stepped free from the deadly impasse of insoluble problems in which we now find ourselves" (*CRN* xiv). The pirate narrative, then, seemingly

attempts to revise history and to reclaim the utopian democracy exemplified by Mission's commune.

However, Burroughs's commune cannot escape the very injustice and disease it attempts to rectify. In order to establish the commune, let alone to maintain it, war must be waged against the powers that oppose its libertarian ideals. Being outnumbered, the commune must develop more effective weapons and tactics to defeat its enemies, including germ warfare. The use of disease against the enemy is proposed by Burroughs's amoral scientist, Doctor Benway, who argues: "Sickness has killed more soldiers than all the wars of history. We can turn illness to account" (*CRN* 104). Benway lists a number of biological contaminants including malaria, dysentery, typhoid, etc. for use against enemies. These diseases represent the same biological threat that infects the contemporary world of Clem Snide's narrative, Virus B-23. The ideology of return ultimately results in failure as alterations in the past simply reduplicate the problems of the present. Noah Blake later recognizes the danger of turning the enemies' tactics against them: "To turn this mechanism back on the Inquisitors gives me a feeling of taking over the office of fate" (*CRN* 190). History is not corrected, but reinscribed through repetition. At the end of the book, Burroughs ruminates, "Better weapons lead to better and better weapons, until the earth is a grenade with the fuse burning" (*CRN* 332).

Snide's narrative must approach the problem in a different way. Unlike Noah Blake, he recognizes the inflexibility of history and when questioned about possible justifications for biological and/or chemical warfare, he replies, "You would do it justified or not" (*CRN* 203). He understands the inevitability of the events of history. For Snide, the revision of the past will not suffice to repair the present, he must bring about a conflation of the past and the present—the technique Burroughs employs in the journal passages from *Ticket* discussed above—to short circuit the influence of history. Burroughs first proposes the technique in *Ticket* writing, "These writers are going to *write history as it happens in present time*" (*TE* 123). Snide thus begins composing his own "pirate story" (*CRN* 173); but rather than once again revising that particular past, he begins to blend in Mayan and Egyptian texts belonging to different histories, resulting in an alternate narrative line featuring characters that do not occupy any particular time, historical or fictive. Snide is then able to abandon the present time of his narrative by merging with the character of Audrey Carsons who shares

Snide's memories and "was a private eye in another incarnation" (*CRN* 271). Snide's transposition into the consciousness of Carsons bears resemblance to the time travel technique Burroughs describes elsewhere:

Toby experienced a feeling of ether vertigo as he was pulled into a whirling black funnel. Far away, as if through a telescope, he could see someone sitting at a table, a slim youth of about twenty with yellow hair and brown eyes. A fluid plop and he was inside the youth, looking out. (*CRN* 247)

Snide's time traveling does not seek a revision of the past, but the merger of two time lines; just as the body switching involved in time travel is not re-identification or possession, but a union of two consciousnesses.

The characters of Snide's alternate and atemporal narrative can also enter the pirate narrative, infecting it with their own temporal indeterminacy. As a result, Noah Blake's journal-like linear narrative decays as time destabilizes: "Silver spots boil in front of my eyes. I am standing in the empty ruined courtyard hundreds of years from now, a sad ghostly visitant in a dead city, smell of nothing and nobody there" (*CRN* 197). Blake loses the time of his own narrative: "I am calling without a throat, without a tongue, calling across the centuries" (*CRN* 197), and like Snide, abandons his own temporality to merge with the consciousness of Carsons. The novel drives the point home when later, in the atemporal narrative, "Audrey screams without a throat, without a tongue" (*CRN* 306). Audrey's condition echoes that of Blake when his temporal location dissolves.

The narratives of both Blake and Snide, then, become subsumed under the atemporal narrative of Carsons, a narrative which merges genres and, therefore, histories:

Criminals and outcasts of many times and places are found here: bravos from seventeenth-century Venice, old western shootists, Indian Thuggees, assassins from Alamut, samurai, Roman gladiators, Chinese hatchet men, pirates and *pistoleros*, Mafia hit-men, dropouts from intelligence agencies and secret police (*CRN* 280).

