THE MAKING OF AMALGAMS: SAMPLING THE "NARRATIVE" OF *WORD VIRUS: THE WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS READER*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the once revolutionary potential of literature defined as "postmodern" has been co-opted by a succession of collections and "Readers," typified by *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*. A study of Burroughs' fiction reveals the dialectic between language as a potential site of resistance and the inability of words to ultimately circumvent social control, problematizing the representation of Burroughs' fictional project in the *Word Virus*. Through analysis of two novels from his later career, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) and *The Western Lands* (1987), the contradictions inherent in contemporary literature's propensity to commercialize and market its revisionist canon will be examined in relation to content that criticizes such compartmentalization.

Somewhere between the macro permutations involved in the frenetic proverb of infinite monkeys jumping up and down on infinite typewriters to produce some masterpiece of Western Literature, and novelist Kurt Vonnegut's more microcosmic aphorism that writing is nothing more than "idiosyncratic arrangements in horizontal lines of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numbers, and maybe eight punctuation marks" (192), rests the cyst of contrapuntal rhythms characterizing, to borrow a phrase from Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (also emblazoned on the paperback jacket), the "American magic and dread" (19) of fiction on this millennial eve. Succeeding, perhaps, Thomas Pynchon's less-timely aphorism of "high magic to low puns" (129) from the *Crying of Lot 49,* the postmodern oeuvre lapses and loop-de-loops about the cultural crosshairs like a jigsaw-puzzle juggernaut.

Contradictions, while never particularly problematic to the postmodern auteur, flatline before a reading public increasingly amenable of the necessity of corporate sponsorship via canonization. How else can Vonnegut's *Timequake* spout its metafictive liturgy of pre-Depression Socialism (epitomized by activist Eugene Debs) as "a possibly reasonable alternative to the Wall Street crapshoot" (166), when Vonnegut's Discover Card advertisements have only recently dropped from constant TV rotation? Likewise, William S. Burroughs' infamous participation and narration of Nike sport shoe ads in 1994 leads Timothy S. Murphy in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, to expend considerable energy unearthing the possibility that his subject's fictional values remain virtuous. Referring to the potential meaning of the spots, which portray Burroughs' image on a TV screen that watches Nike's athletic bodies in their featured footwear, Murphy pumps the post-ironic well:

> ...Burroughs would probably see the bodies of these athletes as objects of erotic
> fantasy, and see their exertions and perspiration as emblems of the physicality
> simultaneously offered and foreclosed by the medium of television. He would
> see it as a kind of elaborately choreographed soft-core pornography. (229-30)

With the intentional fallacy rendered consummately blasé in the hot fat of consumer culture, the postmodern patron is encouraged to sauté a libidinous reading of *Naked Lunch* with both feet firmly ensconced in a pair of Air Jordan sneakers. Burroughs' visit to the bunkers of Madison Avenue, despite the redemptive academic possibilities Murphy attributes to his confluence with the advertising world, represents with great alchemical bombast, the consolidation of the avant-garde into the coldly familiar vanguard, the experimental into the incidental, the base ultramodern into the lead ultra-mundane. The close of the twentieth-century flickers its cants and argots from the mechanical lips of ubiquitous talking-picture boxes, the electric eyes of ATM machines, the hips of a pregnant military machine suckling "collateral damage" on euphemistic teats. In a world where Fred Astaire dances oh-so-delectably with a Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner, and a reanimated John Wayne proudly proclaims the virtues of Coors Light beer, what revolutionary significance can the grand old magus William S. Burroughs possibly maintain once establishment-backed forces (the "Nova criminals" of his cosmology) co-opt the revolutionary politics of his writing? What of *his* massive body of work, *his* cold mechanical lips?

With the January 1998 Grove Press publication of *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*, a compendium of excerpts from most of Burroughs' major works, this project of assimilation nears completion. This essay argues that the absorption of Burroughs into the sound-byte culture that his body of work explicitly problematizes represents (in a macrocosm) the dialectical struggle ubiquitous in his prose between the ability of language to serve as locus of resistance and the inability to discourse to completely transcend or supplant social control. Aside from exposition of *Word Virus* as a manifestation of canonization and compartmentalization, his "Red Night Trilogy" from the 1980s (*Cities of the Red Night, The Place of Dead Roads, The Western Lands*) provides a convergence point in which to identify the legacy of Burroughs' earlier linguistic experiments. This transmutation of style will be applied to both the commercialization of the avant-garde, and the construction of a heteroglossic,

multiethnic canon that simultaneously celebrates and controls diversity across the landscape of contemporary postmodern fiction.

WORD VIRUS

From the circular sticker adhering like a barnacle to the hardcover edition of *Word Virus* (proclaiming "Includes a Spoken Word CD"), to the profile of man and typewriter in silent communion, the austere cover is a coded harbinger of its abridged interiors. Once again, Norman Mailer's famous homily attests to Burroughs' greatness: "The only American novelist who may conceivably be possessed by genius." Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, Jack Kerouac, Anthony Burgess, and J.G. Ballard lend additional testaments to the dust jacket. Buttressed by this collocation of assurances, the post-Burroughs reader (he died in 1997) enters the official career synopsis.

