

"AS UN-AMERICAN AS RABIES": ADDICTION AND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN  
POSTWAR JUNKIE LITERATURE

A Dissertation

by

ABIGAIL LEIGH BOWERS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: English

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Chair of Committee,	Sally Robinson
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## ABSTRACT

"As Un-American as Rabies": Addiction and Identity in American Postwar Junkie Literature. (December 2009)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Sally Robinson

The years following World War II symbolized a new beginning for the United States. While at the height of global power, Americans found that they were able to experience a leisurely existence where items, desired instead of necessary, could be purchased by almost anyone. This increased prosperity, however, also caused a rise in the number of addicts that included not only the hard-core drug users, but "junkies" who were addicted to filling the emptiness within through the use of illegal drugs to television to sex in order to do so. This dissertation examines the phenomenon of the rise of addicts following World War II, using the literature of addiction in order to elucidate the reasoning behind this surge.

Contemporary American authors formed a new genre of writing, "junkie literature," which chronicles the rise of addiction and juxtaposes questions of identity and the use of "junk." Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book* are among the first to represent the shift in the postwar years between earlier narratives of addiction and the rise of junkie literature through an erasure of previously held beliefs that addiction was the result of a moral vice rather than a disease. Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*,

Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, and Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* continue this trend of semi-autobiographical writing in an effort to show the junkie's identity in society, as well as the way addiction mirrors capitalism and consumerism as a whole. Finally, Hubert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero*, and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* explore a different kind of junk addiction, focusing on the use of television, diet pills, sex, cocaine, and food to fill an ineffable void inside that the characters of the novels find themselves unable to articulate. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as well as various socio-historical critics, this dissertation investigates the rise of addiction narratives in the postwar years, linking the questions of identity to consumerism in contemporary American culture.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the following people: to my mother, who has always been there to pick me up when I fall; to my father, who taught me that sometimes we get answers to questions we don't know we've asked; to Marina, the Sam to my Frodo; to my brother and sister-in-law, who taught me the meaning of persistence and compromise; to Paradox and Finn, who taught me that all work and no play make for a dull girl; to Crux, who taught me the meaning of infinite patience and fortitude; and finally, to Rugger, for whom there are no words.

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## CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: "WOULDN'T YOU? YES YOU WOULD": POST-WORLD  
WAR II AMERICA AND THE RISE OF JUNKIE LITERATURE

The realm of addiction is not limited to drugs; addiction incorporates anything that has the potential to cause negative consequences for the person over-indulging in the act, whether it is one of eating, ingesting drugs, or even enmeshed in an unhealthy relationship. According to Sadie Plant in *Writing on Drugs*, the "addict" as an identity emerged in the late nineteenth century as "an individuated outsider born . . . [a] figment[] of a modern imagination that needed to define its own normality, drawing the boundaries around the upright, productive, and reproductive members of twentieth-century society" (164). A "thing" for which desire existed without regulation and check, the addict soon became mythologized as a person simply lacking the control and desire to stop destructive behavior. Society imagined the addict as a monster, a thing that voraciously consumed but offered nothing in return. As the nineteenth century waned and the twentieth century began, there was little that the government could do to stop the influx of the monstrous consumer. America enacted several laws and regulations to control the addicts, but these only resulted in a much larger, and certainly more insidious, threat emanating from inside society. By the time World War II ended, the country was deeply entrenched in one of the first waves of the "War on Drugs," and addiction was no longer being limited to repressed middle-class females who were the victims of doctor-induced,

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This dissertation follows the style of *PMLA*.

or iatrogenic, practices. Instead, a new breed of addict was born in the postwar world, and this, in turn, gave rise to a new type of literature.

