

BURROUGHS AND HIS WORLD: CARNIVAL AS HETEROTOPIA IN *NAKED LUNCH*

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival as a heterotopic space that can be seen in William Burroughs' Naked Lunch. Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque constitutes a suspension of social norms through the use of productions that employ laughter, parody, and the grotesque. These techniques privilege the body's materiality against social qualifiers. By focusing on the city of Interzone in Naked Lunch, I show how carnival can be conceived spatially as a heterotopia. Interzone is a multicultural space that includes a variety of grotesque carnival productions involving degradation, death, and medical transgression. Through these strategies, Naked Lunch brackets cultural differences by portraying the human body as collectively grotesque. This facilitates the coexistence of various cultures within Interzone and generates its heterotopic character. The carnival qualities of Naked Lunch show how carnival not only constitutes a suspension of social rank, but also a suspension of cultural hierarchy. By first asserting the cultural argument underlying Naked Lunch by considering the ethnocentric 1950's USA that Burroughs is writing from, I argue that Interzone represents a heterotopia that is facilitated by carnivalizing cultural differences through techniques of grotesquerie. This analysis indicates the growing importance of the concept of carnival in the humanities, as a mode for bracketing cultural difference by privileging the body's materiality.

William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* has been described as "obscene, barbaric and disgusting" (Burroughs xv). Images of death, rape, and defecation permeate the work. The use of these images corresponds with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque produces a suspension of social order and hierarchies by privileging the body through the use of parody and the grotesque. *Naked Lunch* is a sharply polemical work that satirizes a variety of political targets through its portrayal of grotesque images of bodies and their movements. I will argue that one effect of emphasizing the grotesque in *Naked Lunch* is to privilege the body's materiality over cultural differences. The cosmopolitan city of Interzone in *Naked Lunch* is portrayed as culturally diverse. It is also described as a city that is

grotesque, as the domain for practicing obscene and gruesome bodily practices. Interzone represents a heterotopic space that is produced by carnivalizing cultural difference through the privileging of the body's grotesque materiality.

Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque applies to *Naked Lunch* because it describes the suspension of social order through the privileging of laughter and the body. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). Bakhtin's analysis concerns the various influences on the Renaissance author Francois Rabelais and his book, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. He states that his analysis of the carnivalesque is limited to Renaissance literature, "the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times" (11). Yet, as Linda Hutcheon points out in "The Carnivalesque and the Contemporary Narrative", "Bakhtin focused on the significance of the 'material bodily lower stratum' in Rabelais's work...much contemporary fiction and not just metafiction using a pornographic model – would seem to share these obsessions" (88). This applies towards thinking about *Naked Lunch* as a carnivalesque production. *Naked Lunch* involves the carnivalesque because it portrays a world that is "sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials", instead offering "a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations" (Bakhtin 5-6). It achieves this through the use of satire and the emphasis of "the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (Bakhtin 18). Bakhtin argues that the body is emphasized in carnivalesque productions by involving grotesque configurations of the body. The body is rendered grotesque through techniques of degradation, abuse, and medicalization. By portraying a world that is anarchic and grotesque, *Naked Lunch* gestures towards the "second life, a second world of folk culture...a 'world inside out'" (Bakhtin 11). Bakhtin locates this world in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and describes it as being unstable and generative. Just as religious and political authority is dissolved in Rabelais' texts, so does *Naked Lunch* involve "ever changing, playful, undefined forms...filled with the pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (Bakhtin 11). Despite the criticism that *Naked Lunch* is "obscene...offensive or harmful to public morals" (De Waal 136), the work portrays a variety of generative possibilities which exceed conventional limitations through its carnivalesque suspension of norms.

Although Bakhtin associates the carnivalesque with a suspension of social hierarchies, the carnivalesque in *Naked Lunch* is directed towards cultural difference. Fear of the cultural other is represented in *Naked Lunch* as a response to American xenophobia during the 1950's. As Fiona Paton argues in "Monstrous Rhetoric: Naked Lunch, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties", "Burroughs, writing out of a cultural space that was intensely Gothic in its

own fear of otherness, deploys highly inventive monstrosity against the paranoid discourse of nationhood” (52). Burroughs was writing during a period of extreme American paranoia about communist activities that were compounded with xenophobia and homophobia, since the political deviance of Marxism was associated with the cultural deviance of non-American people and the sexual deviance of homosexuality. Besides its depictions of narcotic and sexual obscenity, *Naked Lunch* prominently addresses issues of cultural difference through its urban creations. The city of Freeland, for example, allegorizes America during the fifties because it represents a “homogenization of place, of all areas of Freelandt, through the imposition of fixed cultural meanings...[that] creates a repressive society in which any who exhibit cultural difference are criminals and subject to ‘unknown sanctions’” (Bolton 69). Burroughs describes “Freeland Republic, [as] a place given over to free love and continual bathing. The citizens are well adjusted, cooperative, honest, tolerant and above all clean” (20). Contrary to the uniform society of Freeland, Interzone is described as being multicultural, “Panorama of the City of Interzone...The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian – races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body...The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market” (Burroughs 96). In Interzone, various cultures exist alongside one another in a non-hierarchized configuration:

