

Spring 2023

"Dream Police": Political Imagination in William Burroughs' Naked Lunch

Ethan JG Haapala
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Haapala, Ethan JG, "'Dream Police': Political Imagination in William Burroughs' Naked Lunch" (2023).
Senior Projects Spring 2023. 321.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023/321

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

“Dream Police”: Political Imagination in William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Ethan JG Haapala

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

For my parents, who showed me the value of optimism,
and for my grandfather, who showed me the value of skepticism.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my advisor, Alex Benson, for his meaningful support and thoughtful criticism in this project, as well as his mentorship and rigorous instruction over the course of my engagement with the Literature program. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Holt, whose junior seminar class introduced me to the craft (and magic) of research, Jonathan Brent, whose passion for stories reinvigorated my interest in narrative invention, and Adhaar Desai, for demonstrating the potency of close reading. I would also like to thank Peter L'Official for his criticism and participation in my midway board, and my peers, Wyatt Alger and Lily Peña for their thoughtful comments on this project. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their love and support over the course of this year, and Fiona Binzen, who teaches me new things everyday.

Table of Contents

Introduction: “The People”	1
Chapter 1: Political Bodies and Fluidity.....	14
Chapter 2: Sovereignty and the Police.....	29
Conclusion: Abandoning Obscenity and the Modern Contexts of Censorship.....	44
Works Cited.....	51

Introduction: “The People”

William S. Burroughs, the writer and herald of squalor, chooses to begin the penultimate chapter of his novel *Naked Lunch* (1959) with a rhetorical question. Entitled “Atrophied Preface”, the reader may be in expectation of summary, explanation or perhaps a thematic review. Instead, the reader is presented with the following lines, “Why all this waste paper getting The People from one place to another? Perhaps to spare The Reader stress of sudden space shifts and keep him Gentle? And so a ticket is bought, a taxi called, a plane boarded. We are allowed a glimpse into the warm peach-lined cave as She (the airline hostess of course) leans over us to murmur of chewing gum, dramamine, even Nembutal”(182).

Burroughs’s faith in the reader’s ability to follow him through a metaphor of such abstract connection attests to much more than a stylistic impulse. Immediately, Burroughs’s emphasis on “The People” followed by “The Reader” produces a curious tension. What is the relationship between the two? As an answer, we identify Burroughs himself as the addresser. The one feeding “The Reader” “waste paper” is the elusive author, whose narrative carries “The People from one place to another”. From this ground, we understand Burroughs’s use of “The People” to mean the characters. Here, in this late chapter, such a rhetorical jab may be read as no more than a jaded remark about the intelligence of the average reader, as someone who can’t comprehend the “stress of sudden space shifts”. The two questions appear to claim that the reader’s comfort comes at the expense of the author’s efforts to preserve continuity within the narrative. It is the author’s job to reconcile these responsibilities. “The People” will be moved from beginning to end and as a result “The Reader” will be kept “Gentle”. As such, these sentences display the author’s remarkable voice. But why does this voice appear to decry

continuity? This succinct, metafictional observation couched in such cynical language is prime evidence of the author's own skepticism about conventional narratives.

The decision to ask such a rhetorical question on the part of the author serves as evidence of a certain awareness as to the reader's expectations of postmodernism, specifically Burroughs's own disinterest in continuity. Later on in the same chapter he posits an essential claim, "There is only one thing 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 'narrative' 'plot' 'continuity'..."(184). This claim to immediacy is an interesting interpretation of authorial power. Burroughs's perspective is entirely personal and derives from a restrictive method of authorship. And yet, his perspective is qualitatively unique from the conventional means of novel-writing.

Burroughs's autobiographical understanding serves as a foundation of *Naked Lunch*'s construction, method and objectives. Burroughs's unsettling distortion of an author's ability (or inability) to comment on the moral or ideological development of a character across a narrative comes from a foundation of radical experimentation within postmodern fiction. Though the former plain, nihilistic sentences are classically discouraging— we, as readers, on some level always expect to be able assign a certain value to the narrative, an expectation which is complicated by the use of "waste paper"— this claim provides us with many inroads to the body of the text itself. At the center of this construction is the idea of "The People ". This banal, oft-repeated phrase has a very specific rhetorical charge. While many politicians and dictators use the phrase to poor, clichéd effect, Burroughs's pointed use of the phrase demonstrates the extent to which it has become abstract through repetition. His use of, "The People" is dissimilar from that of a politician's in its effect; that is, it prompts the reader to question the motives

behind the phrase, rather than to affirm and identify with it on a superficial level. However, on a more foundational level, I would like to argue that this awareness of rhetoric within the textual body of *Naked Lunch* constitutes a method of appraising the effects of political reproduction in modern society. In other words, the novel's political utility is born of its own distinctive methods of representation. We can proceed from these two standpoints; both Burroughs's construction of the novel at large as well as his distinctive poetic voice will enable an investigation of these methods of political reproduction.

From here, I will continue by giving a brief biographical history of William Burroughs's life prior to publishing *Naked Lunch*. Understanding the author's relationship with his family, as well as his early adult life will provide a meaningful context for his investigation of economic and political themes in the novel. The Burroughs family's history is inextricably connected with this country's legal and economic history in the early 20th century, the advent of addiction and the chimeral effects of industrialism. Following this, I will provide a brief discussion of how the text's construction and thematics scaffold a reading of the text from a biopolitical perspective.

William Seward Burroughs II was born on February 5, 1914 in St. Louis, Missouri, a middle child of Mortimer Burroughs and Laura Hammond Lee. The child was given the name of his grandfather, whose vocation was the continued prosperity and expansion of the Burroughs Adding Machine Company (BAMC), established in 1904.¹ The business allowed much of the family to enjoy great privilege in the heavily segregated town of St. Louis, as well as across the south. Many of Burroughs' relatives were employed by the company in various cities throughout the midwest. Although, with each son or daughter of WSB I owning shares of the BAMC (albeit

¹ For comprehensive biographical information, see Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*.

unequally), they were perfectly capable of living without working at all. Nevertheless, Burroughs's father, Mortimer, upon leaving the BAMC in 1916, founded his own business, the Burroughs Glass Company. He installed Laura, his wife, as their vice-president. The business employed around 200 people in St. Louis, and was decently successful.² The prosperity for the family continued.

The Burroughs family structure is conjoined with this industrial impulse. As it was the family company, it was not infrequent that the children and grandchildren would move from city to city based on the status of management at any particular time. In part because of his father's particularly industrious mind, the majority of Burroughs' young life was attended to by his mother, as well as a number of housekeepers, sitters and gardeners employed around the house. His mother, Laura, was popular in the social scene of St. Louis, she had many friends in the business community as well. She marked young William as somewhat of a favorite, noticing a certain intelligence, doting over him at most every chance. It was from this foundation that William Burroughs would come to know his extended family, many of whom visited St. Louis often. During these frequent visits Burroughs would come to be acquainted with his family's history, his great uncles and aunts. It was from these visits that young William would glean the split fortunes of the various actors within the Burroughs family.

His uncle Horace, Mortimer's older brother, born in 1882, resisted the idea of higher education as his brother saved his money to attend MIT. Instead, he spent his share of the Burroughs fortune as a socialite (of sorts) in Los Angeles. Following Mortimer's graduation, both brothers would move to Detroit to work for the family company, but Mortimer would have

² Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 18.

to continually look after Horace, as he always found himself in hot water following a destitute exit from the Los Angeles social scene. Moreof, after sustaining a hunting injury in his arm, Horace began to take morphine as a means to deal with the pain, and addiction followed. Addiction was not well understood in the early decades of the 20th century despite being a serious public health crisis for nearly half a century—civil war veterans were addicted in large numbers to morphine, cocaine— so, when it came to legislate, the issue was viewed as a recourse in morality, as it was commonplace at the time to do so.

Buying morphine over the counter was legal until March 1 1915, the result of the enforcement of the new Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, which heavily taxed the importation and sale of opium³, effectively making the addict's supply vanish overnight. On March 7, after being found unconscious in a park the previous day, taken to a hospital and released, Horace committed suicide in a rented room as a result of insanity caused by morphine withdrawal.⁴ The social effects of the now-illicit drug market were pressingly apparent. Young William's father rarely talked of this, and much of the story was learned from his mother, who he also could only get vague details from. His mother's older brother, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, stands in stark relief to Horace, if only in virtue of his business fortunes. Ivy Ledbetter Lee is considered to be the historical 'father' of public relations. Over his long career, he represented companies such as Standard Oil, Westinghouse, and Chrysler. He worked for John D. Rockefeller Jr. directly, helping to "burnish the image" of Standard Oil. Ivy Lee specialized in anti-strike propaganda. Disturbingly, upon his death in 1943, it was discovered that he was subject to an investigation by

³ See Harrison Narcotics Tax Act.

⁴ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 17-18.

Congress pertaining to his advising Joseph Goebbels on public relations techniques for the Nazi party. Burroughs recounts that, “He was very pompous, you didn’t talk to him, you listened.”⁵

In 1932, Burroughs began attending Harvard, during which time he worked a number of odd jobs, including covering the police docket in St. Louis during the summers. After graduating in 1936, Burroughs considered both a postgraduate in Anthropology, as well as Medical School in Vienna. He declined both of these routes, instead opting for odd jobs in various cities— New York, Chicago, St. Louis. In 1944, he would move to New York to live with various representatives of the Beat generation; Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac and Lucien Carr.⁶ Following a conviction for falsifying a prescription so as to support his growing addiction to morphine, as well as various amphetamines, Burroughs would choose to move to Texas, then New Orleans, and eventually to Mexico with his wife, Joan Vollmer, as well as his son William Burroughs III. These moves were not leisurely— the family’s final move to Mexico City was a means for Burroughs to evade imprisonment in Louisiana for heroin and marijuana possession, forestalling the economic consequences of his strengthening addiction.⁷ The years that Burroughs and his family would spend in Mexico City serve as inspiration for his first two novels, the autobiographical *Junky*, and its sequel, *Queer*. In Mexico City, Burroughs, like his uncle Horace, would be a victim of morphine withdrawal. Exacerbated by his concurrent addiction to amphetamines, Burroughs’s mental state suffered. This breakdown culminated in the shooting and death of Joan Vollmer, on September 6, 1951.⁸ The gravity of this moment should not be understated; whether accidental or intentional, Vollmer’s death represents to Burroughs

⁵ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 13.

