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# "Desirable images": Sexual mapping in William S. Burroughs's *Naked lunch* and Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*

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“Desirable Images”: Sexual Mapping in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and  
Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
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## Dedication

I thank my director, Dr. Michael Clune, and my committee members, Dr. Susan Mooney and Dr. Shirley Toland- Dix, for their invaluable input on this project.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter One - Introduction	1
Chapter Two - Samuel R. Delany's <i>Dhalgren</i>	9
Chapter Three - Pornography and the Postwar Novel	17
Chapter Four - William S. Burroughs's <i>Naked Lunch</i>	28
Chapter Five - Conclusion	37
Works Cited	41

“Desirable Images”: Sexual Mapping in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*

Patrick McGowan

ABSTRACT

In “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson describes the disappearance, within postmodernism, of an objective framework for mapping the social totality. In order to illustrate this concept, Jameson draws upon the ideas of urban planner Kevin Lynch as formulated in his seminal work, *The Image of the City*. For Lynch, the design of the postwar alienated city results in varying and fragmentary “cognitive maps” used by its inhabitants to negotiate urban space, a problem that can be rectified by “good” urban planning, which aims to create mappable public space through the implementation of external orientation markers. Utilizing this framework, this thesis suggests the existence of an aesthetic countertendency, within postwar literature, to Jameson’s vision that is exemplified in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*. These novels integrally deploy alienated urban environments as settings; however, rather than suggesting structural public spaces as solutions, they offer an alternative, opposite stratagem: the externalization of the intimate onto the public sphere through the integration of

pornography. By using the sexual to map character space, they suggest an alternative to Michel Foucault's discursive formulation of sexuality, one that resonates with more recent theoretical work by Leo Bersani and Michael Warner. In order to examine the role of pornography within these works, this thesis integrates Frances Ferguson's account of the pornographic from her study, *Pornography, the Theory*, which looses pornography from prior "interpretive" models and recasts it as a distinct regime of representation that stresses objectivity and concretization, particularly in relation to the abstract notion of the "social body." While Delany's *Dhalgren* offers an image-based deployment of the pornographic experience, in which characters' viewing of the pornographic / sexual leads to full cognition and visual perception, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* presents a more physical model, wherein subjective sexual experience (particularly in the rendering of the "mosaic orgasm") ultimately affords the subject with panoptic capabilities.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Since its introduction in “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson’s concept of the subject’s inability to locate itself in space has long served as a key periodizing feature of the postmodern cultural landscape. He describes the disappearance of an objective framework, within postmodernism, for “mapping” the social totality, both within subjective consciousness and in the realm of artistic representation. What has replaced it, he argues, is abstract space, a uniquely postmodern phenomenon, which he defines as:

. . . the power network of so-called multinational capitalism itself. As individuals, we are in and out of all these overlapping dimensions all the time, something which makes an older kind of existential positioning of ourselves in Being – the human body in the natural landscape, the individual in the older village or organic community, even the citizen in the nation-state - exceedingly problematical. (127)

Because this environment of abstract space is so intangible, Jameson describes the primary postmodern challenge as one centered around aesthetics and the impossibilities of representation: “. . . we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modeling them, however abstractly, in our mind’s eye” (127). Framing it as an exemplary attempt at conveying this disjunction on a spatial level, Jameson examines the house project of architect Frank

Gehry as a means of reconciling the space between an abstracted “. . . superstate and the existential daily life of people in their traditional rooms and tract houses” (128).

Due to the force and wide applicability of Jameson’s vision, a crucial aesthetic countertendency in some works of postwar literature has remained largely concealed. This technique can be located in certain literary works’ integration of the pornographic, whereby some of porn’s essential features - namely, the objectification and public presentation of the personal / intimate, the transformation of narrative into detailed, objective action, and the heightened potential for recognition and self- identification - function to provide the necessary framework for perceiving postmodern space.<sup>1</sup> In this account, I refer to pornography as both the ways in which pornographic materials and sexuality operate at the character - plot level, and, more broadly, the author’s structural deployment of pornographic form and the effect it has on characters, objects, and readers. While pornographic image- making provides the most salient manifestation of this technique through its primary emphasis on objectification, its dynamics also extend to more conventional representations of sexuality, which produce similar effects.

Although evident in several writers’ work, including that of Kathy Acker and William Gibson, this dynamic is immediately apparent in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*, two novels that similarly utilize pornography

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<sup>1</sup> In his influential essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” M.M. Bakhtin observes a similar trend, albeit in a different context. Examining space- time relations throughout the history of the novel, Bakhtin describes the Ancient Greek Romance, which focuses solely on the “individual, private person” (108), as “abstract,” not concerned with the discrete particulars of time and space. Accordingly, this personal time is characterized as “scattered, fragmented, deprived of essential connections” (128). Bakhtin notes an increasing sense of “publicness” and “concreteness” with the advent of the biographical / autobiographical form, and its “breakdown” in the rise of the private rhetorical form of the “familiar letter” and the domain of the “drawing room” (143). Bakhtin ultimately locates the culmination of the “public, exterior” form in the work of Rabelais, whose exaggerated and purely physical, anatomical descriptions endow the body and the world with a “new meaning and concrete reality, a new materiality” (170). Of course, along with “eating, drinking, defecating,” representations of the sexual are a major component of this concretizing process.

as a mechanism for perceiving their “unmappable” urban settings. When examined together, these novels provide an illustration of the varied and flexible cognitive function pornography is called upon to perform in postmodernism. By incorporating this technique, both novels provide an alternative method, previously obscured within postmodern discourse, of approaching postmodern space.<sup>2</sup>

Because these novels explicitly concern themselves with the problems faced by the subject within the postwar city (extrapolated in both novels into semi- futuristic urban settings), the theories of urban planner Kevin Lynch, as postulated in his groundbreaking work, *The Image of the City*, provide an integral context for examining their spatial dynamics. In this work, Lynch offers an account of urban space that neatly illustrates Jameson’s theory of the postmodern within a more immediate, concrete domain. For Lynch, the alienated city leaves its inhabitants with partial mental “images” of the city

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<sup>2</sup> Todd A. Comer, in his essay “Playing at Birth: Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*,” very briefly frames Delany’s novel within Jameson’s concept of postmodernism. Because Comer’s primary concerns are subjectivity and myth, which meet in the “question of how the author function operates” (186) in the novel, he locates the transformation of the abstract in an excerpt of the protagonist’s writing, rather than in the novel’s deployment of sexuality.

As one might expect, both works have often been read within a more conventional postmodern context. Sharon Degraw notes Delany’s “. . . extensive utilization of poststructural and postmodernist theories” and “. . . his explorations of the fragmented and unstable nature of postmodern subjectivity” (118). Robert Elliot Fox posits that *Dhalgren*’s setting serves as “. . . an Ozymandian realm in which the pride of late capitalist society has been . . . shaken, if not yet fully humbled” (98) and more generally identifies Delany with “continental” postmodern theory (*Conscientious Sorcerers*). Jeffrey Allen Tucker declares Delany to be “quintessentially postmodern” and the “ideal postmodern intellectual” (35).

Many critics, such as Robin Lydenberg, interpret Burroughs’s body of work as anticipating that of the major poststructuralist and postmodern theorists through its challenge to “our conventional notions about the status of the author in the text, about the referentiality of language, and about the dualism of Western thought” (xi). N. Katherine Hayles frames her observation of “disembodiment” in Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* as predicting “. . . Fredric Jameson’s claim that an information society is the purest form of capitalism” (42) and Burroughs’s characterization of “the word” as anticipating the work of Foucault and Derrida (212). Timothy Murphy, however, presents a different view critical of the “postmodernization” of Burroughs’s work, particularly in the scholarship of Lydenberg, in his study *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (27, 73). Murphy approaches Burroughs as an amodern author - one who “. . . accepts the failure of modernist ends . . . and means . . . without taking the additional step of homogenizing all remaining difference” and thereby finds “an escape route from the linked control systems of capital, subjectivity, and language” (2-4). Murphy contrasts postmodernism’s “negative totalization” and modernism’s “mythic” totalization with amodern “positive totalization” (27, 34).

used for mapping and positioning, which generally do not conform to the actual design of city space, and, furthermore, vary significantly among individuals who occupy the same space. Lynch draws upon a number of accounts by city dwellers from Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles to present common “themes,” or makeshift markers of orientation, including “paths,” “edges,” “districts,” “nodes,” and “landmarks.” The proposed goal of Lynch’s study is a practical one - to use these elements in future city planning projects in order for urban environments to be more clearly perceived and navigated, essentially rendered “legible,” so that their “parts can be recognized and . . . organized into a coherent pattern” (3); within such a vivid setting, the sketchy mental maps used by individuals would ideally conform to the actual urban landscape, constituting a shared and necessary “public image” (46). Based on Lynch’s findings, this ideal setting would enhance total visibility through open and defined space.