The post-World War II years symbolized a new beginning for America. At the height of global power, Americans were able to experience, for the first time, a leisurely and luxurious existence where items, desired instead of necessary, could be purchased by almost anyone. The postwar years ushered in what David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* refers to as a revolution that cut Americans off from the traditional family values that historically existed, giving way to "a whole range of social developments associated with a shift from an age of production to an age of consumption" (6). In *A Consumer's Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen agrees, noting that the aftermath of World War II provided a fundamental shift in America's politics, economy, and culture, creating major consequences for how Americans began to live their lives, and what they expected from their government (8). Cohen indicates that postwar mass consumption in America was less of a personal indulgence and more a "civic responsibility designed to provide 'full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation'" (113).<sup>1</sup>

The mass consumption practiced by Americans was limited to a particular class of citizens, the white middle class members of society. As Gary Cross explains in *An All-Consuming Century*, Americans began to fulfill the dreams that the hardship of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen is quoting from the May 5, 1947 issue of *Life* magazine. The article, entitled "Family Status Must Improve: It Should Buy More for Itself to Better the Living of Others," followed the story of Ted and Jeanne Hemeke and their three children from their old life as that of the "workingman's family" to the new, imagined "middle class" life, where the children are fashionably dressed, Ted wears a suit, and Jeanne has shiny new appliances in her kitchen. The article also cites a Twentieth Century Fund projection for the economy in 1960, which urges "a health and decency standard for everyone," requiring a "pleasant roof over its head" and all types of consumer goods to be included in the household (Cohen 112-113).

Great Depression nourished, and "[t]he postwar period was an era of unprecedented prosperity, built on an extraordinary, fortuitous confluence of economic and social opportunities. In the generation after 1945, Americans celebrated that prosperity with exuberant spending on cars, houses, and appliances" (67). Nevertheless, underneath the surface of this seemingly genial, productive, patriotic society lurked a world where this optimism ceased to exist. America, while dealing with increased prosperity, was also contending with a rise in the number of addicts; this group not only included hard-core drug addicts like William S. Burroughs, but also brought about a new kind of "junkie": those addicted to filling an emptiness within, simultaneously using anything from illegal drugs to television to sex, among others, in order to do so, and chronicling this abuse through the written forms of memoir and fiction.

While the 1950s represented what Gary Cross defines as a culture that combined hedonist behavior with responsibility and realism with fantasy (9), the threat of outside forces continued to plague the American public. The close scrutiny of citizens' lives by the government caused the public to look more closely at the literature being published. As Timothy Melley suggests, the threat to American autonomy came not from a specific agent or group, but a *system of communications*, involving an organized assortment of discourses, techniques, and ideas (emphasis original, 2). The Communist scare of the 1950s, perpetuated by Joseph McCarthy, aided the thinking that a mass conspiracy was working underneath the polished veneer of American society. Added to this, Melley notes, is the idea that conspiracies were being perpetrated through the mass media depending "upon mass communications, messages to which anyone might be privy.

This new model of 'conspiracy' no longer simply suggests that dangerous agents are *secretly* plotting against us from some remote location. On the contrary, it implies, rather dramatically, that whole populations are being *openly* manipulated without their knowledge" (emphasis original, 3). The American government, coupled with the insidious threat from some foreign outside entity, caused many Americans to turn to relationships with "junk" in order to feel there was something over which they still held control.

Prior to World War II, most of the literature dealing with addiction centered on the ideas of suffering and redemption.<sup>2</sup> Addicts portrayed in these novels were expected to suffer and be punished because of their reliance on outside substances for pleasure. When a substance was used for pleasure, such as alcohol in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), the consequences for indulging were both amusing and appalling. In Irving's story, for example, the title character falls asleep, and though he rids himself of his shrewish wife, he also misses out on twenty years of his life—twenty years that include the passing of the American Revolution, as well as his children growing older. Other American authors followed in Irving's literary footsteps, but took a much darker tone when writing about addiction. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, goes into great detail in his poetry and short fiction about the evils of laudanum, alcohol, and opium.<sup>3</sup> Authors

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<sup>2</sup> Most critical readings of addiction narratives cover authors writing prior to World War II, with the exception of the inclusion of William S. Burroughs. Some collections of criticism include: Sadie Plant's *Writing on Drugs*, Marcus Boon's *The Road of Excess*, David Lenson's *On Drugs*, and *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, edited by Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield. These texts include examinations of Thomas De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, Nelson Algren, and William S. Burroughs, but, for the most part, do not extend beyond Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* in their explication of narcotics addiction in literature.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Poe, please see Chapter II.

like Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, John Cheever, and Nelson Algren also wrote about the negative consequences of over-indulging for the pursuit of pleasure. It is clear that, prior to World War II, the use—and abuse—of pleasure-causing substances caused many Americans to demonize the world of drugs and alcohol.