⁶ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 95.

⁷ Burroughs, William. *Queer*. 121.

⁸ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 208-209.

himself a moment of catalyzed energy. In the original introduction to his novel *Queer*, Burroughs reflects on this event, writing, “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing”(134-135).

Following this turbulent series of events, Burroughs would move overseas again to evade prosecution for drug offenses. After a brief stint in Europe, the writer moved to the Tangier International Zone in Morocco, where he lived for four years. During this time, Burroughs completed much of the writing that would comprise the main textual body of *Naked Lunch*. Before 1957, however, these writings were confined to various, disparate short stories and vignettes.⁹ Many of these short stories and characters lacked a fundamental coherence with each other. In order to claim its status as a novel, Burroughs and his team would have to establish this coherence through the construction of the text itself. In 1957, Burroughs gradually compiled *Naked Lunch* over many months with the help of Jack Kerouac as well as Allen Ginsberg, who served as Burrough’s de facto literary agent and advocate. This work was comprehensive; it included rewriting sections of the text, as well as adding others which had not been there before.

The assemblage process is a defining characteristic of *Naked Lunch*. Despite popular association between *Naked Lunch* and a radical method of narrative construction known as the “cut-up” method—a project which involves dividing pages of prose and reconfiguring them randomly, with the aim of revealing new images and metaphors— the disjunctive and surreal poetics found within *Naked Lunch* were crafted before Burroughs was introduced to the practice in Paris in 1959.¹⁰ The production and manifestation of the textual body created through

⁹ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. Chapter 22.

¹⁰ Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs*. 362.

assemblage gives us a framework for the narratorial experimentations that Burroughs wishes to emphasize, as well as helping to map its effects on the characters and poetics of the story.

Dissimilarly from the conventional processes of publishing, wherein the author ideally seeks near autonomous control over the structuring of the narrative up to the final draft, Burroughs's gang of emissaries and assemblers released a staggering variety of manuscripts, edits, revisions and addendums prior even to the book's publishing. This amounted to a staggering confusion for first Olympia Press in Europe and later Grove Press in the US. In addition to the massive amount of material compiled for review, the constant rewriting and reorganization of the text led to many discrepancies between editions and publishers.¹¹ Despite, or perhaps, because of these publishing confusions, Burroughs reassured readers in retrospect that the routines may be read in any order. Burroughs's reluctance even to declare his own understanding of a linear narrative amidst the process of assemblage is a particular characteristic that marks his own authorial persona. Curiously, this assemblage is nonetheless marked by autobiographical content—two methods of generating and situating language that seem to be in stark contradiction. The autobiographical is commonly based in a concrete, or at least uniform linear movement, with a clear sense of narrator and context.

The majority of the text's chapters reflect the initial material written by Burroughs while he was living in Morocco in the years preceding 1957. That is, many of the chapters read as their own standalone stories. These vignettes—also called “routines”, Burroughs's own polysemantic—stand as a sort of treatise against certain facets of modern society. While Burroughs admits in part to some of *Naked Lunch*'s routines as arguments “against capital

¹¹ *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 241-242.

punishment”¹², it would be simplistic to suggest that the content of each routine is actually emphasizing the same political issue over and over again. Indeed, what may be useful in determining Burroughs’s use of themes like capital punishment or sadomasochism, as well as his willingness to accept certain categorical narratives involving the political natures of his routines, is his consistent use of humor throughout the text. This line of questioning may not be entirely dry however, for there is much precedent for an apolitical or satirical manifesto. The question of politics, of a manifesto that declares bearing on the external world, is certainly of interest to Burroughs.

Throughout the narrative, Burroughs interrogates language’s capability for inspiring violent political action, often through the seemingly paradoxical method of humor. The first line of Valerie Solanas’ *SCUM Manifesto* is a perfect example; “Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex”(1). From this ground, we can observe the tension between political and personal expression. In Solanas’ manifesto, the voice mimics the revolutionary tone of historical manifestos in a more humorous mode. This hybridization, which can be seen most apparently in the tradition of satire, is a distinct component of Burroughs’ style within *Naked Lunch*. Jack Kerouac himself dubbed Burroughs, “The greatest satirical writer since Jonathan Swift.”¹³ Through an analysis of Burrough’s prose as narrative satire, we are able to see that his writing is bound by the necessity of both subjective and political expression.

¹² Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 205.

¹³ From additional materials found in *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*.

Naked Lunch is a daunting text. Its radical departure from conventional modes, emphasis on discontinuity, as well as its rapid oscillation between scenes is disorienting and challenging to follow. However, within these scenes, the foundations of political satire and autobiography provides meaningful context for the reader in a text that veers between science fiction and Marquis de Sade fever dream. Loosely, the text follows William Lee in his departure from a fictional New York, his experience in a transnational setting known as the Interzone and his subsequent return to New York.

Through William Lee's journey into and out of the Interzone—a violent, fantastical, overpopulated petri-dish of addiction, exploitation and death—the reader encounters a number of side characters. Some of these side characters have recurring appearances in the narrative, but most are only present in a handful of chapters. Certain side characters are more famous than others, in part because of the preposterous and gruesome qualities present within these chapters. For example, take one of the most famous, Benway. Doctor Benway is a surgeon and sadist, whose task as a political agent is to experiment with means of psychological control. He speaks of administering his subjects LSD and Benzedrine (an amphetamine), and hypnotizing them until they are under his total control. In the chapter, “Benway”, a bloody scalpel fight between Benway, another doctor by the name of Brubeck, and his baboon assistant, Violet, results in Benway losing his ability to practice medicine. After this, the doctor tells the narrator, Lee, not to worry about his future of practicing medicine, adding, “I managed to keep up my habits performing cut-rate abortions in subway toilets. I even descended to hustling pregnant women in the public streets. It was positively unethical”(27). Much of the textual body of *Naked Lunch* follows this meandering pattern, following anecdotes rather than motivations or desires.

While William Lee is certainly the protagonist of the narrative, his marginal situation with respect to much of the text's action places an increased emphasis on a kind of disembodied, omniscient narrative voice. This voice is able to migrate between scenes and characters without respect to the initial, first-person perspective of William Lee. Part of the difficulty in providing a concise claim of the novel's 'topic'—that is, saying what the text is 'about'—is due to this lack of narrative propulsion on the part of any one character in particular. Thus, it is through the plurality of characters in the narrative that the text finds its gravity. This plurality can be traced to the text's origins. Burroughs's own disjunctive, autobiographical assessment of the Tangier International Zone.

Formally, *Naked Lunch* deals with this plurality of characters through its rigorous description of the Interzone's political sphere. In this sphere, the stakes of assimilation are manifest through a distinct method of organization. This process of assimilation and participation within the political settings of the Interzone is characterized by a distinct preoccupation with the body. By placing the body at the center of political existence, Burroughs allows us to examine the ways in which biopolitical production functions to organize the narrative, as well as emphasize the concentrated and satirized political atmosphere within the text.

As I attempt to describe this new understanding of the text, the term 'biopolitics' will arise in a few contexts. In the first chapter, I will provide a historical understanding of biopolitics alongside an examination of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital's social function in 18th century Paris. My interest in this historical setting mirrors the interests of both Foucault and Burroughs. While in Paris in the late 1950s, Burroughs was completing the manuscript of *Naked Lunch* while

simultaneously conducting research in the French medical library.¹⁴ It is not a stretch to imagine that he came across literature on the preeminent hospital in Paris. Similarly, in interviews conducted towards the end of his life, Foucault would emphasize his interest in these historical institutions as means for understanding state power.¹⁵ In this section, I rely on Foucault's observations of biopolitical evolution, as well as his later lectures at Collège de France in 1978 and 1979. My aim is to establish a connection between a historical understanding of biopolitics with an examination of the market as a site of value exchange.

In chapter two, I will examine the modern applications and manifestations of biopolitics. Again, I will be relying on Foucault's assessments of state power, as well as his rhetorical positioning with respect to other political theoreticians of the 20th century. In addition to this, I will incorporate a discussion of the police as a distinct method of control, both in our modern society and the novel itself. This discussion of the police will be based around Foucault's idea of the "double bind", as well as their position as a sovereign force in society. In this discussion, my definition of a sovereign individual will be centered around the distinct qualities of this bind.¹⁶

It should be noted that although the paper is not without its share of charged terms, such as "assemblage", "value" or "sovereignty", I aim to substitute a rigorous theoretical examination of each term for a more dynamic discussion of a few distinct moments within the text at large. While other scholars have written at length on *Naked Lunch's* observations of late-capitalism and the literature of materiality¹⁷, it is my hope that by establishing connections between the text and historical contexts, as well as applicable political theory, I will identify new ways in which a

¹⁴ *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 239.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. *The Eye of Power*. 146.

¹⁶ For a juristic definition, see Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology*.

¹⁷ See Breu, Hardt and Negri.

perspective based in realism is an important means of understanding the aims of *Naked Lunch* itself. Specifically, I would like to suggest that Burroughs's dogmatic insistence on discontinuity constitutes a means of understanding patterns of dissonance in the political sphere. In this paper, I will examine Burroughs's narrative method and his observations of political ideology. This foundational perspective based in political ideology is most readily expressed through Burroughs's characterization of structural organization, and its effects on the construction of identity. This expression is also manifest in Burroughs's distinct method of constructing the novel as a means of investigating the temporal qualities of political reproduction.