Since the publication of Lynch's *The Image of the City* in 1960, multidisciplinary research, spanning architecture, psychology, and geography, has consistently yielded the fundamentally *egocentric* nature of cognitive mapping. In keeping with Lynch’s more generalized conclusion, this theory suggests that individuals rely primarily on subjective experience in mentally mapping terrain. Psychologists Timothy P. MacNamara and Christine M. Valiquette maintain that “. . . egocentric experience is the dominant cue for selecting an intrinsic reference system because environments rarely have axes or directions as salient as those by point of view” (19). They proceed to question the possibility of creating “. . . an environment that has an internal structure so salient that it

would dominate the usual tendency for intrinsic organization to be selected based on egocentric point of view.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Dhalgren* and *Naked Lunch*, the techniques use to align the subjective spatial perception of characters with a more objective sense of shared absolute space diverge from those proposed by social science. While the aforementioned researchers naturally tend to emphasize the importance of creating clearly defined public spaces in order to orient and objectively homogenize the private maps of individuals, the technique at work in *Dhalgren* and *Naked Lunch* employs an opposite stratagem: externalizing the intimate, which impresses itself onto a shared public sphere, through the integration of pornography. Although both of the novels are largely narrated in the third person with the use of free indirect speech to relate the more subjective view of primary characters, these interior states become objectified and exteriorized in scenes of intense sexual or pornographic activity, lending a sense of clarity and access to characters’ sense of subjective space for other characters and readers.<sup>4</sup>

In his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*, Delany explicitly draws a connection between visibility and sex that further illustrates some of the concepts elaborated here. Describing his experiences in the St. Mark’s baths, he suggests, “I have written of a space at a certain libidinal saturation before. That was not what frightened me. It was rather that the saturation was not only

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<sup>3</sup> See also Roger Downs and David Stea, *Image and Environment* (9); Robert Lloyd, *Spatial Cognition: Geographic Environments* (9-10, 12); Nora S. Newcombe and Julia Sluzenski, “Starting Points and Change in Early Spatial Development,” *Human Spatial Memory*; Romedi Passini, *Wayfinding in Architecture* (38).

<sup>4</sup> As the reader may observe, this technique occurs more consistently in *Naked Lunch* than *Dhalgren*, partially due to the scope and diversity of Delany’s ambitious novel, which captures the heterogeneity of postmodern experience. The intent of this paper, however, is to address this discrete feature as an interesting new deployment of sexuality that resonates with other novels and more recent theoretical work.

kinesthetic but visible. You could *see* what was going on throughout the dorm” (292).

Delany continues:

Whether male, female, working or middle class, the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies. That I’d felt it and was frightened by it means that others had felt it too. The myth said we, as isolated perverts, were only beings of desire, manifestations of the subject (yes, gone awry, turned from its true object, but for all that, even more purely subjective and isolated).

But what *this* experience said was that there was a population- not of individual homosexuals, some of whom now and then encountered, or that those encounters could be fulfilling and human in their way- not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex.

Institutions such as subway johns or the trucks, while they accommodated sex, cut it, visibly, up into tiny portions. It was like *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. No one ever got to see its whole. These institutions cut it up and made it invisible- certainly much less visible- to the bourgeois world that claimed the phenomenon deviant and dangerous. But, by the same token, they cut it up and thus made any apprehension of its totality all but impossible to those who pursued it. And any suggestions of that totality, even in such a form as Saturday night at the baths, was frightening to those of us who’d had no suggestion of it before. (293)

In this passage, Delany provides a minute account of changing notions of queerness and sexuality and the ways in which sexual visibility can serve a cognitive purpose within postmodernity. Delany’s prior experience in the dorm bears a close relationship to Jameson’s theoretical description of postmodernism, which is drastically transformed by Delany’s encounter with total sexual visibility. What the discussed novels signify, more broadly, is the transformation of sexuality from a modernist to postmodern variant. As Michel Foucault observes, the modernist form of sexuality can be characterized as a network of nodes, tacitly entwined with social- scientific institutional power: “... it claimed to ensure the physical vigor and moral cleanliness of the social body . . . The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something

fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable . . .” (54, 56). In literary modernism, consequently, sexual representation is generally deployed as a variously challenging, experimental, or transgressive device. In keeping with Foucault’s notion of an “inner truth,” this deployment of sexuality often achieves representation through a stream- of- consciousness – oriented “fictio[n] of interiority and sexuality” (Boone 5). Because of the particular problems with space in postmodernism, however, postwar authors are able to exploit the new cognitive function of sexuality in order to produce a necessary concretizing effect. While Jameson argues for the impossibility of conceptually modeling postmodern space, Burroughs, Delany, and others have readily appropriated the sexual as a mechanism for mapping such immanent forms of abstraction.

The novels’ emphases on representations of male homosexual sex practices and queerness more generally are also important aspects of this technique. Although the concept of cognitive sexual mapping established here applies equally to all manifestations of sexuality and pornography (e.g. heterosexual, bisexual), Leo Bersani’s concept of “homo-ness” offers some compelling descriptions of the ego- transcendent, outward- oriented, and intersubjective properties of sexual experience that facilitate some of the concepts operating here. Bersani inscribes in homo-ness “... a desire to repeat, to expand, to intensify the same . . . here individual selves are points along a transversal network of being in which otherness is tolerated as the nonthreatening margin of, or supplement to, a seductive sameness” (149-150). Bersani sets traditional, heteronormative sexual privacy and intimacy, which stems from a desire based on lack and difference, in opposition to “homo- ness,” which involves recognizing oneself in the desired object. This melding of public sexuality with a recognition between subject and

object forms a significant new way of conceiving sexuality that extends to various sexual representations in these novels.

## Chapter Two

### Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*

Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, first published in 1975, presents a break with the author's previous output of more conventional science-fiction work. The approximately eight-hundred page novel is set in Bellona, a fictional heterotopian city located directly "in the middle" of the United States, wherein an unarticulated disastrous event has loosed its inhabitants from normative power structures. Its plot follows the journey of Kid, a schizophrenic and aspiring poet, as he enters Bellona and rises to a leadership position in the Scorpions, an interracial street gang, before attempting to flee the city amidst sweeping fires at the novel's conclusion. Critics have noted sympathetic resonances between the novel's characters and events and the general ethos of the 1960s counterculture, the historical backdrop of the work's composition. Structurally, the novel is regarded for its deployment of multiple modes of discourse; while most of the novel is related in third person narrative, it also incorporates selections from Kid's own writing, while the concluding section entirely purports to be excerpted from Kid's journal. Because of the competing and conflicting narratives as well as the novel's circular structure (the novel's ending sentence seamlessly elides into its first) many critics, including Delany, have compared it to an optical illusion such as the Necker Cube.