Sliding along fragments of a largely chronological continuum (superseding publication date), *Word Virus* has been sub-divided by editor James Grauerholz (Burroughs' long-time assistant and collaborator) and Ira Silverberg into "periods" of literary productivity. The classification of the natural kingdoms engendered by scientists over the past several centuries, where the term "species" denotes a "taxonomic category based on closely related, morphologically similar individuals that interbreed or have the potential to interbreed" (*New York Public Library Science Desk Reference* 95) manifests in *Word Virus* as the editorial impulse to impose more than arbitrary justification to the ordering of literary nature. The collection organizes its subject into the following species: "The Name Is Burroughs," "A Hard-Boiled Reporter," "Interzone," "The Cut-Ups," "Inspector Lee: Nova Heat," "Queer Utopia," "The Red Night Trilogy," and "Late Work." Additionally, the reader is informed that "all selections from novels begin with the first pages of the full book, and end with the last pages of the book; the author's sequence is followed." (xxxi)

This impetus to encapsulate and define Burroughs' output for a generation that may very well be unaware of his existence or purported importance to the twentieth-century avant-garde finds a pointed counter-sense in the protoplasmic word-gels that grow from his extant books like the "Undifferentiated Tissue" in *Naked Lunch*'s oft-cited "Talking Asshole" routine. In the novel's "Atrophied Preface" segment (further atrophied into the folds of *Word Virus)*, Burroughs warns against forced continuities:

> There is only one thing that a writer can write about: *what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing*... I am a recording instrument... I do not presume to impose "story" "plot" "continuity." ...Insofar as I succeed in *Direct* recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have limited function... I am not an entertainer... (200)

Naked Lunch becomes classified within *Word Virus* by its idiosyncratic Alpha and Omega —"I can feel the heat closing in... (...long trail of ellipsis...) "No glot... C'lom Fliday." It is precisely this politics of ordination, operating like IBM punch cards behind the incessant sequencing of Burroughs' amorphous prose into a more accessible periodic table, that separates the original *Naked Lunch* from its excerpts in

Word Virus. The directive in the "Nova Trilogy" of the 1960s (*The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded, Nova Express*) to "occupy The Reality Studio and retake the universe" (*Nova Express* 189) positions the "reality film" as a conceptual device created and edited by definite vectors of authority, replacing what is "in front of (a writer's) senses at the moment of writing" with what Larry McCaffery identifies as "rationalist language and all other forms of discourse required by legal, political and consumer capitalism...distorting the individual's sense of him-or-herself as an individual... (288).

Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, in her final novel *The Hour of the Star*, opposes the long-term budgets of "The Reality Studio." Her title page catalogues thirteen alternate titles for the work, each wryly separated by a "Rocky & Bullwinkle"-esque "or." Title eleven is "A Record of Preceding Events," while the opening phrases of the narrative proper trump out a molecular critique of western ontology:

> Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before prehistory there was the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. It ever was so. I do not know why, but I do know that the universe never began. (11)

Compare this with the assumption of the Iguana Twins, characters in Burroughs' 1981 work *Cities of the Red Night*: "The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the prerecordings themselves" (166). The dialectic established between history as the "never" and the "yes" in Lispector and the inability of language to solidify its referents in Burroughs delimits the revolutionary possibilities of the contents of *Word Virus*. The consolidation of the original works into the compendium waylays the schizophrenic mystique of the source material so that the project of Burroughs' latter writing, "the construction of viable subject-group fantasies, and the consequent fantasmatic production of revolutionary groups" (Murphy 153), can be viewed by the literary establishment as antithetical to the earlier oft-cited pronouncement to "*rub out the word forever*" (*Nova Express* 186).

Writing bent upon rendering the process of control explicit, of editing the machine to give "the order to dismantle itself and kill the priests" (*The Soft Machine* 93) is certainly no less deserving of anthologizing than the work of more staid and proper specimens of postwar fiction, and it should be noted that the *Word Virus* assumes metonymical stature for Burroughs' entire body of work the same as any other "Reader" would function for the work of any other writer. Yet the propensity in Burroughs' work for narrative disruption through cut-up strategies in the "Nova Trilogy" and the legacy of collage in the latter works allows for a critique of his formal innovations in the academic *and* popular packaging that *Word Virus* conflates. Imposing conventional narrative on Burroughs' career, even when approved by Burroughs himself (as *was* the case with *Word Virus*), approaches a totalizing script heretofore attempted only by individual critical studies, biographies, and the occasional Burroughs interview or article, which in their diversity encourage a polyglot of equally non-authoritative "narratives" to proliferate in the negative space between accounts. However, the organization of *Word Virus*, and thus, of Burroughs' transgressive potential for future scholars and readers, becomes arranged by the juxtaposition of such programmatic generalizations as that of

Ann Douglas in the introduction in the same volume. Douglas defines the "Beat Generation" in reference to its glorified progenitors: "Jack Kerouac became the mythologizer, Allen Ginsberg the prophet, and Burroughs the theorist" (xv).