The blend of genres conflates historical periods and the time markers associated with any given genre lose relevance. History is rendered impotent as “[c]haracters, actions, and images from one story appear in another; characters and narrators merge and shift identities as they enter different narratives; time and space merge so that all three stories seem to be taking place in a past that is also the present and the future” (Skerl 90). Eventually, the narrative *Cities of the Red Night* becomes a stage play being performed in a high school gym (*CRN* 319). All characters from all times and locations converge and merge within the play, which is a series of atemporal vignettes that synopsizes the novel. The explosion that ends the play prefigures the claim of the unnamed narrator (possibly Blake again) at the novel’s end who announces “I have blown a hole in time with a firecracker” (*CRN* 332). Ultimately, Burroughs works toward a spatialization of time as narratives are released from the bonds of time and history, moving “all out of time and into space” (*TNS* 158).

Place and Culture

The novels’ insistence upon a movement out of temporal location should not, however, be construed as a movement into spatial location. For Burroughs, “space” is not to be read as “territory,” but instead bears much resemblance to Baudrillard’s map-simulations. And the places that occupy space—cities, countries, even bodies—are abstract rather than geographical or cultural. Baudrillard explains: “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1). The map that simulates territory, in fact, “precedes the territory” (1) in that its quest for perfect representation constantly redefines and transforms territory until the territory becomes as much a representation of the map as the map of the territory. This reversal reveals the artifice of both map and territory, erasing distinctions between the imaginary and the real. Burroughs’s spaces operate in a similar manner to challenge the notion of places as stable physical or cultural locations. Burroughs’s places, like Baudrillard’s maps, exist in continual states of movement and mutation as simulations of territories that themselves have no foundations, no origins, and no stable positions.

In his introduction to *Interzone*, James Grauerholz describes Burroughs's world model as "that of an indeterminate universe of endless permutation and recombination" (xv). This notion of the world, of place, contradicts that proposed by theorists who argue that place is constituted by "location, material form, and meaningfulness" (Gieryn 466). Thomas Gieryn expounds this view of place, asserting that "[p]laces are made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs; safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not" (472). These binary qualities, as they are fixed onto locations, become definitive, as "[m]eanings that individuals and groups assign to places are more or less embedded in historically contingent and shared cultural understandings of the terrain" (473). Places, in this account, become established in opposition to other, different places and according to a population's "shared cultural understandings"—a concept reflective of Althusser's particular ideologies. Such places offer little hope for cultural and/or ideological diversity and display great potential for social disparity, hierarchy, and marginalization.

Fixed locations such as these represent for Burroughs sites of cultural and ideological oppression. The Trak Reservation in *Soft Machine* exemplifies institutionalized space:

The Trak Reservation so-called includes almost all areas in and about the United Republics of Freelandt and, since the Trak Police process all matters occurring in Trak Reservation and no one knows what is and is not Reservation cases, civil and criminal are summarily removed from civilian courts with a single word TRAK to unknown sanctions . . ." (*TNS* 43).

The homogenization of place, of all areas of Freelandt, through the imposition of fixed cultural meanings (as laws in the form of the Trak Police) creates a repressive society in which any who exhibit cultural difference are criminals and subject to "unknown sanctions." Gieryn explains this phenomenon, writing, "Place sustains difference and hierarchy [. . .] by embodying in visible and tangible ways the cultural meanings variously

ascribed to them” (474). Marginalization or even ostracism awaits all who fail to reflect the ascribed cultural meanings.

Such dualistic and hierarchical views of place run counter to Burroughs’s indeterminate vision of place, in which the meanings of places are not bound to particular histories or cultural experiences, but remain in a state of flux as places are constantly re-defined by the cultures they accommodate and comprise. Burroughs’s first-hand experiences of locations throughout the world as well as his studies of the histories and cultures of these and other locations often inform his narratives. As a result, the locations of his narratives reflect the different climates, cultures, landscapes, populations, etc. of a variety of places, often simultaneously. His locations are frequently hybrid, largely influenced by the international city of Tangiers, Morocco. At the time of his residence in the city, control of Tangiers fell under several different European and West Asian governments and was inhabited by a distinctly cosmopolitan population. Like Tangiers, Burroughs’s locations—Interzone,³ Freelandia, the Cities of the Red Night—do not allow for interpretation along specific regional, cultural, or political trajectories. Whatever associations these locales might have with locations in the world are mutative and/or ambiguous. All factors related to place are provided only by Burroughs and are subject to abrupt and unannounced transformation.