According to critic Seth McEvoy's estimation, approximately thirty-six pages of the first edition of *Dhalgren* feature explicit representations of sex (106). Throughout the novel, the main narrative voice periodically lapses into the highly descriptive language

suggestive of pornography as characters spontaneously engage in various sex acts, often involving multiple participants. Because of Bellona's atypical setting, sexual activity is at times removed from its normative, private contexts and resituated in public spaces such as alleys and parks as well as a group commune operated by the Scorpions. In a moment of reflection, Kid ponders this contextual distinction:

After baths . . . when you're still alone in the john, is the time for all those things you don't want people around for: jerking off, picking your nose and eating it, serious nail biting . . . His thoughts drifted to various places he's indulged such habits not so privately: seated at the far end of lunch counters, standing at public urinals, in comparatively empty subway cars at night, in city parks at dawn. He smiled; he rubbed. (140)

*Dhalgren's* Bellona represents Lynch's account of the alienated city carried to its extreme conclusion. Continually raging fires create a smoky pall that severely limits visibility: "The smoke hides the sky's variety, stains consciousness, covers the holocaust with something safe and insubstantial" (75); "The smoke was so thick he wondered if the glass were opaque and he only misremembered it as clear-" (153). The city's "-forever adjustable, therefore unlearnable-" (383) building structures seem to change form and position, prohibiting even its most experienced dwellers from accurately mapping their surroundings: "'You go down new streets, you see houses you never saw before, pass places you didn't know were there. Everything changes'. . . 'Sometimes it changes even if you go the same way'" (318-19). Echoing Lynch, Kid repeatedly offers remarks concerning the landscape's ability to overwhelm its inhabitants: "Does the City's topology control us completely?" (697); "'Do you think a city can control the way people live inside it? I mean, just the geography, the way the streets are laid out, the way the buildings are placed?'" (249-50); "'You have to put yourself at the mercy of the geography, and hope that down- hills and up- hills, working propitiously with how much

you feel like fighting and how much you feel like accepting, manage to get you there” (326). In Bellona, the common markers that, according to Lynch’s thesis, lend city space its coherence are conspicuously absent or indistinguishable from surrounding space, making it the obverse of the mappable city: “The demarcation between land and street vanished beneath junk” (77); “Pavingstones were smashed, loose, or upside down in raw earth, so that he was not even certain where the next street began” (78); “The streets lose edges, the rims of thought flake” (156). Within this vastly incoherent urban environment, however, sex is often associated with a sense of clarity and perceptibility.

Kid’s characterization as a “schizophrenic poet” is also worth mentioning, as schizophrenia has provided the classic model of postmodern confusion and modes of being for Jameson and other theorists, including Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Jameson’s application of Lacan’s linguistic concept of schizophrenia- “a breakdown in the signifying chain” – to the realm of contemporary culture- that “we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical life”- closely mirrors Kid’s manner of experiencing reality in *Dhalgren*. Throughout the novel, Kid consistently reaches into the stores of his memory, and cannot remember his age or name; his past is generally recollected in fleeting fragmentary images. While such a cognitively disorienting characterization seems to further disrupt the potential for mapping Bellona, one could also ascribe a positive, productive value to Kid’s schizophrenia which happens to coincide with his role as a poet. Like the production of art and poetry, which, according to a certain conception, transforms subjective experience into a discrete object, the schizophrenic subject often finds it necessary to externalize interior experience in an attempt to impose order upon the surrounding environment.

While Kid is able to use his notebook as a repository for ordering experience to a certain extent, pornography and sexuality provide a more direct and intersubjective ordering mechanism.

When Kid ultimately makes it into the city and enters its social domain, this process of cognitive sexual mapping becomes apparent<sup>6</sup>. Upon arriving at Bellona's city gates, he meets Tak Loufer, a former industrial engineer and condensed, visible symbol of gay leather culture who serves as the city's informal gatekeeper and who gives Kid his new appellation. After briefly introducing Kid to some of Bellona's inhabitants who congregate in the city's park, Tak leads Kid to his rooftop residence for an expected sexual liaison (later, when Tak suggests Kid remove his shirt, the narrator clearly states that "He had known what was coming since he'd accepted the invitation in the park" [47]). Though Kid has trouble navigating the urban terrain partially because "Only two out of forty-some park lights . . . were working," he notices that "Two pinheads of light pricked the darkness somewhere above [Tak's] sandy upper lip" and "Tak's boot heels tattoo the way. I can envision a dotted line left after him. And someone might pick the night up by its edge, tear it along the perforations, crumple it, and toss it away" (35-6). Kid's observation distinguishes Tak's subjective movement from the more permanent, material qualities of the landmark.

After arriving at his building, Tak tells Kid that "The whole city shifts, turns, rearranges itself. All the time. And rearranges us..." (36). He also notes that the sun occasionally alters its orientation point in Bellona, which presents a further challenge to its inhabitants' sense of orientation. Once inside the room, Kid notices "three, yard-high, full color, photographic posters" (42), each a sexually suggestive portrait of a man in

fetish gear. Kid realizes “The bared genitals were huge. The photographs had been taken from crotch level, too, to make them look even larger” (43). The conspicuous presence of pornography in this case provides a clear definition of Tak’s space as a sexual one.

While in the course of pre-coital conversation, Kid wonders:

Did Tak’s voice veer, once more, toward that unsettling tone? Only by suggestion, he realized, and realized too: The longer he stayed, the less of that tone he would hear. Whatever request for complicity, in whatever labyrinth of despair, it made of the listener, whatever demand for relief from situations which were by definition unrelievable, these requests, these demands could only be made of the very new to such labyrinths, such situations. And time, even as he munched flat bread, was erasing that status. (46)

With this comment, Kid draws an integral connection between the “labyrinthine” qualities of the unmappable city and interpersonal sexual familiarity and shared intimacy. As Kid becomes more intimate with Tak, the parallel spatial and intersubjective mazes begin to dissipate.

At the initiation of the sex act, the narrator mentions that “. . . things had drifted to this without his really considering” (48). As with most of *Dhalgren*’s pornographic sequences, this reprieve is accompanied by a marked shift in narrative tone from inward-oriented discourse to outward, objective description. In his work *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference*, Jeffrey Allen Tucker acknowledges the centrality of “quintessentially postmodern” competing narratives in *Dhalgren*; newspapers, journal entries, character dialogue, and other media present conflicting accounts of the same events with no clear claim to “truth” (68). However, it appears that the novel’s recurrent lapses into pornographic narration provide a privileged, objective point of view that remains clear and uncontested. While the surrounding narrative is presented in a suitably hazy, ostensibly third person speech which vaguely echoes Kid’s

confused, subjective thoughts, the sexual moment is accompanied by a characteristically pornographic narrative voice that marks an abrupt transition to objective descriptions of action. In this instance, Kid's attempts to "read" Tak through his tone of voice, the objects in his room, and, more generally, his inquiries concerning Bellona and its inhabitants, are replaced with a clear expression of desire and lucid, omniscient observation of intertwined bodies: "He ground Tak's nipple in his teeth, chin and nose rubbing in hair. He squeezed Tak's testicles a few times, tightening his grip as much as he could; Tak's rhythm quickened" (50). The clarity of the sexual moment in Tak's room is juxtaposed with the "smoky gauzes" that descend upon the city at Kid's exit: "The alley was a torrent of grey in which he could see no bottom" (51). As Kid leaves, he has an extremely difficult time making it back out to the street that leaves him wondering if he should return to Tak's shack, presumably to regain the clarity associated with it.

After Kid finally makes his way out into the city, the chapter closes and a new one begins with the positioning statement, "Here I am and am no I" (55). This cryptic utterance marks a parallel memory in which Kid, as a child, gets lost in an unknown city. Kid's reminiscence begins in a park, where he comes across a group of naked, sexually engaged people. At this particular moment, wherein Kid is cognizant of his surroundings and interacting with these individuals, his feelings are characterized by contentment: "So his sound, begun between song and sigh, ended in laughter; he ran back through the brush, pulling a music from their laughing till his was song again. He cantered down the path" (57). As Kid wanders away from the park and into the unfamiliar city, his feelings transform to ones of fear and paranoia, echoing Lynch's characterization of urban spatial

disorientation: "...the street was loud with voices and machinery, so loud he could hardly catch rhythm for his song . . . He ran . . . He cried" (58-9).