Ted Morgan, in keeping true to the titular theme of his 1988 biography, labels the Beat-era Burroughs as "the Great Seceder, the artist as outlaw...who had deliberately taken the literary game one step further by writing a nauseating book" (288). Regardless of Burroughs' ambivalence to such mantles, or his own affinity for a career narrative evident in interviews and his writings, *Word Virus* creates its own context, removes the original books and manuscripts from the reader's sphere of influence, and like the conception of Sophocles from the seven extant examples of his purported 123 plays, formulates an authoritative narrative (through sampling) in which the remnants classify the whole. In Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo,* the Wallflower Order —"a secret society of enforcers" (189)- maintains the oppressive power structure through a similar grip on extant information: "2,000 years of probing classifying attempting to make an 'orderly' world so that when company came they would know the household's nature and would be careful about dropping ashes on the rug" (153).

CITIES OF THE RED NIGHT

The "ashes" that so concern the conspiratorial control structures in Reed's book are manifest in the Wallflower Order's search for the "Book of Thoth." Reed's version of the book's creation crosses more than a few hegemonic boundaries (conflating it with the Torah), and his wry revision of western orthodoxy codes the absent book as textual basis for the jazz phenomena called "Jes Grew." Tellingly, the only known copy of the book, a translated assemblage of fourteen separate fragments, is destroyed prior to its discovery by the anti-Wallflower forces of Papa LaBas and sorcerer Black Herman.

Similarly, the absent inter-textual books in Burroughs' novel set the reality rules through the interpretation of their fragments and forgeries. The complete text of *Cities of the Red Night*, first published in 1981 by Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, stands in stark contrast to the excerpts included in *Word Virus,* but from an analysis of the original text's manipulation of its inter-narrative fakes, the irony and questionable reliability of the *Word Virus* reprint is revealed.

Cities of the Red Night spins the bulk of its narrative strands in a tripartite web designed to announce Burroughs' latter career move towards transcending the "albatross that *Naked Lunch* represents*"* (Zurbrugg 26). Grauerholz indicates the tenuous relation between the apparent "return" to narrative in the "Red Night Trilogy" and Burroughs' earlier cut-up processes:

> It's less complex than *Naked Lunch* in that it doesn't represent such a constellation, or concatenation, of everything that had been on his mind for a decade; *Naked Lunch* was a great spurt. But on the other hand, *Cities* is more complex in that is self-referential; it's intended. (Zurbrugg 26)

The cut-up strategies of the "Nova Trilogy," claiming that "history —the naïve perambulations of language— is bounded by a tautological word excluding all possi-

bility of discourse" (Nelson 122), become situated *explicitly* in *Cities of the Red Night* as sporadic jumbles of word oases swelling in more traditional narrative deserts, but *implicitly* in the postmodern plot juxtaposition on a structural level. From the ultimately all-consuming fascination with a series of Ur-texts a la *Mumbo Jumbo, Cities of the Red Night* occupies a position in which to critique the abridgment and arbitrary contextualization of extant work in *Word Virus* and other "Readers" of its ilk. Structurally, the novel has three primary narrative strands:

Clem Snide, a "private asshole" (in typical Burroughsian opposition to the "eye") ostensibly investigates the ritual murder of expatriate Jerry Green; Noah Blake, an eighteenth-century Boston gunsmith is whisked into a communal society based upon the "Articles" of Captain Mission, promising "the then revolutionary ideas of universal suffrage, freedom of religion, the abolition of slavery, and the elimination of capital punishment" (Murphy 180); and the Cities of the Red Night themselves —or "Red Night" strand— where a virus generated over 100,000 years ago by a meteor or black hole in a pre-historical, but technologically-mature environment results in evolutionary mutations where: "red and yellow hair, and white, yellow, and red skin appeared for the first time... until the mutants outnumbered the original inhabitants, who were as all human beings were at the time: black" (*Cities* 155).

The "Noah Blake" strand eventually collapses into the "Clem Snide" strand when Snide is revealed to be the author of the Captain Mission/Noah Blake plot. Both strands ultimately implode into the third "Red Night" strand as the Snide/Blake protagonist mutates into Burroughs' earlier anti-hero, Audrey, who along with characters from the other narrative strands make a desperate assault through the titular "Cities of the Red Night" in an ahistorical narrative space incorporating a postmodern collage of past, present, and future.

If, as Walter Benjamin claims proffers, every historical document is "at the same time a document of barbarism," ("Theses on the Philosophy" 256) Burroughs installs a "retroactive utopia" through the commune storyline is an attempt to grasp the moment where change was possible but lost, as "your right to live where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree, died in the eighteenth century with Captain Mission. Only a miracle or disaster could restore it." (*Cities* xv). If successful, Mission's communes would have supplanted the European missionary equivalents and defeated Spanish colonialist forces through the commitment of oppressed persons to the alternative of collective autonomy; "There is no stopping the Articulated" (*Cities* xiv). The "barbarism" is potentially circumvented, not through the description of a failed historical "chance" that can still be allocated to the victors' triumphal procession (in this case Spain), but in the phylogenetic discursive strategies of the commune implemented simultaneously through Burroughs' ontogenetic narrators. As Benjamin writes in "On the Mimetic Faculty": "For clearly the observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples. The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty of with its transformation" (334).