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

The cosmopolitanism of Interzone represents a mosaic rather than a blending of cultures, filled with the sounds of “high mountain flutes, jazz and bebop, one-stringed Mongol instruments, gypsy xylophones, African drums, Arab bagpipes” (Burroughs 98). Michael Sean Bolton argues that the multicultural city of Interzone is heavily influenced by Burroughs’ experiences of Tangiers: “the locations of his narratives reflect the different climates, cultures, landscapes, populations, etc. of a variety of places, often simultaneously. His locations are frequently hybrid, largely influenced by the international city of Tangiers, Morocco...[which] was inhabited by a distinctly cosmopolitan population” (70). These experiences contributed towards the creation of “Interzone’s collage of cities [that] creates a fluid space in which any and all cultures become possible, whether mixing and sharing characteristics or transforming from one to another in a perpetual interchange. Where all

cultures are possible, none are primary” (Bolton 71). The urban creations of *Naked Lunch* depict the political concerns of cultural difference that Burroughs is responding to.

Interzone represents the carnivalization of cultural differences that is achieved by displaying the body in grotesque configurations. Interzone is a multicultural city, but it also a space for various grotesqueries. By considering Bakhtin’s account of carnival, these grotesqueries emphasize Interzone’s suspension of cultural difference. Bakhtin relates the carnival with the grotesque by discussing how social order is suspended through various approaches towards the body that “degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh” (20). Instead of the class differences of the Renaissance, Interzone suspends cultural differences in its carnivalization. Through this carnivalization, Burroughs deals with cultural difference by privileging the universal materiality of the body against national identity. As Mary McCarthy states, places and bodies are linked in *Naked Lunch*, “the scene shifts about, from New York to Chicago to St. Louis to New Orleans to Mexico to Malmo, Tangier, Venice, and the human identities shift about too, for all these modern places and modern individuals, (if that is the right word) have interchangeable parts” (94). In Interzone, individuals are no longer hierarchized according to ethnic qualities. Regardless of their race, they are all grotesque bodies that fuck, shit, piss, and die. They respond to the rentboy’s request, “why cancha just get physical like a human?” (Burroughs 16) This privileging of corporeality is achieved by three different techniques of grotesquerie that Bakhtin discusses: emphasizing the lower bodily stratum, emphasizing death, and foregrounding the impact of medical discourse.

The lower bodily stratum is emphasized in *Naked Lunch* by privileging the anus in grotesque representations. Bakhtin argues that lower bodily activities are elevated during carnival as part of a process of degradation, “degradation here means coming down to earth... To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (21). The degradation of social hierarchies is related to the emphasis of the genitals and the anus because they physically signify an upending of high and low categories. This overturning can be especially seen in *Naked Lunch* with the carnival worker who taught his ass to speak, “this man worked for a carnival you dig, and to start with it was like a novelty ventriloquist act... the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth” (Burroughs 120). The ass eventually takes over the head of the carnival worker, coinciding with Bakhtin’s account of “the grotesque movements of the body (still to be seen in shows and circus performances)... the buttocks persistently trying to take the place of the head and the head that of the buttocks” (353). This image represents a subversion of social order because of its topographical associations, “thanks to degradation the word is renewed;

one might say reborn...we further see the essential topographical element of the bodily hierarchy turned upside down; the lower stratum replaces the upper stratum” (Bakhtin 309). Bakhtin also argues that the anus represents a receiving of the world, since it is an orifice through which life can enter the body, “all these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation” (317). This principle corresponds with the prominence of anuses in *Naked Lunch*, which are described as transcendent portals, “Gentle reader, we see God through our assholes in the flash bulb of orgasm...Through these orifices transmute your body...The way OUT is the way IN...” (Burroughs 208). In this way, we can extend Bakhtin’s analysis by showing that anuses represent “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (Bakhtin 26). These portrayals of the anus contribute to Burroughs’ treatment of cultural difference. Interzone represents a “Composite City” (Burroughs 96) that subverts the cultural hierarchies and closedness of American politics. Since the anus replacing the head signifies a topographical subversion of high and low categories, the anus is consistent with the subversion of American ethnocentrism. Furthermore, the anus as an orifice represents an openness to the world that counters the xenophobia of American politics. By privileging the lower bodily stratum in the city of Interzone, Burroughs’ carnivalesque portrayal of anuses is consistent with subverting cultural hierarchies and xenophobic exclusion.