Cities in the novels are always characterized by their material hybridity, as the physical traits of the various cities represented blend into or overlap one another. In *Naked Lunch*, he describes Interzone:

All houses in the City are joined. Houses of sod—high mountain Mongols blink in smoky doorways—houses of bamboo and teak, houses of adobe, stone and red brick, South Pacific and Maori houses, houses in trees and river boats, wood houses one hundred feet long sheltering entire tribes, houses of boxes and corrugated iron where old men sit in rotten rags cooking down canned heat, great rusty iron racks rising two hundred feet in the air from swamps and rubbish with perilous partitions built on multi-levelled platforms, and hammocks swinging over the void. (*NL* 97)

Interzone's collage of cities creates a fluid space in which any and all cultures become possible, whether mixing and sharing characteristics or transforming from one to another in a perpetual interchange. Where all cultures are possible, none are primary. Interzone represents a site of cultural conflation as, "High mountain flutes, jazz and bebop, one-stringed Mongol instruments, gypsy xylophones, African drums, Arab bagpipes . . ." (NL 98) complement rather than compete with one another. Hierarchies dissolve as a culture of multiplicity and change eventually embraces all inhabitants and favors none. Ultimately, Interzone depicts a place that cannot be located by geography or culture. "A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum," it is "some familiar place I cannot locate" (NL 99).

Many critics have noted that the most prevalent form of place in Burroughs's novels is that of the carnival or circus. Indeed, the carnival/circus world perfectly expresses the transforming and transformative qualities of Burroughs locations. In *Western Lands* he writes:

In Waghdas, however, quarters and streets, squares, markets and bridges change form, shift location from day to day like traveling carnivals. Comfortable, expensive houses arranged around a neat square (all residents have a key to the gate) can change, even as you find your way there, into a murderous ghetto. Oh, there are maps enough. But they are outmoded as soon as they can be printed. (WL 152)

The carnival/circus offers a space within which society remains in a state of constant motion and change. Tanner sees in Burroughs's cities a representation of "modern civilization as a precarious iron city suspended over a void, a city of Ferris wheels and scenic railways as well as planes and cars all in constant motion;" and proclaims, "This is the whole circus of modern society" (136). McCarthy makes a similar observation, stating, "A circus travels but it is always the same, and this is Burroughs's sardonic image of modern life" (35).

Such places occur so often in the novels precisely because they accommodate Burroughs's insistence on constant transformation. As Jennie Skerl notes, "In the carny world 'nothing is true and everything is permit-

ted,' and consciousness is a process of free play with forms" (96). This freeform nature of the "carny world" shares much in common with M. M. Bakhtin's carnival. Shanti Elliot describes Bakhtin's carnival as a space of transition comparable to Burroughs's carnival/circus world: "Carnival reversal implies a change from principles of stability and closure to constant possibility [. . .] nothing is fixed in Bakhtin's carnival world, and everything is in a state of becoming" (130). In Bakhtin's own words:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling . . . and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. (*Rabelais* 10)

Like Bakhtin's, Burroughs's carnival/circus world releases all participants from geographically and culturally imposed context and creates a site of "constant possibility." The freedom of form that describes this landscape reflects a freedom of consciousness in not only the novel's characters and narratives, but also in readers who are never bound by the narratives to particular cultural references or ideologies.

Burroughs's outlines his strategy of dislocating place from context and ideology in *Cities of the Red Night*. As the title indicates, place provides a key focus of the novel and the Cities of the Red Night themselves—Tamaghis, Ba'dan, Yass-Waddah, Waghdas, Naufana, and Ghadis—serve as models for Burroughs's notion of conceptual, non-located place. He offers this description:

Tamaghis: This is the open city of contending partisans where advantage shifts from moment to moment in a desperate biological war. Here everything is as true as you think it is and everything you can get away with is permitted.

Ba'dan: This city is given over to competitive games and commerce. Ba'dan closely resembles present-day America with a precarious moneyed elite, a large disaffected middle class and an equally large segment of criminals and outlaws. Unstable, explosive, and swept by whirlwind riots. Everything is true and everything is permitted. [. . .]