Burroughs' mature attempt to execute the intent of the cut-ups towards a magical, narrative revision of history, manifests itself in a myriad of layers through the novel. Primarily, the auratic treatment of the texts entitled "Cities of the Red Night*"* (within the actual book *Cities of the Red Night*) that Snide is commissioned to "recover" for

the Iguana Twins, represent the "originals" that transcend the similarity of the novels main characters/narrators.[1] Just as *Word Virus* excerpts Burroughs' "original" texts, transforming them into sound-byte epiphanies delimiting the perception of the Burroughs' canon via their juxtaposition in the "Reader," so do the absent "Cities of the Red Night" texts authorize the oppressive control system that Clem Snide functions within through the interpretation of the available pieces.

While the female Iguana Twin initially provides Snide with a "short pamphlet" entitled "Cities of the Red Night," she later supplements the theoretical treatise with additional books. Snide is commissioned to "recover" the originals, and when he inquires why she should need originals with such well made copies, he is told: "Changes, Mr. Snide, can only be effected by alterations in the *original.* The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the prerecordings themselves. The copies can only repeat themselves word for word. *A virus is a copy"* (166). The implication is that the books themselves are viral, and the virus that initiates the "Red Night" subplot (and inhabits Lispector's "molecules") is "a form of radiation unknown at the present time (that) activated a virus. This virus illness occasioned biologic mutations... (167). This virus also engenders the simulacra of textual reproduction that informs Burroughs' earlier conception of "The Reality Studio" (with film as the master metaphor) as well as Benjamin's identification of the distracted mass as "a matrix from which all traditional behavior towards works of art issues today in a new form ("The Work of Art" 239). Snide easily recognizes the pastiche structure of the books that also self-mockingly reference the Burroughs canon *and* the structural integrity of *Cities of the Red Night*.[2] Snide describes these books:

> The books are color comics. "Jokes," Jim calls them. Some lost color process has been used to transfer three-dimensional holograms onto the curious tough translucent parchment-like material of the pages. You ache to look at these colors. Impossible reds, blues, sepias. Colors you can smell and taste and feel with your whole body. Children's books against a Bosch background; legends, fairy stories, stereotyped characters, surface motivations with a child's casual cruelty. What facts could have given rise to such legends? (167).

These books are at once carnivalesque and false, "no more representative of life at the time than a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell represents the complex reality of American life" (*Cities* 168). The penetration of the false colors into physical sensation solidifies the dualistic analogy between the virus that mutates humans and the virus that mutates words, reifying the repressive dialectic that Robyn Lyndenberg claims is transmogrified in Burroughs from the "vertical" axis of right and wrong into a "horizontal" and biologic confrontation between different life forms, the word and the body, the competing "realities" of text and interpretation (10). Lyndenberg maintains that it is Burroughs' "insistent literalness" in his early career that allows his written language to escape the "code" language of sign or symbol (10). Thus, as the "falseness" of the books in the *Cities of the Red Night* novel penetrates Snides' sensory membranes, the entire narrative structure is problematized by sensory perceptions based upon the programmatic interpretation or decryption of translated and truncated samples. The ultimate transformation of this virus to ap-

proach a non-hegemonic "pure state" or narrative, represented by the original "Cities of the Red Night" texts (and the displaced sections indicated by absence in *Word Virus)*, must first be effected through a suspension of the mutating factor, which of course does nothing to indicate that access to the "originals" will ever be granted. The reader of *Word Virus* is removed from the complete *Cities of the Red Night* book just as Snide is assaulted by false reproductions and removed from the "Cities of the Red Night" text. Still, the Iguana Twins point towards the possibility of access to these master documents, originals in the vein of Borges' "formula and perfect compendium" lost in "The Library of Babel" story (56): "At one time a language existed that was immediately comprehensible to anyone with the concept of language" (*Cities* 168).

In the face of the same insolubility ultimately plaguing all linguistic avenues — the distraction created through the replication of the medium (in this case both physical script and physical bodies) —Snide and his assistant Jim decide to pursue the only avenue open to them, complete fabrication of the books. "I felt sure that this was exactly what I was being paid to do" (170). Benjamin's conceptualization of aura in the era of technical reproducibility decries Snide's venture as a typical attempt to distribute an art object in the flavor of its predecessor, diminishing the aura of that predecessor through the urge "to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" ("The Work of Art" 223). Yet Snide's strategy, analogous to Burroughs' magical discourse, fills the vessel with its own broken shards, not to create a copy from the *original* for mass dissemination, but to create the original from an already extant *copy*. If the "real" originals are inaccessible to humanity, can Snide's fabrication of the books actualize a method towards legitimizing the concept of the "new original" as a replacement for the inaccessible source texts? Snide believes that this is the only available method, and attempts to convince the necessary parties that he has "found" the originals, thus invalidating all copies of the "Cities of the Red Night" pamphlet and accompaniment texts, which would no longer indicate the source texts to which they supposedly referred. Of course, this is a ruse, but Snide is initially congratulated: "You have been promised a million dollars to find the books. You have found them" (204).