Soon after his memory anecdote, Kid returns to Bellona's park; while there, significantly, "In his mind were some dozen visions of the city. He jogged, jaggedly, among them" (61). In the park, Kid meets his soon-to-be girlfriend, Lanya, a young musician who associates with the commune that resides there. Kid's sexual engagements with Lanya, which normally take place in public spaces such as the park, are likewise associated with visual perceptibility. Immediately before meeting Lanya for the second time, an occasion before the beginning of their relationship, Kid describes the problem of mapping in Bellona as he stares off into the smoggy horizon, stating "With such disorientation there is no way to measure the angle between such nearly parallel lines of sight, when focusing on something at such distance" (85). After the two attend a party at Tak's place, Lanya tells Kid, "'You're looking for something. You've got your eyes all squinched up. You were craning way out and ...oh, you can't see anything for the smoke!'" (97). After, Kid suggests they return to the park with Lanya leading him in a manner similar to Tak's guiding. Like his encounter with Tak, Kid knows that "this was coming, too" (104) when Lanya asks him to take off his clothes. Remarking on the newly emergent second moon in Bellona, an unexpected appearance that further reinforces the unmappability of the city, Kid mentally remarks: "New moons come . . . and all of heaven changes; still we silently machinate toward the joint of flesh and flesh, while the ground stays still enough to walk, no matter what above it" (104). Kid's comment situates sex, in the absence of common markers of space, as the only stable and concrete practice in Bellona. The ensuing sex scene is again rendered in the blunt language of the

pornographic: “Then he crawled up onto her; both her hands, thrust between her thighs, caught his cock; he pushed into her” (105). In several subsequent sex scenes between the two characters, the visibility- enhancing result attendant upon the sex act is magnified; while Kid is essentially blinded in the darkness of the park, after engaging in sex “There was a grey light after awhile. On his back, he watched leaves appear in it. Suddenly he sat, in one motion, to his knees” (169). In another moment, Kid notices “The red veil, between him and the darkness, here then there, f[a]ll away” (248).

As one can see, visibility and perceptibility within *Dhalgren* are crucially linked to a certain marker: pornography. *Dhalgren*'s engagement with this unique form of sexual representation has gained attention from its critics. Tucker appraises “. . . *Dhalgren*'s radical valorization of supposedly ‘abnormal’ sexual acts” and its “decentering of a sexual norm” (69), while McEvoy briefly discerns *Dhalgren*'s sex scenes as the most extreme manifestation of the novel's central preoccupation with “freedom” and accurately differentiates them from “the highly stylized sexual encounters that take place in most proper literature” (106). Reading *Dhalgren* alongside Delany's autobiographical output, John Moore examines the ways in which the novel's depictions of sex are modeled on Delany's personal experiences, and, like McEvoy, inscribes its sexual representations within a context of freedom and a prioritization of bodily pleasure (189-93). While these characterizations provide descriptive indicators of *Dhalgren*'s sex scenes, they do not positively acknowledge the unique cognitive function that they perform.

## Chapter Three

### Pornography and the Postwar Novel

One of the most recent and relevant descriptions of pornography is presented by Frances Ferguson in her book *Pornography, the Theory*. In response to the dominant pro-porn / anti-porn framework, Ferguson offers a completely new way of understanding the pornographic by loosing it from these existing “interpretive” models,<sup>5</sup> and instead examining it as a new regime of representation that shares features with, and a historical relation to, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, which attempts to concretize and render

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<sup>5</sup> For anti-porn feminists such as Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, pornography codifies the inequality of the sexes by naturalizing images of rape, sexual harassment, and coercion and presenting them as pure, unmediated sex. MacKinnon sees this hierarchizing effect of pornography as playing a primary role in normalizing women’s oppression in other spheres such as the home, school, and workplace. Both Dworkin and MacKinnon take issue with the current legal definition of obscenity law, which situates obscenity on moral grounds, and attempt to rewrite it in political terms, as they conceive of pornography as a violation of women’s fundamental rights.

In the past several decades, there have been other significant formal analyses of pornography. In *The Other Victorians* (1965), Stephen Marcus examines several pornographic novels from the Victorian era, and concludes his study by extrapolating some of porn’s common formal features into a conceptual ideal that he terms “Pornotopia.” Marcus’s term accentuates the “fantasy” element in pornography and suggests porn’s resonance with utopian literature in its “boundless, featureless, freedom” (269). Marcus further offers some general descriptions of pornography’s qualities, including its reader orientation, de-emphasis on external time and space, formulaity, phallocentrism, historical contingency, and infantile longing for jouissance. Marcus’s final contention is primarily a literary account of pornography, as he situates porn in relation to literature; while porn fulfills Marcus’s literary requirement of evoking (sexual) feeling, its singular intention and formlessness relegate it to the lower status of advertising and propaganda (278).

Berkeley Kaite’s *Pornography and Difference* approaches the pornography debate in psychoanalytic - deconstructive terms. Rather than viewing pornography as unmediated sex, Kaite engages the pornographic image as a “dreamwork,” and attempts to extract its assumptions about the reader. Her analysis is primarily textual, as she posits a claim that pornography consumption does not spring from an unmediated sex drive, but rather from a desire for a “textual fix,” replete with formal codes and expectations. Kaite critiques the gender dichotomy that serves as the basis of MacKinnon’s argument, instead making claims for the androgynous elements (phallic framing of objects, anal orientation, etc.) of pornographic representation and the pornographic experience.

perceptible abstract notions of “value.”<sup>6</sup> As Ferguson states, pornography “. . . captur[es] the importance of actions that are not always resolvable into statements of belief. . . [it] uses comparison and displays relative value to create extreme perceptibility. In the process, it sets aside or minimizes the place of individual beliefs and emotions as explanations for what we have done and what we will do” (xiv). Ferguson’s characterization of pornography as the creation of “extreme perceptibility” accurately defines its work in *Dhalgren*, where pornographic representation endows characters with the capability of lucid perception.

Furthermore, Ferguson contends that pornography makes the social body felt by the individual (15). At the character level, this concept is immediately apparent in Bellona’s black community’s manner of pornographic consumption and its ensuing effects. Early in the novel, Kid becomes acquainted with a white, middle- class family, whose daughter, June, idolizes George Harrison, a local black man who subversively adopts the “black rapist” myth- persona, and is elevated to nearly- divine celebrity status by Bellona’s gay community for his flagrant sex appeal. In order to obtain a pornographic image of Harrison for June, Kid ventures to the church of Reverend Amy Tayler, an interdenominational preacher who distributes the images. When Kid asks her ““- why do you have stuff like this here? I mean to give away,”” Tayler replies, ““The poor people in this city- and in Bellona that pretty well means the black people - have *never* had very

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of Ferguson’s account of pornography, see Loren Glass, “Redeeming Value: Obscenity and Anglo- American Modernism,” *Critical Inquiry* 32.2 (2006): 341- 61. Glass argues that the obscenity trials of the 1960s legitimated the modernist aesthetic and enabled feminist critiques of the male- dominated literary avant- garde, and, later, pornography. Glass faults Ferguson for ignoring this context in her work as well as for her apparent failure to make a clear distinction between “obscurity” and “pornography.” Ferguson replied with the essay, “Why Is This Man so Angry? A Reply to Loren Glass,” in which she objects to Glass’s dismissal of her account of pornography, presumably because it deviates from Glass’s preferred dominant one. Ferguson further defends her use of the term “pornography” to signify a representational trend “beyond ideology” which primarily concerns “political modernity” rather than Glass’s preoccupation with “literary modernism.”

much. Now they have even less.’ She looked at him with an expression he recognized as a request for something he could not even name. ‘We have to give them’-she reached forward- ‘something’” (191).

Taylor’s “gift” to the black community seems highly unusual within this context, and its implications are worth considering. Earlier in the novel, Kid describes George’s image in pornographic detail: “The scrotal skin was the color and texture of rotten avocado rind. Between the thighs, a cock, thick and heavy as a flashlight haft, hung dusty, black and wormy with veins” (100). In a gesture reflecting broader urban configurations, Bellona’s black community, a physically substantial segment of the population, resides in the ghettoized Jackson district and remains “invisible” throughout the majority of the novel by way of its peripheral representation.<sup>7</sup> At one moment, Kid even “[finds] himself wondering, granted the handful he’d seen, just where all the black people in Bellona *were*” (192).