The emphasis of death in *Naked Lunch* also contributes to a carnivalizing of cultural difference. Bakhtin argues that death has a special role in carnival ritual, “on death: its grossly carnivalesque traits are obvious...Here we have the combination of killing and birth with which we are familiar. Death, the dead body, blood as seed buried in the earth, rising for another life – this is one of the oldest and most widespread themes” (327). For Bakhtin, death represents one of the themes which Romantic grotesque categorized as a vulgarity that had to be hidden. Carnavalesque productions, on the other hand, emphasize death because it implicates the individual in a universal earthly existence. He goes on to state that carnival representations of death frequently “produce a flowering of erotic images” (327). This corresponds with the eroticization of death in *Naked Lunch*. The text describes many examples of individuals dying during sexual behavior. This is most fully represented in the “A.J.’s Annual Party” section, which involves a “blue movie” starring “Mark, John, and Mary” who copulate until they die, “‘No, Mark!! No! No! No!’ she screams, shitting and pissing in terror as he drags her to the platform...Her neck snaps. A great fluid wave undulates through her body...Masturbating end-over-end, three thousand feet down, his sperm floating beside him, he screams all the way against the shattering blue of sky” (Burroughs 89). The frequent hangings in the novel, which end in ejaculations, are also

followed by mandrakes growing from the fallen sperm, “snapping necks and screaming mandrakes, sigh of orgasm” (Burroughs 208), “Johnny screams like a mandrake, blacks out as his sperm spurts, slumps against Mark’s body an angel on the nod” (Burroughs 81). This image corresponds with Bakhtin’s account of carnivalesque portrayals of “death inseminating mother earth and making her bear fruit” (327). The prominent combination of sex, death, and the earth in *Naked Lunch* functions according to a carnivalizing logic that unifies individuals. Cultural difference is superseded by the bodily qualities of death and sex, illustrating how “in grotesque realism...the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (Bakhtin 19). This is reinforced by the various ethnicities of the boys being hanged in Hassan’s Rumpus Room,

aerialists ejaculate each other in space with one sure touch...boys by the hundred plummet through the roof, quivering and kicking at the end of ropes...Exquisite Balinese and Malays, Mexican Indians with fierce innocent faces and bright red gums. Negroes (teeth, fingers, toe nails and pubic hair gilded), Japanese boys smooth and white as China, Titian-haired Venetian lads, Americans with blond or black curls falling across the forehead (the guests tenderly shove it back), sulky blond Pollacks with animal brown eyes, Arab and Spanish street boys, Austrian boys pink and delicate with a faint shadow of blond pubic hair, sneering German youths with bright blue eyes (Burroughs 72)

This image of boys from different ethnicities being hanged and ejaculating represents an acceptance of cultural difference but an overcoming of cultural hierarchies that is achieved through death. Death is displayed in *Naked Lunch* in order to carnivalize ethnocentrism by emphasizing its universality.

Medical discourse also contributes towards carnivalizing cultural difference in *Naked Lunch*. Bakhtin discusses how grotesque representations in carnival productions were heavily influenced by medical knowledge. He specifically focuses on the influence of Hippocrates’ textson Rabelais, “of all the ancient authors, Hippocrates, or more correctly speaking, the ‘Hippocratic anthology’ exercised the greatest influence on Rabelais, an influence that extended not only to his philosophic and medical views but even to his imagery and style” (355). Surrounding medical discourse influenced the production of carnival grotesqueries because they portrayed the human body in an incomplete, fragmented, and topographically subversive way, “all the works contained in the [Hippocratic] anthology present a grotesque image of the body; the confines dividing it from the world are obscured, and it is most frequently shown open and with its interior exposed...the organism’s various eliminations, which so often appear in the grotesque, also acquire here a great significance” (Burroughs 355). *Naked Lunch* foregrounds the relationship between the grotesque and medical science

through the role of Dr. Benway. Alternately portrayed as benevolent and wicked, Dr. Benway is someone who either rejects xenophobia, or corrects “deviations”. Dr. Benway’s medical achievements correspond with the influence of medical discourse on carnival rituals, because his “cures” involve producing grotesque bodies, “some would be entirely made of penis-like erectile tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of 3 and 4 eyes together, criss-cross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell” (Burroughs 121). These grotesque productions show the body as strange and subversive, achieving a carnivalesque assortment of “creatures [that] have a distinctive grotesque character. Some of them are half human, half animal...this is an entire gallery of images with bodies of mixed parts. There are also giants, dwarfs, and pygmies” (Bakhtin 345). In one sense, Dr. Benway is against anything “anti-homosexual, conformist and prosaic...So somebody wants to establish a beach head of homogeneity in a shambles of potentials like West Europe and U.S.A.?...Spot of bother there. Scalpel fight with a colleague in the operating room” (Burroughs 28). On the other hand, Dr. Benway is featured in the section “The Examination” as a doctor who is responsible for correcting “deviations” in the city of Freeland. This involves curing Carlof his homosexuality, “‘take the matter of uh *sexual deviation*.’ The doctor rocked back and forth in his chair...‘We regard it as a misfortune...a sickness...certainly nothing to be censored or uh sanctioned any more than say...tuberculosis” (Burroughs 170). This portrayal of Dr. Benway is satirical, parodically reflecting the xenophobia and homophobia of America during the fifties. Both of these portrayals of Dr. Benway illustrate the appropriation of medical discourse by carnivalesque productions. In one sense, Dr. Benway creates physical deviations in spite of cultural difference. On the other hand, Burroughs satirically employs Benway to reflect the xenophobia of the fifties. Both of these dimensions contribute towards how medical discourse is used in *Naked Lunch* for carnivalizing cultural difference.