Snide's fabrication of the originals masquerades as an "alteration" of the originals, or with Benjamin's metaphor, the written word (the archive of all prior mutations), has potentially usurped its own mutation through an attempt to alter the "center" to which its signifiers point. Aside from the traditional postmodern trope of centering the "margin," this re-codification allows Snide to not only access characters such as Noah Blake who have already appeared chronologically in *Cities of the Red Night,* but to introduce Audrey, another veteran of Burroughs' self-referential fictional cosmos, and in this case, a figure who will eventually focalize the collapse of the other narrative strands, or signifiers, about the "new" center as it quickly decomposes. Audrey is immediately given lethal abilities: "He draws his spark gun and give them a full blast. They fall twitching and smoking" (177).

From this key point on, Snide's own identity is distributed throughout the various narrative strands, including that of his own time, when he finds himself embroiled in the machinations of Blum and Krup, colorful eugenicists enigmatically (and significantly) attached to Hollywood's ideological film productions. They transfer Snide's consciousness into another body after Snide begins to fabricate a motive to his own textual production and question the "free" agency that allowed him to manufacture

the "new originals" in the first place: "I am not sure the samples correspond in any way to the alleged books I am retained to recover" (199).

All three narrative strands move toward failure. Snide realizes both the distortion of reality operating beyond his "books" through Krup's Hollywood films, as well as the populace's eventual acceptance of his "reality": "We'd seen this character (Krup) operate, how smoothly he'd hoaxed us into his hanging universe... But the shore leave was one hell of a lot better" (214). Noah Blake has a dream vision of the defeat of the anti-colonialist communes and the "Articulated": "When I reach the house the roof has fallen in, rubble and sand on the floor, weeds and vines growing through... it must be centuries..." (216). Audrey sees what he's up against in the rampant capitalism of the plague-stricken cities: "I'm a hero of the fever... but it won't get me a discount... the City Fathers are setting up an American Legion Convention... Hilton and American Express arrive in a cloud of pop stars" (233).

The significance of the hoax (copies masquerading as originals), not only complicates Snide's subjectivity as a character, but indicates the hubris of the *Word Virus* collection. The *Cities of the Red Night* section is whittled down to ten of the novel's forty-nine segments, leaving the reader with a grotesquely truncated "narrative" that for all of Burroughs' disruptive technique and self-reflexiveness in the original publication, bears the mark of an entirely different story. While not actually "altering" the script of inaccessible originals, *Words Virus* potentially re-centers the original Burroughs' texts by proffering excerpts that create a delimiting "narrative" in their edited contexts. The re-codification of *Cities of the Red Night* into its excerpted form allows the new context to formulate perceptual realities based only upon the available data. This effort cannot be acquitted as simply another Burroughsian "cut-up," for the narrative chunks are deliberately constructed towards an editorial telos. Disruption is sacrificed for definition. If we are to take Burroughs' claim in *Naked Lunch* at all seriously, where "the world cannot be expressed direct... it can perhaps be indicated by mosaics of juxtaposition, like objects abandoned in a hotel room, defined by negatives and absence," (qtd. in Murphy 79) the edited version appearing in *Word Virus,* full of absences*,* stands as an ironic counterpoint to Grauerholz's statement of the "Red Night Trilogy's" expansive, anti-temporal project: "Well, immortality in Space and the rewriting of history" (Zurbrugg 24).

THE WESTERN LANDS

Skipping the trilogy's second entry (*The Place of Dead Roads)* for an appropriately edited reading of the cycle, Burroughs' capper, *The Western Lands*, a novel "in which characters search for a way to evolve into 'space' just as fish evolved in order to leave the seas and move onto land" (Punday 40), functions as a mechanism of identity dissolution, utilizing cut-up tactics on combinations of characters and settings rather than the word by word permutations of "twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numbers, and maybe eight punctuation marks" (Vonnegut 192). The novel concretizes the struggle of Burroughs' writing to situate language as resistance in the attempt of discourse to bypass ever-higher levels of control systems. Applied to *Word Virus* and the truncating trend of millennial culture, the uncertainty of "subject position" in *The*

Western Lands, a rubric of polyphonic incorporation, calls into question the "diversity" of contemporary fiction and the postmodern, revisionist canon.

William Seward Hall, the key figure, is an old writer whose "disgust for words accumulated until it choked him, and he could no longer bear to look at his words on a piece of paper" (1). Hall is the author of other significant characters in the trilogy's first two novels, and a stand-in for Burroughs himself. The writer's block that Hall faces is temporal; he is aging, and one of the projects remains (like so much of Burroughs' fiction), to finally surpass control devices, storm "The Reality Studio" and make the jump through western metaphysical limitations into the spatial regions beyond the nodes of the oppressive, hegemonic media.