Without the rise of the Beat poets in the 1950s, new types of representations of addiction may not have been readily available to the general American public. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* showed a new side of America amidst the sprawling suburbia. Ginsberg and Kerouac opened the door for an innovative type of literature that was unrestrained and uncompromisingly honest. Out of this new literary tradition emerged William S. Burroughs, the self-proclaimed "Master Addict" (Burroughs, *NL* 213) whose drug use provided inspiration for his first novel *Junky*, published in 1953. The publication of this novel fascinated and revolted readers, and was closely followed by his second novel, the iconic *Naked Lunch*,<sup>4</sup> in 1959. A year later, Alexander Trocchi, a Scottish immigrant, would publish *Cain's Book*, a semi-autobiographical novel about his experiences as a junkie in New York. The work of these two authors in particular opened a new world and introduced the heroin addict in a different way. Instead of the grubby, uneducated criminals presented in earlier works of addiction, Burroughs and Trocchi invite readers into the underworld of American society, offering the first true insight into the secret world of the junkie. The publication of these novels paved the way for other contemporary American addiction narratives dealing with everything from heroin addiction to the reliance on television for happiness.

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this is a more "revolting" text than *Junky*, as the subject matter is more sexually and graphically explicit than Burroughs's first novel.

According to William S. Burroughs, addiction is something that is "quantitative and accurately measurable" (*NL* 200). Burroughs adds,

Junk yields a basic formula of "evil" virus: *The Algebra of Need*. The face of "evil" is always the face of total need. . . Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: "Wouldn't you?" Yes you would. You would . . . do *anything* to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act in any other way. . . . As long as junk need exists, someone will service it. (*NL*, emphasis original 201-202)

The addict's identity becomes defined by need, which knows no limit or control. If junk is quantitative and measurable, then it stands to reason that Burroughs's "Algebra of Need" provides a fairly accurate understanding of addiction. While this concept comes from his second novel *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs applies this idea in *Junky*, and is, along with Trocchi, one of the first authors of junkie lit to propose that heroin addiction does not result from a lapse in moral character. Instead, the junkie is born when desire crosses over into the world of need; that is, when an addict cannot physically function without heroin. Junk is a way of life, and subsequent narratives of addiction, detailing heroin and other substances, show how identity gets altered in the face of "total need."

In an effort to show how Burroughs's "Algebra of Need" creates a new category of identity for the junkie, as well as for the literature of addiction being produced after World War II, I borrow from Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. In *Powers of Horror*,

Kristeva defines abjection as that which disturbs borders and rules—something ambiguous that disrupts our previous categories of identity (4). In the world of junkie literature (junkie lit), both the authors and the characters in these semi-autobiographical novels of heroin addiction manage to fit Kristeva's definition of abjection. In the works of Burroughs, Trocchi, Jim Carroll, Ann Marlowe, and Linda Yablonsky, the junkie evolves into a creature consumed by need, and in doing so, seeks the pleasure inherent in the drug, as well as an escape from sickness. While the junkie appears human, he or she is also something other in American society, a type of "foreigner" in his or her own country. Taking a psychoanalytic approach to categorizing the identity of the junkie allows for a new definition of abjection to emerge. The junkie, in choosing to use heroin, for example, willingly enters into the abject lifestyle, though this category is one that the public places on the addict, not the other way around. I use this particular approach when examining texts of heroin addiction because I find that the junkie is able to slip in and out of society, the addiction virtually unnoticeable by the American public. These authors illuminate the world of the addict by displaying a microcosm of society where everyone is caught in the capitalist wheel, and where anyone can enter the world of addiction and, in doing so, assume the identity of the abject.<sup>5</sup>