Naked Lunch achieves various subversions of cultural difference through its carnivalesque accounts of the lower bodily stratum, death, and medical discourse, but ultimately achieves an overcoming of cultural difference by privileging the body’s materiality. Bakhtin argues that this constitutes the liberating force of carnivalesque productions, since carnival “has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (Bakhtin 7). The subversion of class is achieved during carnival by privileging the body against social qualifiers. *Naked Lunch*, on the other hand, illustrates how cultural differences can be subverted by privileging the body’s materiality. By portraying bodies through grotesque representations, Burroughs emphasizes the materiality of the bodies inhabiting the multicultural city of Interzone. The physical distortions of bodies constitute topographical subversions of high and low, but also remind the reader that bodies can be modified. In doing so, *Naked Lunch* profanes the purity of bodies as they are understood by xenophobic discourses, which privilege specific ethnicities

against others. Furthermore, *Naked Lunch* reminds the reader that we all have our lower bodily activities in common, despite our cultural differences. In other words, whether we are from “New York to Chicago to St. Louis to New Orleans to Mexico to Malmo, Tangier, Venice”, we all shit, piss, ejaculate, and die. In Bakhtin’s terms, *Naked Lunch* produces a “boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space [that] extends to all languages, all literatures” (319).

Interzone can be spatially understood as a heterotopia that is facilitated by privileging the body’s grotesque materiality. Michel Foucault defines heterotopias in his essay “Other Spaces” as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” (24) Heterotopias have a relational identity with spaces in the world, but unlike utopias, they actually exist. Foucault states that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25), and he provides gardens as well as fairgrounds as examples. The fairground, those “marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclit objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth” (26) bears compelling similarities to carnival. Bakhtin emphasizes the heterogeneity of carnival that is achieved when barriers are dissolved by privileging the body’s materiality. This explanation of carnival coincides with Natalie Melas’ explanation of heterotopia, “a site that can be construed as an ‘elsewhere’ that produces the effect of dislocating one’s fundamental sense of fully inhabiting a single space. It is a parcel of the world that at once brings the totality of the world into apprehension and destabilizes or contests its unity” (26-27). The city of Interzone supports this connection since it represents a non-hierarchized, vertically arranged space of cultural differences. By privileging the body’s grotesque materiality, the various ethnicities that collide in Interzone become trivial qualities. Interzone thereby contests the cultural homogeneity of Freeland by neither getting rid of difference, nor hierarchizing it. Instead, Interzone’s carnival aspects allow the city to become a privileged space filled with “bodies and pleasures”. *Naked Lunch* responds to the politics of space through its satirical reflection of American ethnocentrism by assembling different cultures without stratifying them. In doing so, Interzone is a heterotopia constituted by differences that have been horizontally, rather than vertically arranged.

Naked Lunch has been associated with the carnivalesque by various critics, but few have pointed out its multicultural agenda. *Naked Lunch* is not simply a carnivalesque text because it catalogues various narcotic and sexual obscenities. Even in spite of William S. Burroughs’ claim, that the book is nothing more than a collection of “detailed notes on sickness and delirium” (ix), the text actively engages with questions to do with cultural acceptance. It is a text that works within cultural limitations, foregrounds their hideousness, and supersedes them. By emphasizing the body as something grotesque, the question of

identity spills over social qualities like sexual orientation and ethnicity. The text of *Naked Lunch* itself “spills off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises...Radio Cairo screaming like a berserk tobacco auction, and flutes of Ramadan fanning the sick junky like a gentle lush worker in the grey subway dawn” (Burroughs 208). By preserving the differences of ethnicities without hierarchizing them according to geographic origin, Interzone constitutes the spatial representation of carnival as heterotopia. *Naked Lunch* may be ambivalent about whether the body is ugly or beautiful, but it does show that the body can never be pinned down. Instead, the descriptions of shitting, fucking, and ejaculating achieve a “divinization and apotheosis of man. Earthly space is defeated; all peoples who were scattered throughout the world are united” (Bakhtin 367).

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