Implicit in the formulation of late-capitalist discursive modes exists the postulate that the voice of an author, by virtue of textual position within the publishing topos, represents a tacit acknowledgement to the validity of narrative voice, but Burroughs' earlier cut-up work proves that "identity" cannot be articulated within a continuum of reproduced narratives that in seeming defiance of oppressive, colonial modalities, remains sanctioned by the revision of those modalities allowed within a system —for the system always "scripts" identity. The question for Burroughs is never stylistic (contrary to much critical attention), but methodological, and his attempt to break the shackles of western society, while not wholly successful, implies that a conflation of genre can act as not only the pastiche playground of the postmodernist, but the means of pointing outside even seemingly "enlightened" tradition. The Western Lands is a name of the elite Egyptian afterworld, and concurrent with that mythology in a manner metaphorically linked with present day America, access to these planes are limited to a privileged pharaonic class able to both mummify their bodies and ensure the protection of the mummy through elaborate rituals. An anti-pharaoh partisan leader proclaims: "I am going to destroy every fucking mummy I get my hands on. The Western Lands of the rich are watered by *fellaheen* blood, built of *fellaheen* flesh and bones, lighted by *fellaheen* spirit" (106). Burroughs maintains the need to disrupt the energy-vampire system and open up The Western Lands to everyone who is, as he writes, "ready to take a step into the unknown, a step as drastic and irretrievable as the transition from water to land. That step is from word to silence. From Time to Space" (115). The temporal is overtly linked to the physical, and evolution to the spatial can only be assumed after destruction of the cult of the body.

The book's primary method of disrupting the bodily identities provided by the complex of media signifiers and cultural markers of western society is to attack the conception of the unified ego (and the establishment-ensconced structure of the Freudian psyche). Burroughs borrows the Egyptian postulate of seven souls as he encountered it in Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, and further indicates two sub-groups. There are the eternal souls that "go back to Heaven for another vessel" (4) and thus, cannot be depended upon —Ren, the Director, and "Secret Name... (the) second one off the sinking ship, is Sekem: Energy, Power, and Light... Number three is Khu, the Guardian Angel" (4). The second group includes the mortal souls, which "must take their chances with the subject in the Land of the Dead,"(5) and contains —Ba, the Heart; Ka, "which usually reaches adolescence at the time of bodily death, is the only reliable guide through the Land of the Dead... Khaibit, the Shadow, Memory... and Sekhu, the Remains (5).

The Ka's welfare matches that of the subject; Burroughs states: "The Ka is about the only soul a man can trust. If you don't make it, he don't make it. But it is very difficult to contact your real Ka" (6). Once established, the seven souls are blended in the schema of already questionable metafictive character identities. For instance, sections detailing the authorial travails of the apparent narrator William Seward Hall are interspersed with repetitive vignettes concerning Hall's textual persona Kim Carsons, the old-west gunfighter and historical revisionist already cloned in *The Place of Dead Road*s —as well as one of the clone's assassins, Joe the Dead, an undead member of the "NOs natural outlaws, dedicated to breaking the so-called laws of the universe foisted upon us by physicists, chemists, mathematicians, biologists and, above all, the monumental fraud of cause and effect, to be replaced by the more pregnant concept of synchronicity" (30). Additionally, the Egyptian scribe Neferti assumes an apprenticeship with hieroglyphic writing that implies that he is simultaneously Hall's creator *and* another of his characters. Two white male capitalist villains from *The Place of Dead Roads*, Bickford and Hart (not unlike the blind god of the "Nova Trilogy" Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin) are revealed to be both "Rens, Directors, with their Sekem Technicians and an army of Guardian Angels" (10). Of course, there are multiple "Joes" in the book including Joe Lazarus and Joe Varland, both NOs, and even the gods of the Egyptian pantheon are said to possess a Ka, implying existence for the other six souls as well.

Burroughs writes that Nerferti, like "all Scribes, stud(ies) the Egyptian pantheon: Ra, Bast, Set, Osiris, Amen, Horus, Isis, Nut, Hathor," and a variety of secret gods (102). The recurring mention of the city of Memphis in the text as a potential entry point for the Western Lands implies that Burroughs' Egyptology is that of the Old Kingdom (2800-220 B.C.), recognizing the god Ptah as head of the pantheon and creator of the Ennead (the group of major deities). In *The Literature and Mythology of Ancient Egypt*, Joseph Kaster writes: "Ptah began the process of creation by... conceiving in his mind and by uttering with his tongue" (50). Language operates the originating factor, while the competing mythology of Heliopolis (not mentioned as a location by Burroughs), allocates creation to the act of masturbation by the deity Ra. The Memphis school's apparent non-physical nature is a typical Burroughsian slight, as language is always the great temporal barrier, the initiator of all acts including the masturbation of Ra. In his treatise "Electronic Revolution" from *The Job* (excerpted in *Word Virus)*, Burroughs goes to great length to link the physical body to the word of western discourse, before pointing towards a purer linguistic mode:

> All naming calling presupposes the IS of identity. This concept is unnecessary in a hieroglyphic language like ancient Egyptian and in fact frequently omitted. No need to say the sun IS in the sky, sun in sky suffices... THE contains the implication of one and only: THE God... (311)

In the ancient Egyptian vignettes of *The Western Lands*, there is an attempt by "Pharaoh" to institute a physical consolidation of power to the "One God" system. Burroughs writes: "At some time and place the animal (Egyptian) Gods actually existed, and that their existence gave rise to a belief in them. At this point the monolithic One God concept set out to crush a biologic revolution that could have broken down

the lines" (112). Additionally: "The OGU is a pre-recorded universe of which He is the recorder. It's a flat, thermodynamic universe, since it has no friction by definition. So He invents friction and conflict, pain, fear, sickness, famine, war, old age and Death" (113).