Chapter 1: Political Bodies and Fluidity

The churning web of narratives and styles that together compose the main body of *Naked Lunch* are immediately and ultimately concerned with the Interzone, and the ways in which its citizens negotiate a continuous chaos of violence and death. The Interzone is saturated in an oscillatory, disembodied tension, in which the stakes and dynamics of power are at once transparent, while at the same time compounding on top of each other. While an analysis of the specific delineations of political advantage or disadvantage would be somewhat futile, the exploitation of political power within the narrative is ubiquitous. Historicized anecdotes and dialogue alike is constantly couched in terms of exercising exploitative power, and it is a main constituent of the Interzone's aesthetic representation. Power, exploitation, and most specifically violence is the primary means with which groups negotiate their means of control, of prohibition. These political negotiations are made tangible. In part, *Naked Lunch*'s multiplicity of voice and rapid oscillation between scenes, characters and dialects lends itself to an analysis of the text through political rhetoric. Many of the characters are without interior lives— a self as separate from others within the scene. The self, defined in the novel as a unifying, contiguous set of motivations, interests, or values becomes fluid in Burrough's narrative. Character becomes another, more dynamic phenomenon, conditioned by the methodical construction of the text itself, and its emphasis on political identification. This reluctance on the part of the author to create any continuous, identifiable character attribute speaks to the importance of *group dynamics* within the novel. The novel emphasizes and dramatizes these political contests as a contest for the body. Thus, exterior identifiers, such as political affiliation take on an enhanced importance as characters negotiate their position in the narrative.

The emphasis on politics and political affiliation within the novel in chapters such as, “Islam Inc and the Parties of the Interzone” does more to structure the narrative than just providing a label that the reader may assign to a character. The text indeed resists such a reading, as many of the recurring characters act as agents and double agents for the various parties, and their status as agents changes from chapter to chapter. However, duplicitous or not, these characters operate within a concentrated, cannibalistic atmosphere of political rhetoric and violence. This resistance to concrete identification is indicative of a larger question of visibility and affiliation in an atmosphere where the stakes for the body are absolute. The body is conditioned by total exploitation. Political affiliations and their consequences are negotiated differently across each party. Each faction has their own moral code, proclivities and organizing principles, however, each of the three main political parties within the novel are totalitarian in their methods. Factionalism thus occupies a relative and superficial position when viewed with knowledge of the identical ideological methods and ends of each party. They each seek absolute control over the population through various means of eradication. Despite this, the behaviors and abilities of each member of the political body are diverse in their rhetoric and symbology.

Beneath these political behaviors however, the anarchic foundations of these characters’ actions that together constitute the political atmosphere of the Interzone provides Burroughs with a kind of sandbox in which he can experiment and observe the depreciation of the self with respect to the principles of political institutions. As an author who is expressly concerned with new modes of narrative construction, it should be no surprise to the reader that, as a consequence of this interest, Burroughs must do away with a static political atmosphere in favor of a more dynamic one. Only then will new behaviors reveal themselves. This experimental impulse is not

without historical precedent. Even in clinical contexts, the acquisition of new knowledge has at times been based on the management of a chaotic environment as opposed to a sterile, organized one. In the preface to the second edition of his text, *The Joyful Wisdom*, Friedrich Nietzsche proposes an important claim regarding the connection between bodies and knowledge. He writes,

Behind the highest value judgements that have hitherto guided the history of thought, there are concealed misunderstandings of the physical constitution...All those bold insanities of metaphysics, especially answers to the questions about the *value* of existence, may always be considered first of all as symptoms of certain bodies. And if such world affirmations or world negations...lack any significance when measured scientifically, they are the more valuable for the historian and the psychologist as hints or symptoms of the body...I am still waiting for a philosophical *physician* in the exceptional sense of that word—one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of the people... (5).

If we are concerned with the “value” of existence within systems of political control, we must first examine the extent to which the body itself is at the center of this constructive force. The two components that Nietzsche identifies at the beginning of his quote, “value judgements” and the “physical constitution” have a necessary resolution in a sort of clinical knowledge, which Nietzsche identifies through his use of the word, “physician”. This problem of “total health” however, is a difficult one. We will see that the incorporation of a population at large for the purposes of medical knowledge and public health is linked historically with an almost necessary depreciation of the body’s individual value. An examination of a historical setting in which symptomatic diagnosis has been most relevant in structuring a body of knowledge may give us new inroads to questions of political value and exploitation.

This chapter will demonstrate that a reading of the text based on the fluid characteristics of the main characters allows the reader insight into the myriad ways in which the author chooses to characterize the population at large. The author constructs various institutions tasked with facilitating the characters' positions within the Interzone as well as the direction of the narrative itself. Investigating the linkage, the superimposition of these institutions may give the reader a new understanding of the narrative's observations of power. These methods of organization are diverse, and yet, they share definite characteristics with each other, and they exert similar forces on those within their proverbial or physical walls. A comparison of two settings defined by this transformative chaos; the Hôtel-Dieu with the Interzone, one historical and the other fantastical, will allow us to observe continuities in the systems of power deployed by each, as well as their distinctive effect on the individual. This comparison will also enable us to isolate distinct qualities of authorial intention embedded within the Interzone's construction, and the ideological connections between the historical and the narrative. In the political sense, the ubiquity of faction and schism within the Interzone mirrors other fractured-yet-operational institutions within *Naked Lunch*. However, the linkage between these institutions is apparent; the body must undergo a transformation, assuming a base value, defined by the function of the body, or use to a body of knowledge. It is here that we can observe the troubling continuity within the narrative between clinical and political settings, as well clinical and political figures.

In a 1977 interview entitled *The Eye of Power*, while discussing Jeremy Bentham's philosophy surrounding the penal system and its resonance across history, Michel Foucault observed the primary functions of power in 18th century French society via an examination of medical facilities in the Hôtel-Dieu in 1772. Speaking of the nascent clinical system,

Power had only a weak capacity for ‘resolution,’ as one might say in photographic terms; it was incapable of an individualizing, exhaustive analysis of the social body. But the economic changes of the 18th century made it necessary to ensure the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions. By such means, power—even when faced with ruling a multiplicity of men—could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one (151).

While Foucault presents a historical analysis, the consequences and logical extensions of such a process are evident in the text. This quote also echoes a claim Burroughs makes in the

“Atrophied Preface” of *Naked Lunch* on page 186, “Sooner or later The Vigilante, The Rube, Lee the Agent...are subject to say the same thing in the same words, to occupy, at that intersectional point, the same position in space time.” Burroughs seems to be describing a sort of ultimate visibility, a solipsistic understanding of character. Speaking in the terms of a certain political institution instead of a medical institution means that one must define and interrogate the different means of power that these institutions exercise. While different in their functions, medical institutions and any political party system both specifically negotiate the role of the individual in a group in terms of mitigation.

The Hôtel-Dieu’s primary function in 18th century Paris was as a sick ward, housing those too poor to seek medical treatment for tuberculosis, smallpox, and other contagious diseases. The Hôtel-Dieu (translated as “house of God”) stands as one of the oldest, continuously functioning hospitals in the world, with official records dating it to 829 CE. Such an institution is intrinsically connected to the epidemiological and social history of Paris itself. As the mortality rate was consistently over 25 percent through the end of the 18th century, and as the city’s population grew at an even more rapid rate, the twin purposes of quarantine and rehabilitation

became linked to the public health of the city at large.¹⁸ Towards the end of the 18th century, historians estimate that out of Paris' total population of over 650,000 citizens, over 100,000 were paupers—living in extreme poverty.¹⁹ The structure and organization of the hospital itself served a necessary social purpose, even if the purpose was to keep the dying off of the street. The chaotic and disordered atmosphere of the hospital was detailed in a number of famous accounts, however, it is perhaps most vividly recorded by the surgeon, Jacques-René Tenon in a report from 1788,

The general policy of the Hôtel-Dieu—policy caused by the lack of space—is to put as many beds as possible into one room, and to put four, five or six people into one bed. We have seen the dead mixed with the living there. We have seen rooms so narrow that the air stagnates and is not renewed and the light enters only feebly and charged with vapors. We have seen convalescents together with the sick, the dying and the dead... We have seen a room for convalescents on the third floor, which can be reached only via the smallpox ward. The ward for the insane is next to the one for unfortunate postoperative patients, who cannot hope for rest in this neighborhood which is so full of outcries day and night... The operation ward... contains those who are being operated upon, those who will be operated upon, and those who have already been operated upon... The St. Joseph ward is for pregnant women... three or four are in the same bed, exposed to insomnia, contagion, and the danger of hurting their children... It is nauseating to think of how they infect each other. A thousand particular and accidental cases are added every day...²⁰

As a patient of the Hôtel-Dieu, the predominant site of medical treatment for the population of Paris, whatever physiological autonomy one had before entering this institution is

¹⁸ Richmond, Phyllis. "The Hôtel-Dieu on the Eve of Revolution".

¹⁹ Rosen, George. "Hospitals, Medical Care, and Social Policy in the French Revolution".