Waghdas: This is the university city, the center of learning where all questions are answered in terms of what can be expressed and understood. Complete permission derives from complete understanding. (*CRN* 158)

The form of the descriptions of the cities closely follows that of the Penny Arcade peep show episodes discussed above. The sequence of the cities does not depend on any linear or causal factors such as geographical positions or qualitative assessments of cultural primacy. Instead, the cities are associated and juxtaposed through similarities in their structures. In this case rather than utilizing common objects, Burroughs figures his cities along the lines of ideological structure, characterizing each under a particular ideology. These ideologies diverge in significant ways, but always intersect through their structures, as indicated in the last lines of each description.

As a result, readers are encouraged not to favor one city's ideological perspective over others. In order to truly understand any one city, the reader (or traveler in his terms) needs to experience all cities rather than settle on/in only one: "The traveler must start in Tamaghis and make his way through the other cities in the order named. This pilgrimage may take many lifetimes" (*CRN* 159). We must travel in all cities in order to engage with the overriding ideological structure that defines them all. Burroughs's insistence on a specific order or sequence of travel may be troubling; but again, as with the Penny Arcade peep show episodes, sequence denotes neither linearity nor causality. The sequence of travel instead operates as a poetic formalism, maximizing the effects of juxtaposing each city with its neighbors. The sequence follows Burroughs's argument: political division is followed by economic division, which is followed by gender division, which is followed by intellectual division. The order is not arbitrary, but in the end no one city is preferable to any of the others and no causal links

exist between cities. The sequence is a formal device that leads eventually to the cities of Naufana and Ghadis, “the cities of illusion (*CRN* 159),” in which ideological divisions no longer have material foundations. The particular ideologies of the first four cities collapse in the final two cities into Althusser’s “ideology *in general*” (239), yielding sites disconnected from history or culture “where nothing is true and *therefore* everything is permitted” (*CRN* 159). As the overriding structure of ideology becomes visible, the particular ideologies of each city are exposed as arbitrary and the divisions they create as illusory.

By traveling through the Cities of the Red Night, readers come to understand the artifice of the structure of each city and encounter the true multiplicity and mutability of the cities. Jaishree Odin describes this alternative vision of place, writing, “This contemporary topology is composed of cracks, in-between spaces, or gaps that do not fracture reality into this or that, but instead provide multiple points of articulation with a potential for incorporating contradictions and ambiguities” (599–600). Similarly, Burroughs’s cities are sites of inclusion rather than exclusion. One does not leave a city and enter another so much as continually re-enter the same city in an altered context. As Burroughs informs us, “There are bits and pieces of many cities in Tamaghis” (*CRN* 234). Any given city contains many cities within its form and, thus, distinctions between cities break down.

The *Nova Express* chapter, “A Distant Thank You,” demonstrates the process by which place and, subsequently, culture are rendered mutable. In this section, the aristocratic Benson’s call in Bill&Iam for a remodeling job on a living space that is at once a house, a city, and the cultures that define the space. Bill&Iam, being an amalgamate of the “technical” Iam and the creative Bill, brings the element of indeterminacy to the remodel. The cut-up prose further reflects the method of the remodel, as Bill explains: “We might start with a photo-collage of The House—yes?—of course and the statues in clear air fell away to a Mayan Ball Court with eternal gondolas” (*TNN* 286). Applying this method, Bill&Iam constructs a space of fluidity within the structure of The House:

And The House moved slowly from Inca to Mayan back to peasant hut in blighted maize fields or windy mountain slopes of the Andes—Gothic cathedrals soared and dis-

solved in air—The walls were made of blocks that shifted and permutated—cave paintings—Mayan relief—Attic frieze—panels—screens—photo-collage of the House in all periods and stages—Greek temples rose in clear air and fell to limestone huts by a black lagoon dotted with gondolas—(*TNN* 287)

The “photo-collage” approach fragments *The House* into mutable pieces and, like the cut-up prose, creates opportunities for endless permutations of physical and cultural elements.

The mutability of physical space created by the remodel also produces a mutability of culture within the space. Bill describes his vision for the statuary to be included, “I envisage a Mayan Ball Court with eternal youths—and over here the limestone bookmakers and bettors changing position and pedestal” (*TNN*). The two cultures represented, one ancient and one contemporary, not only create a multiplicity but are always in a state of flux, “changing position and pedestal.” Artworks no longer designate the cultural identities of the spaces they occupy, nor can they be culturally located by those spaces.