Clearly, the black community in *Dhalgren* is subject to a certain form of negative invisibility, a feature of the novel reflected in the criticism. McEvoy presents an autobiographical reading, suggesting that “It is in *Dhalgren* that we get closest to Delany as a person” (116-17). McEvoy contrasts *Dhalgren*’s homosexual characters and themes with “... the predominately heterosexual characters that have been the focus of his earlier books,” and further states that “The same applies to blacks and their separate, usually unseen by whites, culture,” a social dynamic that achieves representation in the novel. In

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<sup>7</sup> Kid’s own biracial status warrants some mention. As the child of a white father and Native American mother, Kid’s complexion marks him as racially indeterminate in the eyes of other characters, who tend to project their racial interpretations onto him; this phenomenon seems to facilitate Kid’s movement among various groups in Bellona. This characterization is perhaps influenced by Delany’s own experiences as a light-skinned African – American born and raised in Black Harlem and educated at the largely white Bronx School of Science, as depicted in his autobiographical output.

his discussion of the ways in which conventional power dynamics reassert themselves in the institutionally vacuous Bellona, Jean Mark Gawron maintains that "... the high percentage of blacks left in Bellona has given them majority rule. Nevertheless, because Bellona *does* still sit in the real world, blacks as a group in Bellona continue to act like blacks, a people severed by history from the lines of power" (77). Robert Elliot Fox continues this socio- historical account, positing that "Although it may not always strike the reader, a sizeable portion of Bellona's population is black . . . So it would appear that the 'fright flight' that so drastically reduced the population of the city was also a 'white flight' of the sort that has turned many of our urban areas into minority enclaves" (105). Tucker ventures even further in exploring the connections between *Dhalgren's* black community and actual urban uprisings, stating ". . . *Dhalgren* most evidently conjures images of the era's uprisings in urban, predominately black, neighborhoods and provides a reading of their relevant social, political, and economic factors. . . Like those uprisings, *Dhalgren* demands that attention be paid to a part of America previously ignored" (79, 82).<sup>8</sup>

This racial framing, presented in the novel and briefly acknowledged within the existing criticism, clearly resonates with the concept of "black invisibility" codified in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which has remained the dominant framework for conceiving blackness in postwar literature and society. For Ellison's protagonist, identity

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<sup>8</sup> Tucker's *A Sense of Wonder* is by far the most extensive and substantial study of Delany's engagement with race and African- American culture. Tucker proceeds from dominant critical accounts of Delany's position, which alternatively identify Delany positively as an "anti- race race man" critical of identity politics, or, more negatively, as an African American author whose work is "insufficiently racial in context" (2). Tucker, however, attempts to make a case for the central influence of African American culture on Delany's thinking and writing. According to Tucker, in *Dhalgren*, this influence structurally operates through the use of "repetition, return, and improvisation," which resonates with black musical forms such as blues and jazz (62-4).

and subjectivity depend upon the social recognition of others, who continually fail to acknowledge his person without the shadings of constructed, imposed notions of black identity; as he states, “Responsibility rests on recognition and recognition is a form of agreement” (14). In a modernist attempt at conveying this social phenomenon, Ellison allegorically renders his protagonist “invisible”: according to Whitaker, “When people of Caucasian ancestry look in his direction, they see only his surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination” (391). In *Dhalgren*, however, the notion of black invisibility is further extrapolated into starkly physical terms; rather than limiting this invisibility to the social realm, the black community is rarely actually portrayed, save in past media accounts associated with social uprising.

In her essay “Ellison, Photography, and the Origins of Invisibility,” Sara Blair argues for a number of ways in which Ellison’s experience as a photographer and the socio- cultural deployment of photography in the early to mid – twentieth century informed Ellison’s twin concepts of visibility / invisibility, and provided critical motifs for *Invisible Man*. Blair contrasts the influential New Deal Farm Security Administration’s style of documentary realism, which, however well- intentioned, “. . . distorted and reified the realities of black experience in America” (57), with Ellison’s more ambiguous and experimental use of the documentary photograph and literary photographic motifs to counteract this form of objectification. Writing against dominant critical accounts of the novel that draw a negative relationship between conspicuous markers of sight and social forms of “blindness,” Blair attests that “. . . photography serves Ellison powerfully as a resource for the transformation of lived experience into narrative and of social fact into aesthetic possibility. . .” (59), and figuratively functions

in the novel as an instrument of “social critique” (61), and “a powerful exercise, at once aesthetic and political, of self- knowledge” (69). This technique is made particularly evident in the pivotal “eviction” scene, in which the protagonist’s encounter with various historical objects an old photograph of an elderly black couple in the process of being evicted, sparks outrage and provides him with his voice.

This moment in *Dhalgren* may constitute such a similar dynamic. Unlike the ethnographic and hierarchal inclinations of the FSA, the photo of Harrison, according to Tayler, “. . . was done with a backdrop, right down in the church basement . . .” (190), a folk- oriented bastion espousing a progressive creed of egalitarianism and racial pride.<sup>9</sup> However, because of the pornographic, rather than documentarian, nature of the photograph, the dynamics involved are markedly different, and become socially magnified when examined in the context of Ferguson’s account of pornography. The black community’s utilization of pornography responds to Ferguson’s characterization of utilitarian social structures, which

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<sup>9</sup> Like Blair’s account of the photograph in *Invisible Man*, Tucker seems to argue along similar lines for the protest- oriented, socially conscious qualities of this moment of photographic consumption in *Dhalgren*. Perhaps because of the scene’s ambiguity, however, Tucker appears to confuse two separate and entirely different images, which ultimately leads him to draw a rather different conclusion from the one presented here.

When Kid enters the church to ask for the poster, Tayler provides him with six different headshots, to which Kid responds, “No . . . You probably don’t have the ones I was looking for, ma’am” (191). Tayler then offers Kid a nude poster of George, asking “Is this the one you want?” and Kid once again replies, “No . . .” (191). Finally, Tayler states, “Then this must be the one” (191). As Kid glances at the poster, Tayler notes, “We’ve given out lots of the first one you saw. That one,’ she pointed to the one he held, ‘isn’t in quite as much demand” (191).

Believing Tayler to be referring to the headshots, Tucker concludes that “It could be that Bellona’s black community demonstrates its own critical awareness of myths of black sexuality by preferring the head shots of George to the crotch shots, pictures that represent his identity and subjectivity instead of his mere sexuality” (74). However, it seems clear to me that Tayler’s use of the singular referent “that one,” instead of a more appropriate collective referent, refers not to the various headshots, but rather to the first poster offered, which is still pornographic (“Naked and half- erect, one hand cupping his testicles”), but the accompanying imagery of which is comparatively more tame and idyllic (“Harrison leaned against some thick tree. Behind him, a black dog . . . sat in the dead leaves, lolling an out- of- focus tongue. Sunset flung bronze, down through the browns and greens” [190]) than Kid’s preferred leather- oriented one, which might account for its popularity.

...bypass questions of what there actually is and how fully individuals need to be believed and acknowledged by others. Instead, utilitarianism, by emphasizing the importance of evaluating actions in relation to others, makes the perception of value more significant than the perception of essences and identities. (2)

With this new deployment of the pornographic, the dominant concept of social visibility, which requires the recognition of an other, is replaced with a more immediate process which enables the subject to position itself more objectively. In keeping with Ferguson's claims, pornography here functions in an effort to render the black community "visible."

On the surface, this presentation of Harrison, which emphasizes his physicality and sexuality, effectually "exploit[ing] the very mythos of black male potency" (Gawron 105), seems entirely problematic, given the pervasive and destructive characterization of the black male body within white supremacist discourse. Harrison's image appears to accommodate racist notions that associate "Blacks with an organic hypersexuality" (Staples 25), and thereby further give definition to whiteness as a transcendental norm. As many scholars have noted, such racial "scripting" emerged within the time of slavery and gained precedence during Reconstruction, wherein the myth of the "black rapist" entered the white imagination in order to justify the practices of lynching and emasculation in a presumed attempt to protect "white womanhood" (Jackson 79). Such scripts live on, of course, through more contemporary media representations.