²⁰ Ackerknecht, Erwin. *Medicine at the Paris Hospital: 1794-1848*. 16.

revoked. The question becomes one of entanglement. The hospital becomes a site for a certain kind of equitability. One's diagnosis is conditioned by others' diagnoses. The air becomes charged with viral and bacterial pathogens. The individual is transformed by this pressure, this overlap. Any actionable medical treatment one may receive from a doctor becomes secondary to the claustrophobia of the institution; an institution that persists on the frugal economic rations provided by the ruling class. Indeed, it is not a surprise that some politicians at the time considered disbanding the hospital, on account of the fact that many were giving money to an institution which Tenon, a prominent medical scholar, judged as "the most unhealthy and the most uncomfortable of all hospitals, and that of nine patients two die"²¹ This claustrophobia persists despite the testimonials and recommendations of those with medical knowledge, and it would persist until many years after the transformation of France's government from monarchy to democracy. For those tasked with managing the Hôtel-Dieu, as well as other medical institutions in the 18th and 19th centuries, the methods with which one may derive a body of scientific knowledge from this entanglement would become increasingly important to a new formulation of the clinic, as well as its deployment in modern society.

It should be acknowledged that the chaotic atmosphere Hôtel-Dieu was not only a site for frantic quarantine, but also careful research. Of course, as with most burgeoning schools of thought in the 19th century, the guiding principles were marked by an interest by a continuation of the moral paradigm beyond the scope of religion. French doctors and surgeons, nearly all of whom were ardent students of philosophy as well as medicine, began to construct a basis for a science of the body. As with philosophy, medical knowledge may also be derived from careful

²¹ Ackerknecht, Erwin. *Medicine at the Paris Hospital: 1794-1848*. 16.

observation, and yet, these doctors were content to leave these foundations behind for a more concrete science, based in new fields like microscopy and chemistry.²² New modes of observation born in the laboratory called into question the supremacy of observation. At the time, the predominant school of medical thought was constituted in the sensualist's perspective, a position born in the recent centuries from the progress of Enlightenment philosophy. In his book, *Medicine at the Paris Hospital 1794-1848*, Dr. Erwin Ackerknecht writes,

The brain, center of all sensory functions, which produced 'thought like the liver bile, the parotis saliva' and the whole nervous system was, for the sensualist, of prime importance. Temperament was a question of the nervous system; the influence of the moral on the physical was ultimately the influence of the cerebral system. Medicine was therefore the basis of the science of man— and so, also, a 'moral science'. It could participate in perfecting man, in that uninterrupted movement towards amelioration so essential in the philosophy of the Enlightenment (5).

Hôtel-Dieu's central position at this historical moment is essential; here was a population of the sick, subject to new methods of classification and observation, the empirical evidence for a new "moral science". These new modes of thought, born on the eve of the nineteenth century, organizing themselves into bodies of knowledge with their own beliefs and practices, would begin to redefine the body's positioning with respect to value, indivisibility. In this historical example, Foucault observed the beginning of the convergence between clinical, economic and political power. Examining and comparing the setting of the Interzone in conversation with the historical function of the Hôtel-Dieu leads one to a definite similarity between the historical and textual scenes. Both contexts are defined by two distinct, yet synergistic phenomena:

²² See Ackerknecht, Erwin. *Medicine at the Paris Hospital 1794-1848*. Chapter 1.

1. The depreciated value of the body with regard to the larger community (in the medical case, the motives would be public health or medical knowledge, in the political sense, genocide).
2. A complex and nascent taxonomy marked by superimposition and transformation (marked especially by the position of the politicized addict, as well as the institutionalized addict).

Examining the similarities and differences between the historical context of the birth of clinical knowledge alongside the narrative construction of the Interzone as a setting in which competing factions vie for control over a population will lead us to a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions in which Burroughs thought it best to situate the construction of a particular narrative voice. To continue Foucault's photographic metaphor from above, in the case of *Naked Lunch*, the "resolution" has lapsed into a kind of saturation, in which the imposed political categorization has made a "multiplicity of men" out of a single actor. Voice and identity become slippery, divisible. This schism is central to building an understanding of character within the text. To truly acknowledge this conditioned entanglement, Burroughs brings those diagnoses buried deep within the structure of the institution to the surface. He imbues the tubercular, newly-poxed, and jaundiced man with authority, and sets him on his way. With politics, Burroughs portrays this in a literal, material sense. With any party's method, the end is the same; a consolidation of power through a mass of alike bodies. In the Interzone, ideology is contingent on the incorporation of this mass, regardless of political affiliation.

In drawing comparisons between Foucault's historical appraisal and the construction of a political atmosphere within the text itself, we can begin to recontextualize the often phrenetic

side effects of a totalitarian regime on the individual characters within Burroughs's narrative. Political affiliations and their consequences are negotiated differently across each party, however, each of the three main political parties within the novel are totalitarian in their methods. While far from the only apparatus in the novel to do so, the political parties of the Interzone seek absolute control over the population through various means of eradication. Firstly, the Liquefactionists plan on eradicating the citizens of opposing parties through means of absorption. The Senders' agenda is to gain power by means of mind control. The Divisionists' affiliates have the ability to replicate themselves, gaining control through sheer numbers. With any method, the end is the same— a consolidation of power through a mass of bodies. In the Interzone, ideology is contingent on the incorporation of this mass, regardless of political affiliation. In the chapter mentioned above, "Islam Inc and the parties of the Interzone" the narrator elaborates on the behaviors and histories of the various parties in a kind of direct address to the reader;

It will be immediately clear that the Liquefactionist Party is, except for one man, entirely composed of dupes, it not being clear until the final absorption who is whose dupe... The Liquefactionists are much given to every form of perversion, especially sadomasochistic practices... Liquefactionists in general know what the score is. The Senders, on the other hand, are notorious for their ignorance of the nature and terminal state of sending, for barbarous and self-righteous manners, and for rabid fear of any fact. It was only the intervention of the Factualists that prevented the Senders from putting Einstein in an institution and destroying his theory (136).

Already, we can assess the Liquefactionists' scheme on Foucault's ground. Burroughs' use of the word dupe, (a word with a somewhat extended and malleable definition within the text, but something that should be taken to mean here as the yet-to-be-liquidated individual) signifies an

individual's position within the party as a sort of binarism. Each party member is capable of absorbing another, as well as being absorbed themselves. The 'fluidity' of the self is conditioned by subjugation or exploitation alternatively. The party holds this authority collectively, however volatile that authority may be at any moment. This volatility is explicitly linked in the above passage to a sort of clinical institution, as well as the destruction of Einstein's scientific mind. Interestingly, Burroughs identifies those who wished to institutionalize Einstein as "rabid", a curious inversion of affliction and rehabilitation. Absorption, represented humorously in this passage through Einstein's attempted induction into an institution, is not contingent on an order, or logic. Use is defined by power, the massive group. This is true in the political sense as well. The hidden "one man" who ends up absorbing all into the self is not actual yet, as it is made clear that no one knows who will absorb who. And yet, this "one man" can be said to exist, he is just not individualized beyond the party identity. The party can be said to lack "resolution", to use Foucault's term. This is what separates medical from political institutions. The process of individualization is precisely the inverse of the ideological foundations of each party's means for expansion. The term "resolution" can be thus examined in two semantic senses; both as an end, as well as the process of consolidation.

A brief point on "liquidation". Aside from the fantastical contexts in which Burroughs employs the word "liquidation", such as describing the Liquifactionists, Burroughs's first use of the term "liquidation" is important, as it helps to bring context to later uses in the novel. On page 4 of *Naked Lunch*, describing a "hot shot", the narrator again directly addresses the reader, "Note: This is a cap of poison junk sold to the addict for liquidation purposes. Often given to informers. Usually the hot shot is strychnine since it tastes and looks like junk." In an original

addendum to *Naked Lunch*, “Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness”, Burroughs details the business of addiction in cold, economic terms; “Junk is the ideal product... the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy... The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to the product. He does not improve and simplifies his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client”(201). If the term “liquidation” is contingent on the fluidity of a product’s value, could it be said to also be contingent on the fluidity of the consumer’s value? It certainly appears so. The degradation that the addict must endure, coupled with the abandon with which they seek the product means that this absolute need will inevitably be reinforced. To continue in reductive economic jargon— as demand for the product is absolute, any manipulation of the supply means that the addict *must* adapt. This is what Burroughs means by “he sells his consumer to the product”. The standards for negotiation are at once absolute and contingent on the volatility of the market.

This idea of liquidation is synonymous with Foucault’s analysis of the market as a site of ‘truth’. Initially, the market served as a site in which the appraisal of economic value; an appraisal with respect to regulation and the standard value of goods. As government and mercantilism are historically synergistic, and as the advent of industrialism and our current era of late-stage capitalism demonstrates, the market functions as a site of truth beyond the scope of political regulation. Thus, Foucault reasons, government action is predominantly situated in a position of veridiction with respect to the market. He elaborates,

In other words, it is the natural mechanism of the market and the formation of a natural price that enables us to falsify and verify governmental practice when, on the basis of these elements, we examine what government does, the measures it takes, and the rules it imposes. In this sense, inasmuch as it enables production, need, supply, demand, value, and price, etcetera, to be linked

together through exchange, the market constitutes a site of veridiction, I mean a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice. Consequently, the market determines that good government is no longer simply government that functions according to justice. The market determines that a good government is no longer quite simply one that is just. The market now means that to be good government, government has to function according to truth (32).

In a drug market, both the consumer and the product are necessarily fluid, as the regulation imposed by our government amounts to prohibition. Such a relationship with any illicit market means that it will flourish or wither according to its own standards of jurisprudence. The drug market is a prime example of this, and, in the US, the supreme failure on the part of the government to abate this market not only demonstrates the utter absurdity of its policies, but also transmutes Foucault's argument into a more essential position. It is our engagement with markets that allows us to examine our government from a position of relative truth. A government, however, cannot differentiate between legal and illegal markets. Both provide the participant with a distinct perspective of government function. Whatever truth that the US government derives from the continuous prevalence of the drug market is siphoned into its institutions; institutions tasked with negotiating the positions of those who trade in 'alternative' markets through imprisonment, or rehabilitation. Thus, Foucault's principle of veridiction quickly becomes fraught. This principle, based in the equation of price and value, has disastrous consequences in the realm of addiction. As has already been claimed by Burroughs, the individual demand for heroin eclipses all other needs, desires. No price is too high to pay, no supply is too meager. Nowhere are the principles of exchange and value more viral than in the drug market. The chemical aspect of addiction, the physiological consequences are such that

one's individuality becomes encapsulated within the next \$20 bill. It is in this economic context that the reader begins to identify the body as grounds for a certain imposed economic conversion.