The inhabitants of *The House*, just as the artworks, become as inconstant as their environment. The Fish People, an “amphibious-hermaphrodite strain,” undergo continual transformations “blending beauty and vileness” (*TNN* 291). And the Lemur People, who are “all affect,” are so transient they cannot be held even in memory (*TNN* 294). Burroughs explains, “No one has been able to hold a lemur for more than a few minutes in my memory [. . .] the least attempt-thought of a holding and they are back in the branches” (*TNN* 294–95).⁴ Since these creatures have no fixed physical location or even fixed physical form, they have no notion of borders, of exclusion, or of the “other.” They “have lost their enemy” and have no use for divisive and hierarchical ideologies (*TNN* 287). Nor do they maintain any stable cultural values on which to found ideology. They are perfect products and inhabitants of a landscape that cannot be located.

Burroughs’s spaces should not be viewed as sites of transgression of the boundaries of culture and ideology, but rather as sites of transcendence where culture and ideology dissolve, where meaning is released from the materiality of place as territory. Such places are not touchable, either phys-

ically or ideologically, and are therefore not locatable. One must experience Burroughsian space, as with the Cities of the Red Night, through associations with its own permutations. He invites readers to “imagine that you are dead and see your whole life spread out in a spatial panorama, a vast maze of rooms, streets, landscapes, not sequential but arranged in shifting associational patterns” (WL 138). These patterns generate an ever-changing series of meanings unhindered by the constraints of material context.

Ultimately, Burroughs’s novels disintegrate all material contexts, constructing temporal and physical (dis)locations as fluid and destabilized spaces. In Murphy’s words, contexts are “[c]oefficients of deterritorialization . . . ephemeral, or rather variable in the mathematical sense: capable of taking on any value in a given domain” (195). These variable contexts create both a challenge and a boon for readers of the novels. Given no predetermined context, no ideological frame, by which to assign meaning to the texts, readers are challenged to engage the texts in a more personal as well as active manner, negotiating unique and ever-changing meanings during each reading. Readers must encounter these novels utilizing an associative strategy comparable to María Lugones’s “complex communication” in which “we create and cement *relational* identities, meanings that did not precede the encounter” (84, emphasis added). This associative strategy requires a great deal of attention from readers who negotiate the continual construction and reconstruction the world of the novels as new relationships and juxtapositions emerge from inside as well as outside the texts.

The advantage of Burroughs’s fugitive world, and the associative reading strategy it demands, is the opportunity for readers to fully and profoundly participate in the creation of that world. Burroughs’s world can be compared to Bakhtin’s “world that *creates* the text, for all its aspects—the reality reflected in the text, the authors creating the text, the performers of the text (if they exist) and finally the listeners or readers who recreate and in doing so renew the text—participate equally in the creation of the represented world in the text” (*Dialogic* 253). This world is singular and not referential, it is disconnected from any “real” landscape or time frame, unlocatable yet familiar owing to its inclusion of any and all elements of worlds within the experiences of readers. The text becomes its own context, a simulacrum of material context generated from within as well as without. As a result readers, like the narratives themselves, are liberated

from fixed times and places, from particular histories and cultures, and from the ideological trappings these generate.

Notes

1. It is important to note that Althusser draws a distinction between particular ideologies and “ideology *in general*,” which refers to the ideological structure or form in which all particular ideologies participate and which, as an abstraction, “*has no History*” (239).
2. Burroughs cites *Under the Black Flag* by Don Carlos Seitz, which features a chapter on Captain Mission who established Burroughs’s paradigm commune, Libertatia, on Madagascar in the eighteenth century. It should be noted that, though Seitz presents Captain Mission as a historical figure, Mission’s Libertatia (or Libertalia) is likely a fictional creation of Daniel Defoe’s (writing as Captain Charles Johnson) in his *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*. Captain Mission and his utopian settlement are further fictionalized in Burroughs’s 1991 novella *Ghost of A Chance*.
3. The name “Interzone” is a reference to Tangiers’ status as an International Zone during much of the time of Burroughs’s residence. See Gruaerholz’s introduction to *Interzone*, particularly page xviii.
4. The Lemur People eschew concepts of time as well as geography. In *Ghost of a Chance*, Burroughs explains: “Their way of thinking and feeling is basically different from ours, not oriented toward time and sequence and causality. They find these concepts repugnant and difficult to understand” (GC 15).

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