The tenuous equilibrium between proponents of the One God Universe, associated throughout the text with "Venusian" conspirators seeking to eliminate the seven souls, and the supporters of a magical, non-western universe bent upon escape from "Time" into "Space," from flat thermodynamics to pregnant synchronicity, maintains its precarious balance not only through the multiplicity of identity markers associated with each character, their metafictional counterparts, their clones, and the component souls —but in the metaphor of roads leading toward particular locations.

The motif is always marked by a description of direction, as in this extension of the "Red Night" strain from the earlier books: "The Road to Waghdas, the City of Knowledge, is a long, circuitous detour through labyrinths of ignorance, stupidity and error" (124). —Or in the shifting topological signifiers to the Land of the Dead— "The road to the Western Lands is by definition the most dangerous road in the world, for it is a journey beyond Death, beyond the basic God standard of Fear and Danger" (124) —or "The road to the Western Lands is devious, unpredictable. Today's easy passage may be tomorrow's death trap" (151).

Waghdas is the city of knowledge, and as Grauerholz comments in the "The Red Night Trilogy" introductory section of *Word Virus*, "a stand-in for ancient Thebes and for the college town of Lawrence, where Burroughs was entering old age" (410). Waghdas readily assumes its position within the hierarchy of the six Cities of the Red Night played out in all three books, conflated with its topos as an Egyptian city embroiled in the struggle of the One God Universe, confused with Burroughs' own physical location in Kansas, which of course, correlates with the domicile of the old writer Hall, living "in a boxcar by the river" (1). The fragmented exegesis of these cities' existence in "Time" is further complicated by the spatial arrangement of their interiors:

> 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... 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 are printed (152).

Furthermore, the navigational method is equally specious and hyper-personalized: "Place yourself in a scene from your past, preferably a scene that no longer exists. The buildings have been torn down, streets altered... Now, get up and leave the place. With skill and luck you find the location that you seek" (152).

Burroughs' cities function as "characters" attendant to the vicissitudes of his actual characters, and imagining the superimposition of each level of schizophrenic identity onto each potential city the reader is soon cognizant of what Murphy calls "coefficients of deterritorialization... variable in the mathematical sense: capable of taking on any value in a given domain" (195). Burroughs' use of these non-centered, anti-colonialist metaphors reinscribes the duality of his previous, linguistically reversible scripts. To paraphrase Brian McHale's comment on the junk metaphor in

Frederick Dolan's article "The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs's *The Western Lands*," Burroughs' fiction exists on one evaluative level really as the fragmentation of identity and the different manifestations of identity discourses in a fairly didactic, standard postmodern, literalistic manner, where the construction and control of these discourses is relegated to metaphor status. From another perspective, control is literal, and these manifestations serve as tropes. "The hierarchy is reversible and re-reversible" (545).

If the textual plane is easily morphed across a contextual continuum dependant upon the interpretative schema imposed by the reader, the essence of the effort to transcend these schemas in *The Western Lands* is evident in the ontological displacement engendered by the available shift of evaluative ground. If a reader can peg, for instance, the schizophrenic Ka of Kim Carsons clone number seven, after Kim is revealed as a construct of William Seward Hall and avatar of Neferti the Scribe (assuming this construct can even be located within the mutating topos of the Egyptian overworld) —then the ability of language (in its manipulation of the reader) to sublimate Kim Carsons as a mere tool of an overtly oppressive sign system (that author William S. Burroughs uses to tweak the reader), allows the reversible hierarchy to destroy its own epiphanies, and despite enticement into "Space," offer no substantive alternative to "Time."

It is the western desire to displace in favor of replacement that feeds the bodily mummification and power consolidation agenda of the One God's use of the Western Lands: "Cut-rate embalmers offer pay-as-you-go-plans, so much a month for mummy insurance... (An old couple with their arms around each other's shoulder stand in front of their modest little villa)" (160). Another scribe asks Neferti, "And what can you offer that is better than such precarious survival?" (162).

Neferti, not one to be put off by a challenge, responds: "I can offer the refusal to accept survival on such terms, the disastrous terms of birth. I can offer the determination to seek survival elsewhere. Who dictates all this mummy shit?" (162). The answer to his question is of course, the gods, but Neferti's resistance to the agenda of the pharaoh in establishing *the* One God universe, does not ultimately replace the void he would like to create with an alternative model operating within the same system.

The defining characteristic of the magical universe, the proposed alternative where "the paradox of an all-powerful, all-knowing God who permits suffering, evil and death, does not arise" (113), cannot be instituted through directive button pushing within a western capitalist power system, just as the once revolutionary attempt at narrative disruption through the cut-ups reached a literary wall. Burroughs only hope of resistance in his later career is extra-systemic, where authority, to cite Dolan's gloss on Paul de Man's *Resistance to Theory*, is undermined "not by producing a new myth or reality —by telling another story— but by exposing the fictitious character of reality as a narrative process and so rendering language useless for purposes of domination" (540).