Burroughs elaborates on this cyclical, yet enduring market economy in a number of instances throughout the textual body of *Naked Lunch*. On page 46, the author describes an historical episode in which the Mugwamps, a species of alien origin, and their chemical dependents, the Reptiles, were forced into hiding,

During the biennial Panics when the raw, peeled Dream Police storm the city the Mugwamps take refuge in the deepest crevices of the wall, sealing themselves in clay cubicles, and remain for weeks in biostasis. In those days of grey terror the Reptiles dart about faster and faster, scream past each other at supersonic speed, their flexible skulls flapping in black winds of insect agony. The Dream Police disintegrate in globs of rotten ectoplasm swept away by an old junky, coughing and spitting in the sick morning. The Mugwamp Man comes with alabaster jars of fluid and the Reptiles get smoothed out. The air is once again still and clear as glycerin.

In this passage, the power dynamics are shown in stark, scientific terms. The Mugwamps, although clearly already alien, are animalized in their “refuge” from the police. They protect their value through instinct. They are able to hibernate in a state of “biostasis”, in contrast with their chemical dependents, the Reptiles. The Mugwamps “secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises which prolongs life by slowing metabolism”²³. A Reptile is chemically dependent on a Mugwamp— an addict. This passage is a prime example of the slippery temporal quality of the narrative. In the Interzone, history shrinks and expands. The narrator organizes time into “biennial” instances and “weeks”, conjuring vastness, only before the police “disintegrate” and are “swept away”. This slippery, transitive quality emanates from the body, specifically the

²³ Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 46.

addicted body. Social disorder, conditioned in part by the behavior of the market, is most accurately recorded in the physiology of the group. The Reptiles, dependent on the Mugwamps, are dislodged from this structure and thrown into a chaotic, energetic state, only to be inducted again through a middleman. Here, we can clearly observe a set of familiar thematics. Whatever disorder imposed by the state, the drug market— encapsulated in the figure of the Mugwamp— is able to conceal itself in the architecture, the immovable materiality of the place itself. The consumers are unable to embed themselves in the setting. The Reptiles move at “supersonic” speeds. In a literal sense, they travel beyond the boundaries of spoken language. Their collective chaos emanates into the atmosphere around them, spawning “black winds”. After all of this, the air itself is made into “glycerin”; a viscous, sweet-tasting fluid used commonly in food processing.²⁴ This emphasis on fluid characteristics, the “flexible” skulls of the Reptiles, as well as the Mugwamps’ ability to seal themselves into cracks in the wall— this preoccupation somehow constitutes both the animalistic endurance of the drug market, as well as the state of the high, wherein the preservation of the individual takes on diminished importance with respect to the fulfillment of need. Our institutions are fed by this liquidity, this perplexing continuity.

²⁴ See Wikipedia. “Glycerol”.

Chapter 2: Sovereignty and the Police

Any attempt to compose a rudimentary analysis of the body with respect to the political methods of control present in *Naked Lunch* inevitably leads one into a maze of subtleties. Conducting a biopolitical analysis of the novel requires a careful examination of the ways in which Burroughs constructs a “self” within the text with respect to the political environment. It is evident that the author is concerned with labels and political identification— an identification which amounts to a certain anonymous participation in structures of devaluation and extermination. In *Naked Lunch*, realistic, historical apparatuses are often placed next to more surreal constructions. Within the text, we should take care to not ignore conventional, recognizable apparatuses in favor of fantastical ones. Burroughs’s narrative emphasis on the police’s role as a sovereign force is one of the few lines of narrative continuity throughout *Naked Lunch*. Of course, these observations are also charged with distinct literary conventions. Of these literary conventions, the most useful predicate to a discussion of biopolitics in any novel is the introduction of a dystopia. In a dystopian setting the character’s political self is separated from any concrete temporal moment. The recognizable apparatuses of the state that appear to exist in perpetuity take on a more significant symbolic meaning with respect to their role in preserving power. Burroughs’s dystopia amplifies the preexisting structures of power, rather than disintegrating them. *Naked Lunch* provides us with many significant examples of this, the most significant being the role of the police. Burroughs’ characterization of the police as co-habitants of the underworld complicates their usual position as biopolitical agents. The connection between these two concepts, biopolitics and dystopia is important as we attempt to characterize the role of a police force in the narrative.

In an examination of Foucault's lectures on biopolitics at the University of Vermont in 1982, Giorgio Agamben elucidates on the schism in Foucault's assessment of the "political life". Thinking beyond the "decisive event of modernity"²⁵ Agamben comments on the consequential process of binding oneself to an external power, which, among other definitions, I will call duty. While Agamben is weary of defining of a "unitary theory of power"²⁶ from Foucault's disparate constructions, he makes clear the exceptional condition of the 'modern' age,

Foucault seemed to orient this analysis according to two distinct directives for research...*political techniques* (such as the science of the police) with which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center...[and] *technologies of the self* by which process of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself...to an external power...In one of his last writings, Foucault argues that the modern Western state has integrated techniques of subjective individualization with procedures of objective totalization to an unprecedented degree, and he speaks of a real 'political double bind, constituted by individualization and the simultaneous totalization of the structures of modern power'(11).

Similarly to the twin complementary concepts of dystopia and biopolitics with which we can scaffold an analysis of *Naked Lunch*, so to do the results of this "double-bind" constitute an individual's conception of the self as a participant or subject of the state. One of the most apparent, as well as one of the most charged duties of an individual beholden to a state is that of law enforcement. Nowhere are questions of sovereignty more relevant or consequential for the population than in the position of a police officer. The actions of a police officer are nearly always interpreted as legal, even in the exception.²⁷ A police officer is the clearest manifestation

²⁵ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. 10.

²⁶ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. 11.

²⁷ Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology*. 5.

of this “bind” identified by Foucault. A police officer’s process of “individualization” serves the structures of “totalization”, and vice versa. Occupying a privileged position amidst the systems of control, a police officer is the embodiment of a curious state of exemption from the population itself, reflective of a certain conception of sovereignty. Though by no means the only method of control, the organization and empowerment of citizens who represent the state is the primary means with which the US has chosen to regulate the lives of its citizens— especially in times of emergency or prolonged destabilization.²⁸ The “science” of the police, where and how police are tasked with control of the population is in the “very center” of the State’s interest. Consequently, the “double bind”, which is manifest in the psychological reality of police, is also indirectly at the center of the state’s power over the body. Furthermore, these concepts that Agamben identifies—the process of individualization and the expansion of objective totalization—should not only be conceived of as complementary, but as ideas that reinforce and create each other.

In his text, *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben identifies a fundamental question of biopolitical consciousness through an analysis of Foucault’s 1977 lectures at Collège de France. He writes, “The politicization of bare life as such...constitutes the decisive event of modernity...It is even likely that if politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse, this is because politics has failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity”(10). In using the term biopolitics to characterize the volatile relationships between Burroughs’ characters and political contexts, I wish to draw attention to a fundamental conflict of modernity. The methods of controlling what Foucault would term a “state of population”²⁹ are incompatible with modern conceptions of duty and the self. The most apparent of these methods, and also that

²⁸ Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology*. 5-6.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer*. 10.

method which most tangibly connects the body to the state is that of the police. It is in this field, amongst the deputized population of sovereign individuals, that the psychological consequences of controlling a “state of population” will play out. Agamben goes on to elucidate on the linkage between sovereignty and a biopolitical population, writing, “It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception”(11).

The continuous reproduction of sovereign power is intrinsically connected to the reproduction of biopolitical bodies. What are the consequences of this failure to recognize the “decisive event of modernity” within the narrative of *Naked Lunch*? In the context of a novel wherein the police are situated at the margins of the narrative, the function of their sovereign position is amplified without respect to their position as deputy of the state. In other words, however anarchic or authoritarian the setting may be, police are empowered to expand their operations into increasingly hermetic territories. This expansion may be a consequence of the “double-bind” that Foucault identifies. Within the architecture of *Naked Lunch*, this connection always manifests within the psychological sphere.

D.A. Miller, a literary scholar greatly influenced by Foucault, provides us with an important perspective as we attempt to characterize the function of the police within *Naked Lunch*. In the first chapter of Miller’s book, *The Novel and the Police*, he defines the role of the police as such,

In the economy of the ‘mainstream’ novel, a more obviously circumscribed police apparatus functions somewhat analogously to define the field that exceeds its range. Its very limits bear witness to the existence of other domains, formally lawless, outside and beyond its powers of supervision and detection. Characteristically locating its story in an everyday, middle-class world, the novel

takes frequent and explicit notice that this is an area that for the most part the law does not cover or supervise. Yet when the law falls short in the novel, the world is never reduced to anarchy as a result. In the move whereby the police are contained in a marginal pocket of the representation, the work of the police is superseded by the operations of another, informal, and extralegal principle of organization and control (3).

While Miller is primarily concerned with 19th century literature and its historical manifestations of police power, a recontextualization of the basic dynamics Miller identifies may help us to understand the unique sections that bookend the original textual body of *Naked Lunch*. Within these sections, the police are at the center of the narrative in a way similar to that of the “mainstream” novel. This ability to “bear witness” in “formally lawless” spaces is manifest through the paranoia of the protagonist. The setting that Miller uses as a token for the “mainstream” novel, “an everyday, middle-class world” may on its surface appear to be incompatible with the usual scenes of the drug market within the novel. However, the essential quality of the police remains the same despite the shift in setting. Whatsmore, these settings provide the reader with examples of where police power appears to consistently fall short, revealing those “informal, extralegal principles of organization and control” that Miller identifies.