Through his image, Harrison appears to counter the "invisibility" of the black community with a black "hypervisibility" that is generally viewed as an opposite, but just as problematic, form of objectification. As most critics note, however, Harrison exploits the gap between this self-conscious form of image-making and his actual subjectivity. While he is construed by many whites in Bellona as a "hypersexed black male," Harrison

does not conform to this stereotype (Tucker 73). In reference to the subplot involving the relationship between June and George, Mary Kay Bray observes that Delany reverses “character stereotypes . . . in the black man- white woman rape plot, in which George is the knowledgeable and sensitive individual and June is driven by her lusts, perhaps even to murdering her brother” (qtd. in Tucker 73). The sexual consummation of George and June’s relationship, which occurs in an alley during the riots prior to Kid’s arrival in Bellona, is captured in a photograph and subsequently published in the *Bellona Times*. Because of its racial- sexual dynamics, this image of consensual sex is construed as one of rape by some in Bellona’s white community, including *Times* reporter Joaquin Faust, who claims, “‘Rape’ is the nasty word they didn’t use in the paper, but rape is what it was” (71).

In an early statement uttered in accordance with his self- conscious, ambiguous image- making, George admits that he enjoys “rape” (i.e. consensual rape fantasy) while expressing genuine sympathy toward Lanya’s story of a friend who was the victim of actual rape, two entirely different acts that fall under the same signifier, as George notes. A similar dynamic allows Harrison’s image to be celebrated by the black community while eliciting a racist reaction from some members of Bellona’s white population, including Tak, who states, “‘That ape likes to get his picture taken more than just about anything, you know? . . . Ain’t he beautiful? Strong as a couple of horses, too’” (100). One could easily draw a parallel between Ferguson’s account of pornography, which can potentially rank viewers according to response, and the image’s function as an indicator of racial assumptions, as observers seem to impose a certain “script” upon George’s body.

In the last section of *Dhalgren*, “The Anathemata: a plague journal,” which is presented as a transcript of Kid’s recovered notebook, Kid records an encounter with Nightmare, another member of the Scorpions, in which Nightmare demonstrates the potency of the sexual map as a means of orientation. As they wander through the city, Nightmare recounts his sexual activities with another gang member, Dragon Lady, that have been externalized onto city space. Nightmare tells Kid:

“Man, we used to do some freaky things, all the time, any time, anywhere, right in the middle of the fuckin’ street, man, I swear.” We ambled; he pointed out doorways, alleys, a pickup truck parked on its axles - “Once with her sitting in the cab and me standing on the fuckin’ sidewalk, a hand on either side of the door, and my head just in there, eatin’ out all that black pussy- Baby and Adam running around someplace across the street- then I fucked her in the back there, on the burlap. Oh, shit!” – and where, by the park, she had pushed him up against the wall and blown him; where she used to make him walk down the center of the street with his genitals loose from his fly, “with her sitting on the curb and doing things with her mouth, man before I even *got* there, so I had a hard- on out to *here!*” . . . On the marble steps of the Second City Bank building (he tells me) he made her take off all her clothes- “Just like Baby, man. I mean people can go around in the street stark naked here, and it don’t mean nothing” – and urinate, while he stood behind her, one arm over her shoulder, catching her water in his palm. “And once she made me lie on my back, you know, in the center of the pavement” - the incident illustrated with much gesturing and head- shaking as we search his memories out of the dry mist-“naked, man, and she just walked around and around me, a big woman!” . . . “made me eat her out for half an hour, I swear, right” – he looks around, surprised - “*here* man. Right here! It was just getting light and you couldn’t hardly see her...” (751-52)

Nightmare’s characterization of Dragon Lady, which is explicitly racialized and sexualized, is again problematic as it draws upon historically situated racist notions that position the black woman as sexually exploitable (Spillers 85).<sup>10</sup> Nightmare’s own characterization in the novel as a white ex- pimp further solidifies the racial- sexual

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<sup>10</sup> For a strong account of representations of black women in pornography, see Patricia Hill Collins’s “The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood.” Collins presents the argument that contemporary pornography’s representational framework draws upon male conceptions of the female body rooted in the slave trade. She further differentiates between the “objectified” white pornographic body and the “bestial” black pornographic body.

dynamics operating here. In another capacity, however, this instance resonates with Ferguson's statement that pornography "mak[es] . . . actions look as though they could plausibly be described in terms of their perceptibility and value in public" (xv). Crucially, for Nightmare, the tangibility of sexual experience seems to precede any type of physical marker. Additionally, Kid's mediation of Nightmare's account and their cooperative "searching" suggests that Nightmare's individual map has been transformed into one that is external and sharable. In the course of Nightmare's description, Kid notes that, "He talks about these celebrations as though they are religious rituals recently banned. Forty minutes of this, before it hit me how lonely not only Nightmare is, but all of us here are: Who can I discuss the mechanics of Lanya and Denny with? I don't even have the consolation of public disapproval" (752). Kid's remark implies the commonality and permissibility of sexual activity amongst the inhabitants of Bellona; though it connotes a sense of depression and longing, it also provides significant insight into the newly deployed role of sex, which has been transformed from its traditionally private and hidden domain, and rendered objectively "public."

Nightmare's comment about the role of nakedness in Bellona recalls a scene that immediately precedes his attempt at mapping. Kid and his lovers, Denny and Lanya, climb onto the roof of the "nest," the commune which the Scorpions inhabit. Once there, they find Fireball, another member of the Scorpions, standing "buck naked except his optic girdle" (728). Denny tightly echoes Nightmare's statement, ". . . explain[ing] (unnecessarily) that you could go around in the street stark naked if you wanted in Bellona '...and it wouldn't bother nobody'" (728). In this scene, collective intimacy and urban visibility are directly linked, as Kid recollects that "We all walked around and

stared out at the edges of what we could see or each other when each other wasn't staring back; leaned on the roof rim; sat on the mansard things along the side. A long time" (728-29).

## Chapter Four

### William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*

Though presented in a different manner, William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* also provides a contestatory account of the sexual and pornographic that clearly transforms hidden, private sexual action into a public, external experience that achieves the utilitarian ideal of "mutual social visibility" (13). At the time of its publication in 1959, William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* was faced with censorship due to its legal designation as an obscene work. While the novel was met with some critical praise, many "traditional humanist" detractors critiqued its experimental style, which was often deemed lacking in literary accomplishment. Though popularly considered a novel, *Naked Lunch* consists of a more experimental collage- like array of fragmentary sequences loosely linked by the intermittent presence of the narrator- protagonist and agent, William Lee, Burroughs's presumed literary persona. The novel's events occur in various fictional locations representative of extreme forms of social organization, including the bureaucratic- totalitarian Freeland Republic, and the more thematically central Interzone, a denationalized, deinstitutionalized space of radical freedom in which the structures of control ingrained within individuals reassert themselves through various acts of violence and sadism. Burroughs's thematic emphasis on freedom and control is infused with the imagery of the addict and dealer, a symbiotic relationship that depends on one's desire for control and another's desire to be controlled. As per Burroughs's stated intents, many critics have approached the work as a critique of systems of hierarchy; since Burroughs

considers language to be the fundamental form of control and compares its irreducible unit, the word, to a virus, *Naked Lunch*'s fragmentary and "direct" style is generally considered an experimental assault on the perceived latent control that asserts itself through forms of narrative and traditional literary devices such as metaphor.