The twelve brief selections from *The Western Lands* included in *Word Virus,* while maintaining an intimation of the original in a more "narrative" manner than the *Cities of the Red Night* segment, still manage to present Burroughs' project of deterritorialization in an artificial context. *Word Virus* serves as a typical millennial viewmaster, capturing quick snapshots of textual collage fragments, altering language as a means of escaping control —into yet another model of controlling discourse.

CONCLUSION

Any affectation towards the these textual fragments as innocuous referents, as constructs indeliberate in the assignment of mimetic control and specificity to the rest of the Burroughs canon, should be laid to rest through the distrust that both *Cities of the Red Night* and *The Western Lands* bestow upon both the replication of knowledge through reproduction of text, and the identity and authorial intent of such work. As Raymond Federman writes in his book *Critifiction*:

> For Burroughs, the text itself is never innocent, and therefore a friendly accommodating relationship between author and reader, between the writing subject and the reading subject is not to be sought. The literary discourse and the words that make that discourse are biological enemies..." (30)

Given this tendency to maintain the ever-decomposing autonomy between the organism and the discourse machine, if only in order to expose the various conspiratorial plans towards their merger, Burroughs' work concatenates his themes through associative and aleatory methods that care little for standard narrative practice. The placement of his work into *Word Virus* violates the transgressive potential of the text and completes the project of linguistic an territorial assimilation of the twentieth-century avant-garde by the dominant forces that sanction some degree of acceptable rebellion.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, a new "loa" of American black culture emerges from the radio, and one could easily imagine the Wallflower Order's assimilation of the media spirit into publication demographics and market niches. *Word Virus* includes that delicious spoken word CD, and retails in hardcover for $27.50 (infinitely less than the purchase and collection of Burroughs' more than thirty extant books). Immediately after its publication, *Word Virus* sat face outward in the "literature" section of certain chain bookstores, a privileged discourse shelf from which writers such as Kathy Acker and Walter Abish are often exiled. Frank Episale, a former employee of a chain bookstore, writes of the demographic muddle: "Where should a gay, black, science-fiction writer be shelved?... Categorizing special interest sections leads to questionable identity politics" (*To the Quick* 51). Acker and Abish, of course, along with postmodern heavyweights Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Maxine Hong Kingston, Don DeLillo, and less well-known writers such Joanna Russ, Ntozake Shange, Curtis White, and Carole Maso, stud the 1998 collection *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. Given the "narratives" implied by both its gaps and selections (Burroughs is represented by one brief routine from 1964s *Nova Express*, thirty-four years previous), the result is only a more accessible example of the "literary Reader" hegemony perpetuated in spirit by *Word Virus* and the entire *Norton Anthology* collection.

None of these disconcerting paradoxes threaten to any serious degree the continual scholarly enthronement of postmodernism or the formulation of contemporary millennial fiction. Monstrously-long broadsides will still expunge themselves from the pens of the "Po-Mo" ordained. William Gass' *The Tunnel*, Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, and DeLillo's *Underworld* indicate that the consolidation of the "new," the "experimental," the "self-reflexive" and the "avant-garde" will do little to stop the

prodigious output of its proponents. Still, the complete acquiescence of writing that once struggled so hard to rupture the limits of the word, the page, and the narrative, is characteristic of the ballast of economic factors that, to borrow from Samuel Beckett, chains the dog to his vomit (8).

Typical of the totalizing world-view imposed by these attempts to classify and organize is David Lehman's recent claims in reference to the "New York School of Poets," where four white poets in 1960s New York City —John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler— are repeatedly identified as the last manifestation of the "avant-garde." The constructs of thought behind Lehman's vilification program for the "school," who knew that "the aim of a poem was to live forever," (290), seem to magically forget that such Black Art poets as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Norman H. Pritchard, and Askia Muhammad Touré ever existed as innovators. Comfortable champions of today's multiethnic, heteroglossic revisionist canon (and its army of "Readers," Greatest Hits," "Selected Works," *ad nauseum*) should be wary of the programmatic discourse of powers sanctioning an "acceptable" level of rebellion (or fetishizing difference), and might take a lesson from Burroughs' Clem Snide, the private asshole, who ultimately understands (perhaps too late), that samples presented by seeming authoritative powers are not necessarily authoritative in and of themselves (if such authority is even possible). These trends raise significant questions regarding both the cultural reception of Burroughs' body of work and the "narrative" formulated to control the apparent diversity of such perception in contemporary literature, while simultaneously pointing toward a vector of critique that postmodernism, even if rigor mortis has set on the complete corpse, must not fail to autopsy —despite constant assault by consoling reproductions and excerpts.

Notes

[1] The italicized *Cities of the Red Night* refers to the novel by William S. Burroughs. "Cites of the Red Night" in quotation marks, references the books and pamphlets by that name within the novel.

[2] Burroughs' 1969 novel *The Wild Boys*, critically lauded as the beginning of his return towards more explicitly programmatic agenda is indicated: "There is a Rover Boys—Tom Swift story line where boy heroes battle against desperate odds" (*Cities* 167) In *The Wild Boys,* revolution ultimately fails, but Burroughs clearly moves away from word by word cut-ups.

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