Ideally, a police officer is able to exercise discretion. Their sovereign position should be a lawful one. That being said, the question of whether or not the police represent a lawful force within this novel is far beyond debate. *Naked Lunch* is an anarchic text. The police are not exempt from this insistence. However, in a novel where self-interest and exploitation marks most, if not all of the characters included, we must first distinguish the particular qualities of their intrusion and surveillance. The police in an anarchic society do not have a doctrine, or

reason with which they may justify their sense of duty. The sections in question within the novel appear to support this claim. They follow no prescribed procedure, no standards of respect.

While abuse of, or neglect for the prescribed doctrines of policing is not necessarily the same as a fictionalized militia who appears entirely dislodged from any responsibility for maintaining law and order, in reality, the only distinction between these two imagined forces is in the sovereign individual's belief or disbelief in their subordination to the law. In other words, it is purely psychological. In reality, a police officer's disregard for doctrine or lack of fear of prosecution is superficially a demonstration of a belief in their personal exemption from the rule of law. I would also argue that the prevalence of this belief in our society is evidence of our theological dependency on the idea of the power of the sovereign individual. However, distinct patterns of misconduct, as well as organizational misconduct, reveals the importance of subordination, of order within prescribed structure if one wishes to maintain a sense of duty. A tyrannical officer demonstrates an ability to project power which is analogous to a supernatural ability. This enhanced ability over the lives and wellbeing of those within the drug economy functions within the narrative to change the conventional representations of police.

There are many historical examples of this, indeed, one does not have to look far for abuse or neglect for doctrine within law enforcement in our society. Beginning in 2008 with the election of President Obama, the Department of Justice, as of 2015, had opened 23 investigations into police conduct across the country.³⁰ More investigations were opened in 2021 following the election of President Biden. These recent investigations are ongoing, but of the ones concluded in 2016, the DOJ found evidence of constitutional misconduct in 17 of the 23 local departments

³⁰ See "Police Reform and Accountability Accomplishments". DOJ.

they investigated. Of this misconduct, discriminatory policing tactics were nearly ubiquitous, often targeting people of Color, as well as other, more sensationalized criminal activity perpetrated by the police, such as organized robbery.³¹

While the ubiquity of misconduct certainly attests to the presence of certain “extralegal principles of organization and control”, this behavior on the part of the sovereign individual is not created in a vacuum. The doctrine of qualified immunity, which states that a government employee (including but not limited to police officers) is immune from prosecution for any alleged violation of an individual’s civil rights, unless they violated a “clearly established law” attests to the robust nature of this organization of sovereign individuals.³² Importantly, while this doctrine bolsters the legality of a deputy’s behaviors, the means with which the police control a population are juridical in other contexts as well. This is important if a wronged individual seeks recourse with the law for a wrong. For example, the more general prohibition of assault may help the case of a victim of excessive force, depending on the locality. But what if the methods of control surpasses the parameters of jurisprudence itself? What if there is no no legal recourse? This dynamic is important as we characterize Burrough’s depiction of a dystopian society.

Biopolitics and dystopia both function as critiques of modernity. This relationship between dystopia and biopolitics is important in an examination of a text like *Naked Lunch*, wherein the slippery quality of time and the inclusion of semi-autobiographical details problematizes the classification of the text as plainly dystopian. The conventional understanding of a dystopian author as one who imagines ‘futures’ is by no means entirely misguided. However, it may be more advantageous to emphasize an author’s observation of the world as

³¹ CNN. “7 Baltimore officers accused of abusing power, robbing citizens”.

³² American Bar Association. “What is Qualified Immunity?”.

such as indicative of or pointing to the existence of phenomena in the present, rather than as solely manifesting in the future. Furthermore, the introduction of a police force into a dystopian setting presents an interesting theoretical problem for the police within the narrative. In a setting which inherently lacks a foundation in lawful conduct, what is the norm that the police seek to uphold? In this way, dystopia also functions as a critique of modernity by means of suggesting a kind of discontinuity or flaw. In a text that presupposes anarchy, marked by a ubiquitous disregard amongst its characters for conventional law, as well as the enforcement of conventional law, the representation of the police within the text functions to reveal the inherent, extralegal forces of organization presupposed by the author— forces that augment the experimental capabilities of the text. By situating the construction of a dystopia in the present, Burroughs' characters hybridize historical and speculative manifestations of power. In other words, the temporal experimentation within the text allows the reader a clearer perspective with respect to exploitation and the psychological consequences of modernity.

Within the narrative of *Naked Lunch*, it becomes immediately clear that the police's activities are actively relegated to somewhat of a marginal position within the text. These chapters are anchored by the perspective of the protagonist, William Lee. In the middle of the first chapter, the protagonist is in search of heroin to take on his escape out of town. In a brief aside, Lee elaborates on the predatory behavior of police officers— “dicks”— toward drug users within the text. This quote is also an example of one of Burrough's conventions within *Naked Lunch*, an isolated anecdote entirely concerned with a new character,

So back downtown by Sheridan Square Station in case the dick is lurking in a broom closet. Like I say it couldn't last. I knew they were out there powwowing and making their evil fuzz magic, putting dolls of me in Leavenworth. 'No use sticking needles in

that one, Mike.’ I heard they got Chapin with a doll. This old eunich dick just sat in the precinct basement hanging a doll of him day and night, year in year out. And when Chapin hanged in Connecticut, they find this old creep with his neck broken. ‘He fell downstairs,’ they say. You know the old cop bullshit (6).

In this passage, the police are using magic to catch fugitives, placing their power into a pre-modern, extrajudicial context. This introduces an interesting tension between ideology and method. Popularly, we interpret the police as a distinct feature of modernity. A modern society, at least in the popular imagination, is an entirely lawful society. However, within Burroughs’s dystopian narrative, the methods with which the police seek to enforce laws within society are themselves uncontrollable. This is reinforced by the author’s reference to the “eunich dick”, which can be read as both a pun on his colloquial reference to the police, as well as a claim to a kind of psychological impotence within the police. This impotence is transformed into a kind of equalizing power; both the policeman and Chapin die as a result of this ritualized behavior. The police’s use of the supernatural speaks to Agamben’s identification of the specific “process of subjectivization [which brings] the individual to bind himself...to an external power.”³³ Within the example from the text, we are enabled to see the consequences of this “bind”; a bind which Burroughs visualizes through his attribution of a supernatural ability to the “science” of the police. Agamben’s use of the word “science” is interesting in this context, as Burroughs appears to replace “science” with supernatural ability. This is a dangerous and transformative conflation. However, when viewed from a dystopian perspective, this conflation seems apt. Such a transformation speaks to Miller’s attribution of an “extralegal principle of organization and control” and supports his discussion of the law’s expansive power. Whatmore, as Miller

³³ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. 11.

observes, this expansive power is specifically conditioned by the police's quality of impotence within the narrative itself. Burroughs reiterates this impotence in the face of method even as we observe and intuit these new laws coming into effect. He ends the anecdote by referring us back to the lie, writing, "'He fell downstairs,' they say. You know the old cop bullshit." A refusal to recognize the volatility of this hidden juridical system is another demonstration of impotence. In an anarchic setting, amongst addicts, con-men and political agents, the work of the police is repeatedly and continuously "superseded" by these "extralegal" principles, revealing the presence of new juridical ideology within the narrative dislodged from the rigorous connotations of "science", originally proposed by Agamben.

Though brief, this episode provides the reader some insight into the protagonist's mind before the poetic onslaught of disembodied narration and vast array of characters and settings take over. From this passage, which lasts barely a page, we can identify from the first pages an essential, almost supernatural connection between Lee and the police. Dissimilarly from the "middle-class world" which Miller identifies, the settings which together compose the unified drug market of this fictional New York City are supervised by the police to a far greater degree. The function of the police within narrative reveals itself as distinct from any middle class setting, more specifically, the extension of the police into those persistently lawless domains reveal the ways in which psychological manifestations of an individual's bind eclipses the conception of duty. The police's integration and participation within the system of drug markets suggests a complex tension with respect to the police's classical representation as mediators of convention, order, and justice.

While the first chapter of the text employs a more conventionally causal narrative from that of the more abstract following chapters, the initial characterization of Lee—his paranoid nature as well as his own perception of his place within “the world network of junkies”³⁴— leads to a distinct tonal effect when it is placed in conversation with the final chapter of the narrative “Hauser and O’Brien”. The reappearance of narcotics detectives provide an unsteady continuity for the narrative. By the penultimate chapter, Burroughs decides to abruptly transition the narrative back to New York City seemingly without any narrative cause. However, when examined in connection to the narrative’s first chapter, it becomes clear that Lee’s encounter with the police represents the culmination of the character’s paranoid psychological development. This encounter destabilizes Lee’s character within the setting, and demonstrates the invasive role of the police in society as such. He describes the pair of narcotics detectives on page 175,

Hauser and O’Brien. They had been on the City Narcotics Squad for 20 years. Old-timers like me. I been on the junk for 16 years. They weren’t bad as laws go. At least O’Brien wasn’t. O’Brien was the con man, and Hauser the tough guy. A vaudeville team. Hauser had a way of hitting you before he said anything, just to break the ice. Then O’Brien gives you an Old Gold...and starts putting down a cop con that was really bottled in bond.