Like Bellona, the central urban locations of *Naked Lunch* pose difficulties for accurate cognitive mapping. The market in the central area of Interzone, one of the novel's primary settings and an extrapolated vision of Burroughs' environment in Tangier, is described in terms that suggest a lack of planning:

All houses in the city are joined. Houses of sod- high mountain moguls blink in smoky doorways- houses of bamboo and teak, houses of adobe, stone and red brick, South Pacific and Maori houses, houses in trees and riverboats, wood houses one hundred feet long sheltering entire tribes, houses of boxes and corrugated iron where old men sit in rotten rags cooking down canned heat, great rusty iron racks rising two hundred feet in the air from swamps and rubbish with perilous partitions built on multi-leveled platforms, and hammocks swinging over the void. (90)

Similarly, Interzone's Plaza is related in language that evokes the very antithesis of good urban planning, the maze or labyrinth, the design of which is intended to disorient the individual, although here it emerges more spontaneously as a result of lack of planning:

All streets of the City slope down between deepening canyons to a vast, kidney-shaped plaza full of darkness. Walls of street and plaza are perforated by dwelling cubicles and cafes, some a few feet deep, others extending out of sight in a network of rooms and corridors.

At all levels criss- cross of bridges, cat walks, and cable cars. . . a maze of kitchens, restaurants, cubicles, perilous iron balconies and basements opening into the underground baths. (45-46)

For the most part, however, these cities are conveyed to the reader through descriptions of the sexual activities that occur within their confines. In this sense, the sexual appears to precede the physical environment as a more accurate indication of spatial orientation. Within Interzone, "a single, vast building":

The rooms are made of a plastic cement that bulges to accommodate people, but when too many crowd into one room there is a soft *plop* and someone squeezes through the wall right into the next house- the next bed that is, since the rooms are mostly bed where the business of the Zone is transacted. A hum of sex and commerce shakes the Zone like a vast hive. (149)

Though Interzone's landscape is presented as completely indistinct and unmarked, the concentration and public presentation of the intimate seems to result in new perceptible social and spatial configurations akin to Ferguson's characterization of artificial utilitarian social structures.

The uses of sexuality in *Naked Lunch* demonstrates Burroughs's use of the body in a positive, constructive manner. In the extant criticism on Burroughs by both his detractors and champions, however, sex is described in overwhelmingly negative terms, a characterization which is perhaps a product of Burroughs's popularly perceived dismal vision. In *Naked Lunch*, these comments largely respond to the notorious "Blue Movie" scene, a section of the novel which involves depictions of violent sex and hangings. Speaking in traditional "moral" terms, John Tytell states that "there can be no justifying explanations of the significance of the Blue Movie sequence, but only an appreciation of its ecstatically kinetic . . . depiction of violence... only the speed of flashing sensation" (qtd. in Lydenberg 9), while David Lodge broadly objects to the novel's "...violence, squalor, and perversion" (76). Burroughs's more enthusiastic critics, by contrast, uphold this negative motivation, although framing it in more analytical, descriptive terms. Lydenberg states that the Blue Movie Scene "tries to take the thrill out of sexual violence" (12). Reading *Naked Lunch* alongside the writings of the Frankfurt School, Murphy contends that Burroughs "... brings copulation out into the open and reveals it as a control process" (91). Ihab Hassan proposes that in *Naked Lunch*, "sex is usually

violation” (55), and an expression of the “extinction of life” (56), while Hayles similarly observes a great deal of pervasive “sexual nausea” (21).

Burroughs encapsulates the more positive function of sexuality in *Naked Lunch* most palpably with the sentence, “Signal flares of orgasm burst over the world” (174). Amidst the disorienting spaces presented in the novel, the orgasm is associated with clarity and generally affords the subject a far-reaching, panoptic view shared with sexual partners and observers. In scenes of sexual activity, the narrative transitions from Burroughs’s characteristically hallucinatory and fragmented style to the unmistakably concrete description of the pornographic, and finally resolves in the moment of orgasm, which is rendered as a disconnected imagistic “mosaic,” an attempt to convey a glimpse of absolute space, which Lydenberg alternatively refers to as “moments of intense clarity” and “direct naked seeing” (15).

In “Hassan’s Rumpus Room,” a sequence focusing on an orgiastic party in Interzone and deemed somewhat reductively by Murphy as “a parody of the commodification of homosexuality” (76), surreal sex-death rituals presented in pornographic detail lead to such panoptic experiences, as the narrative moves from the immediate and limited surroundings of the room – “Gilt and red plush. Rococo bar backed by pink shell... Windowless cubicle with blue walls. Dirty pink curtain cover the door” (63, 65) - to vast expansive space congruent with the advent of sexual activity- “A vast still harbor of iridescent water. Deserted gas well flares on the horizon. Stink of oil and sewage. Sick sharks swim through the black water, belch sulfur from rotting livers, ignore a bloody, broken Icarus” (64). As the scene progresses and Hassan increases the

level of sexual activity with the cry, “Freedom Hall here, folks! . . . *Let it be! And no holes barred!!!*” (66), the mapping function of sex becomes more concrete:

Two boys jacking off under railroad bridge. The train shakes through their bodies, ejaculates them, fades with distant whistle . . .

Train compartment: two sick young junkies on their way to Lexington tear their pants down in convulsions of lust. One of them soaps his cock and works it up the other’s ass with a corkscrew motion . . . Both ejaculate at once standing up. . .

The train tears on through the smoky, neon- lighted June night. Pictures of men and women, boys and girls, animals, fish, birds, the copulating rhythm of the universe flows through the room, a great blue tide of life. (68-699)

The interconnectedness of various orgasms here implies a graspable, intentional coherence and contrasts with the fragmented style that characterizes the majority of the novel. As Ferguson states in her discussion of utilitarian social groups, from which she contends pornography derives its means and motives, one key feature is the promulgation of “visible order,” here seen in the intricate relationship among various individuals (15). Additionally, in discussing the work of de Sade, Ferguson makes the claim that “...even persons who may not know one another may become linked by action, [which] may be seen in terms of law and consequences . . . even personal ties may cease to be compelling” (6). Burroughs’s “action”- oriented depiction of the sexual in *Naked Lunch* further corresponds to Ferguson’s claims concerning utilitarian social structures, which “mak[e] persons visible to one another . . . for the purpose of the social structures, they were dissolved into actions” (4).

This orgasm function in *Naked Lunch* clearly contrasts with the image- oriented pornographic experience in *Dhalgren*. In *Dhalgren*, specifically in the poignant example of the black community, the presentation of an image endows characters with physical and social visibility, in a way very much like Ferguson’s account of pornography. Burroughs’s presentation of the orgasm, however, is a much more physical and

immediate process of cognition, in which sexual experience leads to vivid perception rendered in the language of the pornographic.

Several critics responding to *Naked Lunch* and Burroughs's body of work more generally have insightfully investigated Burroughs's critique of Western hierarchy and binarism, particularly the prevalent concept of mind - body dualism. In doing so, however, they have taken the additional step of somewhat contradictorily interpreting the aforementioned moments as suggesting disembodiment, wherein consciousness physically leaves the body and the strictures of a subjective framework. In one example, Lydenberg first faults psychoanalytic critic Serge Grunberg for "his reluctance to imagine, or to recognize as anything but failure and self- delusion, the possibility of life without a body or without a unified subject" (22), and subsequently contends that *Naked Lunch* contains

. . . concrete embodiments of every possible imbalance and abuse within this dual system: from paralyzed bodies numbed by the abstractions of religion and romance, to paralyzed minds imprisoned by the body's physical cravings . . . the tyranny of the body turns the life energy of sex and sensory experience into the mindless mechanical responses of pure need . . . the sex addict is alienated from his own body, his own desire. (28)

N. Katherine Hayles similarly observes, through the lens of informatics, the concept of disembodiment at work, as she states, "The junkie's body is a harbinger of the postmodern mutant, for it demonstrates how presence yields to assembly and disassembly patterns created by the flow of junk as information through points of amplification and resistance" (42-3). Beyond the obvious difficulties of modeling such a phenomenon,

these critics overlook the cognitive function achieved here through the subject's contact with the physical. In opposition to such a form of binarism and the traditional structures of metaphor that the critics attack, Burroughs presents the sexual pornographic moment as a fully integrated mind-body experience, in which the physical is used as a means to mental cognition.