In the world of junkie literature (junkie lit), the protagonist often searches for something elusive and illusive, which results in his or her addiction. In Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, for example, the narrator seeks purity through heroin addiction; in Hubert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*, the characters want to capture a feeling of

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<sup>5</sup> Previous critical analyses of addiction narratives tend to focus on contextualizing the work rather than analyzing the characters and their actions.

wholeness. While it is easy to understand how a drug such as heroin intoxicates the user and acts as a ruling force in an addict's life, it may seem more of a stretch to assume that other forms of "junk" have similar ramifications and implications. For instance, literature dealing with heroin addiction is generally thought to focus on a fairly marginalized group of people; however, addicts exist in various guises. The identity of the addict strays from previous categories related to race, gender or religion; in doing so, junkie lit highlights the fact that any person, regardless of these limiting categories of identity, can be a junkie.

Peter C. Whybrow, in *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*, implies that uncontrollable appetites are unique to American culture, noting that the term "addiction" is socially determined and dangerously confusing. The brain's chemistry houses a common chemical pathway of reward, resulting in subjective excitement-induced risk-taking behaviors, including drugs, overindulgence in food, and unsafe sexual practices. The rush, which includes surges of pleasure unique to each individual and mimics the ones caused by drug addiction, does not result wholly from the chemicals of drugs entering the brain, but through the hedonistic experience generated by altered brain chemistry. Since the "dopamine superhighways" do not distinguish between potential rewards signals, the subjective sense of pleasure can drive people to recklessly pursue dangerous activities (Whybrow 85, 93). Some activities and addictions are considered perfectly acceptable, such as over-working; when there is the implication that pleasure can be gained, though, the person pursuing such activities as over-eating, too much



television, or indulging in drugs ceases to be merely a risk-taker and becomes, instead, negatively classified as an addict.

Without the contribution made by William S. Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi, literature dealing with addiction would be relegated to "pulp" fiction. Heroin titillates and frightens based on its dangerous reputation, and is perhaps the most notorious drug in American culture. Heroin's reputation for being so dangerous creates a fascination, and I begin "'As Un-American as Rabies': Addiction and Identity in American Postwar Junkie Literature" by focusing the first two chapters on this drug. When the word heroin is brought up in conversation, most people recall the image of a rock star, as opposed to an author. Rock stars are considered by many to be disillusioned suffering artists who use drugs to escape a world that cannot possibly understand the pain and torment they deal with on a day-to-day basis. Many American musicians fall into this category: Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Kurt Cobain, to name a few. These musicians—Holiday, Joplin, Hendrix, and Cobain—have one thing in common, besides the country they come from: they are all linked to heroin-related deaths. Not all overdosed, though their use of the drug indicates what many believe is the inevitable outcome for anyone choosing to use heroin in the first place. Heroin is often the drug of choice for disaffected generations, regardless of the time period. It speaks to the loneliness and isolation felt by many who consider themselves to be on the fringes of society, and often acts as the best friend and muse for the junkie musician.

Perhaps the most popular junkie musician during the latter half of the twentieth century was Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the band Nirvana. Nirvana was arguably the

biggest band in the 1990s, and Cobain, while at first eager to embrace the rock star persona, quickly began to feel alienated from the generation he was supposed to be leading. While there is no song more anthemic than Cobain's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," it has been said that Cobain was an unwilling spokesperson for Generation X. His desire to escape the spotlight culminated in several failed suicide attempts by drug overdose, and purportedly,<sup>6</sup> on April 7, 1994, Cobain, a known heroin addict, injected both arms with a lethal dose of heroin, opened his wallet to display his driver's license for picture ID, wrote a suicide note, and killed himself with a shotgun (Driver 573). Cobain's suicide rocked the nation, and heroin was directly blamed for his abrupt departure from the world. Like Morrison, Joplin, and Hendrix, Cobain was only 27 when he died. Cobain's legacy resides not just in the music, but through the fact that he was last in the list of junkie-rock icons to so explicitly use the drug and take his own life.