The introduction of historical continuity is jarring, it is a rare instance within the text for the narrator to introduce such a foundational backstory. Over the course of decades, Lee has come to understand their role by establishing a metaphorical connection to their position as actors, rather than agents or officers. The marginal and superfluous connotation of the phrase “vaudeville team” speaks to the absurdity of the detectives’ behavior. In the eyes of the narrator, they are perfectly caricatured versions of themselves. When viewed in connection to the section that

³⁴ Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 7.

opens the first chapter, where it appears to be Lee's paranoia creating this threat, the crystallization of these virtual, unseen fears into embodied, archetypal actors is significant with respect to Lee's character development. His fears of police methods have become "bottled in bond"—predictable and regularized. This phrase's etymology can be traced back to the Bottled-in-Bond Act of 1897, an act aimed to provide tax incentives to combat the production of impure liquor. Any manufacturer who wishes to produce liquor with the label, "Bottled-in-Bond" must follow rigorous guidelines during production.³⁵ In doing so, the manufacturer provides the consumer and government with certain assurances. The narrator's portrayal of the "con man" O'Brien's method of interrogation as highly regularized and transparent speaks to the presence of Foucault's "double bind". This bind is useful as we consider the unsteady continuity that the police provide for the narrative itself, as well their effect on Lee's psychology.

Later in the scene, the narrator says of the pair of detectives, "They were suspicious. A man can't be a cop all his life without developing a special set of intuitions."³⁶ Even though this quote attributes this intuition to the archetype of a career police officer, comparisons between the intuitive abilities of addicts and police can be seen throughout the penultimate chapter. Burroughs' choice to assign a similar extrasensory capacity to both groups is significant with respect to their oppositional arrangement within the narrative and society itself. However, while the relationship between Lee and the narcotics detectives can certainly be described as antagonistic, it is clear that there is an implicit understanding of mutual advantage. Speaking of the subtext to O'Brien's tendency to wheedle for information, the narrator says on page 176, "He meant, of course, 'What can you do for us, Bill?' He looked at me and smiled. The smile stayed

³⁵ See Wikipedia. "Bottled in Bond".

³⁶ Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 176.

there too long, hideous and naked, the smile of an old painted pervert, gathering all the negative evil of O'Brien's ambiguous function." On the surface, the narrator's image of O'Brien as a sort of saccharine villain speaks to the value of caricature as a primary indicator of sovereignty. The detective's smile, rather than betraying a cruel interior or speaking to a lack of character, is actively "gathering" evil. O'Brien's presentation of an empathetic exterior is wholly disingenuous, yet at the same time it unmistakably reveals the "ambiguity" of O'Brien's character. In this way, the narrator's apt description of the smile as "naked" speaks to the clarity with which the narrator, William Lee, sees the specific "function" of the two detectives within the narrative.

It should be noted that O'Brien's original statement to Lee that precedes the above passage on page 176 is, "You know we can't do that, Bill." O'Brien is, of course, lying. And yet, the narrator identifies in his tone an "insinuating familiarity". The utility of a lie is to elicit a response on the part of Lee. The most important part of this interaction is encapsulated within Lee's immediate recognition of the lie's function. From this ground, it is clear that there is actually no mutual advantage for Lee to gain. Hauser and O'Brien's sovereign power over Lee speaks to Foucault's situation of sovereign power within a postmodern society as, "a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death."³⁷ This power is presented in the context of addiction. Lee is preparing for a fix when the detectives barge in, purposefully interrupting him. Additionally, this power to "disallow" life is applied to the existential position of a writer as well. The chapter begins with the detectives being sent to Lee's apartment to steal away any writing or reading material. Following the initial confrontation and mirroring the action within first chapter

³⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 138.

of the novel, Lee's urge to flee the scene begins to build. Following their brief discussion, Lee shoots the detectives dead before fleeing the hotel in search of heroin as he attempts to skip town again. This scene represents a significant dramatic turn. When read in connection to Foucault's analysis of sovereign power, Lee's violent betrayal represents a necessary reversion into an archaic sovereignty—a direct power over life and death.³⁸ Lee's identity as an addict makes this event all the more phenomenal, he understands the risks of such an act. However, this is the only way for Lee to preserve his freedom.

Towards the end of the chapter, in a moment of confusion, Lee calls the police headquarters to talk to Hauser and O'Brien, seeming to forget his previous actions. The operator informs Lee that there is no one named Hauser or O'Brien in the department. His uncharacteristic act of sovereignty appears to erase the detectives from the record completely. It is within this surreal detail that Lee discovers his own double bind. Following this phone call, the narrator reflects on the consequences of his actions,

I hung up and took a taxi out of the area...In the cab I realized what had happened...I had been occluded from space-time...Locked out...Never again would I have the Key, a Point of Intersection...The Heat was off me from here on out...relegated with Hauser and O'Brien to a landlocked junk past where heroin is always twenty-eight dollars an ounce...Far side of the world's mirror, moving into the past with Hauser and O'Brien...clawing at a not-yet of Telepathic Bureaucracies, Time Monopolies, Control Drugs...(181).

This withdrawal from "space-time" is prompted by his killing of the detectives and their subsequent erasure from the historical record. On its surface, this occlusion from his own history as an addict within a drug economy appears to reflect merely a physical freedom. However,

³⁸ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 135.

Lee's sudden inversion of sovereign power demonstrates an unwillingness to submit to the caricatured version of an addict in society, represented by his almost nostalgic relationship with Hauser and O'Brien. The phrase, "far side of the world's mirror" suggests an imperceptible distance between two forms. Lee has become divorced from a historical understanding, an understanding of himself as a constituent of modern society. The claim of occlusion from space-time also speaks directly to a certain psychological fulcrum of modernity. In the popular imagination, we justify our own places amidst modernity through a deterministic logic. A conceptual understanding of existence within time is a necessary fact of human existence itself. Though we are all actively enmeshed in this field, we continuously reproduce the concept of modernity as a means to ignore the universal consequences of sovereignty. Predicated by a recognition, and then drastic inversion of historical sovereignty, Lee's separation from space-time represents a radical reorienting of the self with respect to the reproduction of history.

Conclusion: Abandoning Obscenity and the Modern Contexts of Censorship

The legacy of *Naked Lunch* is inextricably intertwined with the history of censorship in the latter half of the 20th century. In the US, this impulse towards censorship is connected with the public reception of conservative political rhetoric. Though scholars point to a variety of social and cultural behaviors and events as justification for these urges, the relative success or failure of these plans for censorship is nevertheless predicated by an artificial environment of fear. Indeed, the historical context of initial publication of the *Naked Lunch* manuscript serves to highlight the connection between censorship and fear. In the 1950s, the paranoid nationalism induced by the Cold War served as a means to justify censorship.³⁹ As a result of this paranoia, nationalism and moral supremacy would become increasingly intertwined. Assimilation became the only medium with which one may express their patriotism. However, this event was by no means the origin of this impulse.

The judicial arm of the United States government had long been disposed to calls for censorship. By this time a number of ‘classics’ had been hotly contested, including Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1933 and Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata* earlier in 1890. Censorship was first codified in US law in the 1873 Comstock Act, which in part prompted the general guidelines for obscene or sexually explicit material in the 20th Century. Interestingly, the Comstock Act also banned the mailing or transportation of contraceptive drugs, or any material pertaining to contraceptive drugs.⁴⁰

Beginning in the 1950s at the advent of the Cold War, the Supreme Court dealt with a number of cases involving obscenity, the results of which would gradually walk back the vast

³⁹ See Cohen, Ronald. “The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U. S. History.”

⁴⁰ See Comstock Act.

scope of the Comstock Act and comparable state law. In the 20th century, censorship primarily failed to address the issue of “obscene” literature, *Naked Lunch* being a prime example. In the 1957 case, *Roth v. United States*, a bookseller in New York was found guilty of using the federal post office to send obscene material to California. 6 justices; Warren, Frankfurter, Burton, Clark, Brennan and Whittaker ruled that that transportation and sale of obscene material was not entitled to protection under the first amendment. Brennan reasons in the majority opinion that the first amendment should not protect obscenity because it is “utterly without redeeming social importance.”⁴¹ Simultaneously in 1957, in the case *Butler v. Michigan*, another bookseller, this time from Detroit, was arrested and sentenced after selling an ‘obscene’ book to an undercover police, which was illegal under a state obscenity law. In a 9-0 opinion, Justice Felix Frankfurter held the ruling as unconstitutional because only a single judge passed this sentence by reason that the book (titled *The Devil Rides Outside*) if disseminated would “corrupt minors”; a claim that was found to abridge freedom of expression for adults.⁴² While in *Roth* the scope of the first amendment appeared at first to be shrinking, the classification of obscenity as being “utterly without redeeming social importance” would become charged in discussions of the literary versus the obscene. Additionally, in *Butler*, we see a strong opinion against the ruling of a lone judge⁴³, which the Supreme Court sees as insufficient grounds to rule on matters of public welfare.

The legal precedents set in motion in these cases would be mirrored in the rulings of “Attorney General of Massachusetts v. A Book Named *Naked Lunch*”. However, even before the

⁴¹ Oyez. *Roth v. United States*. 1957.

⁴² Oyez. *Butler v. Michigan*. 1956.

⁴³ See Court Decision Invalidating F.D.A. Approval of Mifepristone. NY Times.

text was debated in court, *Naked Lunch* was received skeptically in academic circles. Excerpts of the *Naked Lunch* manuscript appeared in the *Chicago Review* in late 1958 at the behest of Allen Ginsburg. The student-led journal had previously enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy with respect to the administration of the University of Chicago, the results of this autonomy culminating in the collective outrage stirred up in the more chaste Chicago publications in the fall of 1958.⁴⁴ Lawrence Kimpton, the president of the college, wrote in a letter to Irving Rosenthal, an editor of the *Review*, that he should not include any material in the publication that “would offend a sixteen-year-old girl.”⁴⁵ This event resulted in all but one of the editors of the *Review* resigning their positions, with the survivor, Hyung Woong Pak, pivoting the next issue away from beats and towards “Existentialism and Literature”, a distinctly more European endeavor.