In stark opposition to the freedom and permissibility of Interzone, where sex functions as a tenuous mechanism for spatial orientation, is the totalitarian-bureaucratic Freeland Republic, where the efficient, sadistic Dr. Benway, “. . . a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control” (19), has implemented a plan intended to spatially disorient the city's inhabitants in an effort to control them. Broadly, Benway poses a challenge to individual and group cognition through the institution of “an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy.” Consistent with Lynch's theory of mapping, Dr. Benway has ordered the obliteration of common markers of spatial orientation: “All benches were removed from the city, all fountains turned off, all flowers and trees destroyed” (20). Noting the potential for sexual activity as a method of orientation, however, Benway also analogously institutes a ban on sexual solicitation: “No one ever looked at anyone else because of the strict law against importuning, with or without verbal approach, anyone for any purpose, sexual or otherwise” (20). With these parallel actions, Burroughs draws a distinct functional equivalent between physical locationing dependent upon external objects, and a sexual mapping that relies on the external perceptibility of the sex act. As Ferguson posits, “Pornography [is] the interest in the ways in which people's bodies come to be increasingly tracked in relation to other bodies” (“Why Is This Man So Angry?” 368). By

suppressing the possibility of creating social and visual perceptibility through sexual action, Benway reduces the level of relevant intersubjective knowledge among the citizens of Freeland.

Benway further solidifies the connection between abstract forms of control and physical unnavigability when he returns to the labyrinth trope, stating that “. . . the possibilities are endless like meandering paths in a great big beautiful garden” (25). Benway’s ultimate goal of abolishing recognition and sexual community is realized in one of the novel’s closing sequences in which Carl Peterson, a homosexual patient, walks out of “sexual correction” treatment: “A homosexual tourist looked at him and raised a knowing eyebrow.” Returning his glance, Carl sees “something ignoble and hideous reflected back in the queen’s spayed- animal brown eyes” (161). Benway’s treatment effectively reduces the way in which Freeland’s inhabitants can perceive any notion of the social totality through the sexual.

In contrast to the brutal separation of public and private zones within the Freeland Republic, Burroughs demonstrates the radical effects of their melding through the pranks of the roguish agent A.J, whom Murphy accurately characterizes as a “critical subversive” of instrumental reason (86). A.J.’s tentative identification as a member of the “Factualist” party connotatively implies a desire for objectivity and places him as one opposed to systems of control through obfuscation, such as Benway’s plan to institute “an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct” (19). In one prank, A.J. releases the Xiucutl, an aphrodisiac bug, “on the opening night of the metropolitan.” The ensuing scene is rendered in metonymic, visible, sensory - oriented detail:

Screams, breaking glass, ripping cloth. A rising crescendo of grunts and squeals and moans and whimpers and gasps . . . Reek of semen and cunts and sweat and the musty odor of penetrated rectums . . . Diamond and fur pieces, evening dresses, orchids, suits and underwear litter the floor covered by a writing, frenzied, heaving mass of naked bodies. (124)

A similar occurrence takes place at the opening of the Escuela Amigo, a “delinquent school for boys,” in which A. J. presents a sexually suggestive statue (128). Here, A.J.’s imposition of sexual perceptibility upon formerly obscure, largely bourgeois social domains provides an alternative means of “order,” which effectively captures the role of pornography within these novels.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

As demonstrated in this discussion, pornography in these novels functions as a mechanism for ordering space and experience, a topic that has warranted a great deal of discussion in modern and postmodern discourse. In his highly antagonistic treatment of Burroughs's narrative innovations, David Lodge situates the "random elements" of Burroughs's work and that of other postmodern artists in relation to his preferred modernist aesthetic, which relies on a concentrated form of order. Lodge states, ". . . in the experience of successful literature, we feel compelled to credit all of its excitement and interest . . . to the creative mind behind it . . . neo- modernism, apart from its merely humorous intents and purposes, is involved in a logical contradiction, for when it succeeds it does so by creating an order of the type it seems to deny" (81, 82). As demonstrated, however, the transformation of space within postmodernism and its effect on the individual disenable such a transcendental modernist reference point for ordering a tide of chaos. More perceptibly than others, George Edgar Slusser observes this unique cognitive phenomenon operating within *Dhalgren*: "The hero of *Dhalgren* projects chaos; as artist, however, he cannot order it – Kid's 'notebook' (which may not even be his) is no more than the mirror of moral fragmentation. . . [he] is neither hero nor artist; he is unable to act or create. . . the landscape he wanders through is made of the scattered and shifting fragments of one life" (61, 62). Within this new environment, as we have seen, the cognitive aspects of sexuality function as an ordering and clarifying mechanism,

which ultimately proves more amenable to the “spontaneous” dynamics of postmodernism. As Gawron maintains, “In *Dhalgren* . . . the emblems of disorder are made the instruments of order” (64), an observation which is clearly reflected in this analysis, and in Ferguson’s claim that utilitarian representations, such as pornography, “must promulgate order, but, more, visible order” (15). Regarding Burroughs’s work, Lydenberg similarly notes, “. . . in Burroughs’ mythology, evil applies to anything which represses spontaneity” (6).

Moving beyond the realm of the literary, critics have recognized the potentially liberating effects of this new function of sexuality within a wider cultural context. Writing against a certain “politics of privatization,” Michael Warner observes the devastating effects, on gay cultural visibility, of zoning laws intended to curb the expansion of sex-oriented business and the normally accompanying culture of publicly visible sexuality. In reference to pornography, Warner writes that it “. . . jeopardize [s] the amnesia between sex and public culture . . . [it is] a media of acknowledgment . . . and one of the things porn objectifies is acknowledgment” (103). Ultimately, what Warner argues for is an alternative means of creating order via the sexual, as he claims that such a conspicuous display of sexuality perpetuates visible order and creates a clearly-defined space informing queer identity: “. . . the availability of explicit sexual materials, theaters, and clubs . . . is how we have learned to find each other, to construct a sense of a shared world, to carve out spaces of our own in a homophobic world” (90). Writing with Lauren Berlant along similar lines, the authors describe the implications of this form of externalization: “After a certain point, a quantitative change is a qualitative change. A critical mass develops. The street becomes queer. It develops a dense, publicly

accessible sexual culture. . . No group is more dependent on this kind of pattern in urban space than queers” (562-63).

Much has been written about the abstracted, “unifying” efforts of modern architecture and planning efforts; here, we are seeing a resurgence of a similar form of planning, though one that is less aesthetically- motivated and of a more market- oriented, political nature. As with the postmodern concepts of order within *Naked Lunch* and *Dhalgren*, Warner and Berlant’s ideal space of public queerness is set in opposition to concentrated planning efforts, which, in the critics’ urban- spatial context, demonstrate a “desire to make sex less noticeable in the course of everyday urban life” (83). Delany also acknowledges the ordering potential of this newly deployed sexuality, as he describes his experiences at the Christopher St. Docks, stating, “. . .the actuality of such a situation, with thirty- five, fifty, a hundred all- but strangers, is highly ordered, highly social, and grounded in a certain care, if not community” (226).

Evidently, Delany’s and Burroughs’s new framing of sexuality departs from a traditional concept offered by Foucault’s discursive formulation. However, before moving too quickly to embrace this new use of sexuality as a utopian gesture, perhaps we should return again to the original historian of sexuality. Beyond his particularly relevant critique of the “repressive hypothesis,” which warns against a false association of open sexual expression and a critique of dominant institutions, Foucault firmly acknowledges the unique susceptibility of sexuality for undergoing a process of transformation from unstructured desire to a deep association with structures of power and value by way of discourse:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to

uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (105-6)

As if anticipating Foucault, Kid, in an oft-cited notebook passage, writes

I think sometimes, the difference is that they are sure that any social structures that arise grow out of patterns innate to The Sex Act- whatever that is; while we have seen, again and again, that the psychology, structures, and accoutrements that define *any* sex act are always internalized from social structures that already exist, that have been created, that can be changed. (720)

Certainly, these texts indicate such a movement toward change. However, while the transformation of sexuality exemplified in *Dhalgren* and *Naked Lunch* and reflected in emergent critical discourse suggests a break with Foucault's account of privatized and control-oriented forms of sexuality, it similarly burdens sexuality with such an extra-sensory function entangled with notions of value.

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