In his *Journals*, Cobain writes, "[D]rug use is escapism whether you want to admit it or not" (284). In fact, Cobain sought audience with the Master Addict himself, collaborating with William S. Burroughs in a track written by the author entitled "The Priest They Called Him." Cobain played noise guitar in the background; Burroughs commented to his assistant, "'There's something wrong with that boy; he frowns for no good reason'" (qtd. in C. Cross 290). Burroughs was the ultimate icon for Cobain; while Burroughs claims that drugs never came up, it is clear that they shared the connection of heroin addiction. For Burroughs, though, heroin was never about escapism; for rock

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<sup>6</sup> I use "purportedly" because there are conspiracy theorists who believe that Courtney Love, Cobain's wife, hired a hit man and had Cobain murdered. However, the facts presented pretty much show that Cobain, a known depressive, committed suicide. This wasn't his first attempt.

stars who are turned unwilling cultural icons, however, heroin became something Cobain used to be "numb" (C. Cross 338-339). He also inadvertently popularized the use of the drug to a new generation of disaffected youth.<sup>7</sup>

Cobain's use of heroin, and his suicide that resulted from a depression exacerbated by the drug, once again brought heroin into the national spotlight. The mid-1990s signaled a return of the drug, and the image of the dead artist as martyr, again popularized by Kurt Cobain, appeared in another form: fashion's "heroin chic." Spawned by misguided fashion designers wanting to cash in on Cobain's death and the "grunge" movement of the early 90s, heroin chic focused on the images of emaciated, hollow-eyed, slack-mouthed models sitting in squalor and aimlessly staring into nothing.<sup>8</sup> In 1996, designer Calvin Klein came under fire from the National Families in Action (NFA), a group that claimed the ads for Klein's fragrance "ckbe" featured models that appeared to be heroin addicts (Fernandez 292). Klein retorted that the company was not promoting addiction; they were simply capitalizing on the look of mid-90s youth (Fernandez 293). This prompted The Partnership for a Drug-Free America to run a series of ads discouraging heroin use, incorporating taglines from, for example, "HIV-positive ex-entrepreneur Stacy": "Heroin Lets You Escape: 'After awhile, you're not doing heroin to get high. You're just sick, and you need it to get normal.'" "Ex-model

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<sup>7</sup> According to *The DASIS (Drug and Alcohol Services Information System) Report*, published by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), between 1993 and 1999, heroin treatment admission rates increased by 200 percent or more in six states, and by 100-199 percent in another 11 states. The West and Northeast had the highest heroin treatment admissions rates between 1993 and 1999, and high purity and "generational forgetting" were considered the reasons for increased heroin use (SAMHSA).

<sup>8</sup> In Chapter III, I go into detail about the ways in which this particular image, a popular one of the "junkie," is a mixture of fiction and fact.

Rebecca" was also quoted: "Heroin is a Religious Experience: 'Often you pray to God to let you die'" (Fernandez 293). The fashion industry ignored these ads, which could not compete with the image being sold. Instead of deterring heroin addiction, the youth culture was swayed by the media representations of heroin as glamorous and cool.

The downfall of heroin chic in the mid-90s occurred near the height of its popularity. The success of the Calvin Klein ads—despite the serious protestations of the NFA and The Partnership for a Drug-Free America—spurred the utilization of waiflike, wan models in advertising campaigns. In 1997, David Sorrenti, a young fashion photographer, took pictures of a young model, James King, slumped on a sofa, smoking a cigarette and picking at the holes in her tights. On the wall were posters of Sid Vicious<sup>9</sup> and Kurt Cobain. In the same year the infamous photograph was taken, Sorrenti overdosed at the age of 20 (Ashton 14). Sorrenti's overdose prompted then-President Bill Clinton to take action against the heroin problem in the United States. In May of 1997, Clinton noted that American fashion may be an enormous source of beauty, creativity, art, and economic prosperity for the United States, "[b]ut the glorification of heroin is not creative, it's destructive. It's not beautiful, it's ugly. And this is not about art; it's about life and death. And glorifying death is not good for any society" (Wren). Clinton added that the ads are making heroin addiction seem "glamorous and sexy and cool. And as some of those people in those images start to die