In 1965, the novel’s legality was contested in the Massachusetts Supreme Court. After being deemed “obscene” by the Superior Court of Massachusetts, the lawyer for Grove Press, a man named Edward de Grazia, would choose to call forward a number of Burroughs’ peers to testify in defense of the novel’s literary value. Most notably, Allen Ginsberg, one the novel’s de facto agents, would testify before the court. This strategy of demonstrating the novel’s acceptance within the literary community was based on an apt reading of the legal qualifiers for obscenity. If a novel could be proven to have a certain value to a community, it would no longer meet the legal standards of obscenity. This definition is vague, and it appears as such even to a person who is unfamiliar with jurisprudence. Because of this, Ginsberg’s testimonials place a

⁴⁴ See Editor’s Note in *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text* for more information on the process of publication.

⁴⁵ See Wilson, Meagan. “Your Reputation Precedes You: A Reception Study of *Naked Lunch*”.

heavy emphasis on his own experience of reading *Naked Lunch* as a writer. When asked for his opinion of the classification of the text as obscene, Ginsberg replies to the court that he doesn't believe it to be obscene at all. As a response, the court points to Burrough's own language in the introduction, where he writes, "Since *Naked Lunch* treats this health problem [of addiction], it is necessarily brutal, obscene, and disgusting."⁴⁶ Ginsburg remains undaunted. He rebuts by stating, "I don't think he intends that to be obscene in any legal sense or even obscene as seen through his own eyes or through the eyes of a sympathetic reader. He is dealing with matters very basic and very frightening."⁴⁷

By expanding the consequences of Ginsberg's claim, we can see that the assessment of a text as obscene—at least in the literary community— does not demonstrate a lack of textual value. Burroughs's use of the term 'obscene' speaks to the act of dealing with literary themes on the level of the novel, that are simultaneously foundational, unseen components of the real world. This act of "dealing with matters very basic and very frightening" only serves to reveal the ways in which political rhetoric feeds this environment of fear. As Burroughs himself suggests, the treatment of such a "brutal, obscene, and disgusting problem" necessitates the use of such language. The sublimation of this desire to describe and reveal the obscene is directly opposed to the inherent value of an author's vocation.

In many ways, *Naked Lunch* constituted a perfect means of exposing the thin reasoning of the legal definition of obscenity. Ginsberg's interpretation of obscenity is no less important than that of the court's. The foundational component of the court's understanding of obscenity is in reality a prohibition on pornography. The famous phrase which speaks to an individual's

⁴⁶ Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. 205.

⁴⁷ See "The Boston Trial of Naked Lunch".

assessment of material as pornographic—that is, “I know it when I see it”—can be attributed to Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart.⁴⁸ When placed next to each other, we can plainly observe the stark divide between the literary and legal definitions of obscenity. One is overwhelmingly simple, the other complex and abstract. And yet, both are based on a kind of gut interpretation. Burroughs’ examination of these obscene themes demonstrates his capability in attributing necessary value to those unseen forces that motivate our behavior in society. This task is fundamentally more difficult than that of the court’s, whose societal positioning as a kind of moral litmus test for literature speaks only to the persistent, insipid manifestations of their own egotistical impulses.

The current social trend towards censorship in our society today is not without historical precedent. Though discussions have trended away from the obscene, the justifications for censorship have largely remained the same. Conservative political rhetoric was wholly renovated by the Trump administration. In the years since, it has undoubtedly become more concentrated, and more volatile. While specific talking points are subject to shorter and shorter life spans by news media, the issues that tend to mobilize the most supporters are echoes of earlier historical contexts. In the Cold War, the establishment of the nuclear family served as a reassertion of the value of the family unit. The act of censorship served to defend the family unit from supposedly corrupting influences. Today, conservative rhetoric identifies education as the primary source of this corruption of the family unit.

Even though this process of fearful outrage and mobilization has accelerated to such an extent that I wouldn’t be surprised if this issue was forgotten suddenly over a weekend, it is no

⁴⁸Oyez. *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. 1964.

secret that public school administrators and teachers already face enormous challenges in their job. Being subject to such paranoid vitriol is but an extension of the consistent devaluation teachers have long been subject to in our country, and it is not hard to imagine that any additional strain would result in a series of catastrophes. Often, conservative rhetoric places parental choice at the center of its argument. Parents should be able to choose what kinds of information their kids are exposed to in school. In reality, however, this information is politically motivated and animated by parental fear rather than true concern for the welfare of their children. Ironically, this push for “choice” is an example of the state placing the “natural life of individuals into its very center”⁴⁹, a dynamic identified by Agamben. The life and education of a child has been politicized by the state. However, it should be clarified that this is not a conventional “state”, as understood by political theologians in the 20th century. The transnational and transindustrial interests of for-profit media no longer fall within conventional state parameters. Instead, we face a family of agglomerated chimeras, capable of creating imaginary, political boogeymen in any country of their choosing. Though fear and concern may be hard to parse, even in our world of smoke and mirrors, it is an essential question in the creation of a safe environment for children. The simplicity afforded by the boogeyman may explain its appeal, yet it fails to address a number of practical considerations.

In our virtual age, the ubiquity of media continues to compound exponentially. Unequivocally, it can be said that we are aspiring to a level of near total saturation. Finding delusion-reaffirming and factual information alike is as easy as knowing which social media service to open. I myself cannot remember a time without the internet, and yet I still consider

⁴⁹ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. 11.

myself to be towards the shallow end of this massive information pool. Those born in the years after 2001(those children who are now in elementary and middle school) will experience this saturation to an ever increasing degree. It is ridiculous to suggest that these children haven't already seen or even posted something on social media that would be deemed obscene by parents, regardless of a context in education. Here, we can see a distinct fault line in the simplistic logic of the argument. Capitalizing on fear and the ubiquity of the internet, corporations have initiated a new cultural suspicion of literature as a corrupting force. This rhetoric will have distinct effects on younger generations. According to PEN America, 41% of the texts banned in the schools across the US address LGBTQ+ themes, while 40% have major characters of Color.⁵⁰ This data exposes the racist and prejudiced manifestations of censorship. In the name of safeguarding the family unit, we have elected to restrict the representation of marginalized individuals in literature across the country. Again, at the center of this argument is fear. Nowhere is fear more palpable than in the mind of the parent, whose concern for the welfare and happiness of their child makes real the possibility of this corruption.

⁵⁰PEN America. "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools".

Works Cited

- Ackerknecht, Erwin. "The Hospitals." *Medicine at the Paris Hospital 1794-1848*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb05736.0001.001>.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. Stanford University Press, 1998, <https://www.thing.net/~rdom/ucsd/biopolitics/HomoSacer.pdf>.
- "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools." *PEN America*, September 2022, <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>.
- "Bottled in Bond." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bottled_in_bond.
- Breu, Christopher. "The Novel Enfleshed: Naked Lunch and the Literature of Materiality." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, Summer 2011, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41698742.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A35defc268f62156b15999552221cdb3d&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.
- Burnette, Brandon. "Comstock Act of 1873." *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State University, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1038/comstock-act-of-1873>.
- Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. Edited by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles, Grove Press, 2013.
- Burroughs, William S., and Oliver Harris. *Queer*. First Grove Atlantic paperback edition, Grove Press, 2022.
- Butler v. Michigan*. 1957, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1956/16>.

Cohen, Ronald. "The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U.S. History."

History of Education Quarterly, vol. 37, no. 3.

"Court Decision Invalidating F.D.A. Approval of Mifepristone." *New York Times*, Mar. 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/04/08/us/court-decision-invalidating-approval-of-mifepristone.html>.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2008,

https://1000littlehammers.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/birth_of_biopolitics.pdf.

---. "The Eye of Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*

1972-1977, Pantheon Books,

<https://www.ikhtyar.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Foucault-Michel-The-Eye-of-Power.pdf>.

---. *The History of Sexuality*. 1st American ed, Pantheon Books, 1978.

"Glycerol." *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glycerol>.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed.,

[Nachdr.], Harvard Univ. Press, 2003.

Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, 1914. 22 Jan. 1915,

https://www.naabt.org/documents/harrison_narcotics_tax_act_1914.pdf.

Jacobellis v. Ohio. 1964, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1963/11>.

Mallonee, Mary. "7 Baltimore Officers Accused of Abusing Power, Robbing Citizens."

CNN, 1 Mar. 2017,

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/01/us/baltimore-police-officers-racketeering-charges/>.

- Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs: A Life*. First edition, Twelve, 2014.
- Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police*. University of California Press, 1988.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Preface to the Second Edition." *The Joyful Wisdom*, Second Edition, Darien Press, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52881/52881-h/52881-h.htm#Page_1.
- Police Reform and Accountability Accomplishments*. Department of Justice, 4 Dec. 2015, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/797666/download>.
- Richmond, Phyllis. "The Hôtel-Dieu of Paris on the Eve of Revolution." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol. vol.16, no. no.4, Oct. 1961.
- Rosen, George. "Hospitals, Medical Care and Social Policy in The French Revolution." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. vol.30, no. no.2, Apr. 1956.
- Roth v. United States*. 1957, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1956/582>.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. University of Chicago Press ed, University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Solanas, Valerie. *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto*. Matriarchy Study Group, 1983, <https://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/shivers/rants/scum.html>.
- The Boston Trial of Naked Lunch*. 1965, p. Excerpt, <https://realitystudio.org/texts/naked-lunch/trial/>.
- "What Is Qualified Immunity?" *American Bar Association*, vol. 21, no. 1, Dec. 2020, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_education/publications/insights-on-law-and-society/volume-21/issue-1/qualified-immunity/.
- Wilson, Meagan. "Your Reputation Precedes You: A Reception Study of Naked Lunch." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, Winter 2012, p. 28.