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<sup>9</sup> Sid Vicious was a member of the British band the Sex Pistols. After allegedly murdering his groupie-girlfriend Nancy Spungeon, he was sent to jail, where he spent a few days getting raped and taunted by other inmates. He made bail, slashed every vein in his body with a smashed light bulb and a rusty razor, and, three months later, overdosed on heroin given to him by his mother (who dropped the urn containing his ashes all over Heathrow airport) (Driver 597).

now, it has become obvious that this is not true. You do not need to glamorize addiction to sell clothes" (qtd. in Wren). Clinton's scathing comments on the fashion industry, and indirectly on the popularization of heroin through such films as *The Basketball Diaries* (1995) and *Trainspotting* (1996),<sup>10</sup> did little to curb the use of stick-thin models on the runway. Fashion, like everything else, is cyclical, and soon the "heroin chic" look passed, particularly when the "glamorous" side of heroin was exposed as a fraud by the people who decided to try the drug.

While many criticize popular culture and the media for glamorizing heroin addiction, the authors who write about their experiences give the sobering reality of being a junkie. In reality, heroin allowed for anonymity, and the ability to slip in and out of society without being labeled in any particular way. Heroin focused a user on the ability to become an apparition, to transgress the notion of death, and to be alive without really existing in the usual sense. Pete Hamill asserts that "there is a continuing flirtation with death that has erotic undertow. Consciously or not, each day the addict teases death, defies it embraces it, and then wakes from it obliterating emptiness, still alive . . . . Certain drugs allow the addict to do what no humans can do: return from the land of death" (xi). Heroin allows an escape from the idea of death by allowing users to venture into that particular realm.

In narratives like *Junky* and *Cain's Book*, the question of identity is nebulous; after all, the junkie possesses the same appearance as everyone else. The choice to use

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<sup>10</sup> The film is, of course, based on Jim Carroll's book; however, certain liberties are taken in the cinematic representation. This will be discussed in Chapter III.

heroin, and write about the effects, shows how the question of identity shifts. In the heroin subculture, everyone is, as Burroughs suggests, "grey and spectral and anonymous" (NL 7). Junkie literature provides a space for an identity that becomes something that cannot be categorized in the usual way, through race, color, gender, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs, for example. Instead, in the world of the heroin addict, as shown in these narratives, once a person gets addicted, it does not matter what class, race, or gender a person belongs to or possesses, because everyone is in the same predicament. The narrator of literary representations of addiction becomes what Alan Ansen refers to as "a cipher in the crowd" who describes the world around him or her to illustrate the isolation of the culture (27). In the vein of anonymity, the characters and narrators populating junkie literature tend to want to disappear and not stand out from the crowd.

Marcus Boon, in *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*, asserts, "There has been no major advance in the narcotic literature since . . . the 1930s. The same genres, confession, addiction, and disintoxication narratives, continue to be written" (84). In spite of Boon's claim, that "the situation of addicts is roughly the same as it has been since World War I" (Boon 84), addiction narratives have evolved from simply acting as confessional pieces that deal primarily with redemption to a body of literature that advocates a new understanding for the identity of the heroin addict. Beginning with Burroughs's *Junky*, each subsequent narrative of addiction sheds new light on the situation of the junkie in post-World War II America. *Junky*, along with Trocchi's *Cain's Book*, provide privileged insight into the subculture of the heroin addict

in America through their honest portrayal of the junkie. As a result of this insight, Burroughs and Trocchi usher in a new breed of addiction narratives—"junkie literature (junkie lit)"—where confession is made without apology, and getting clean is never an option. Unlike novels prior to World War II, there is no redemption to be found in Burroughs, Trocchi, Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky; instead, although perhaps there is not much variation in narcotic addiction, there is a major advancement in the way identity is portrayed and understood in junkie lit.

As seen through Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book*, early representations of junkie lit question whether or not this type of literature is capable of promoting an allegory for the mass consumption practiced by Americans in the latter half of the twentieth century. In Burroughs and Trocchi, as well as in the subsequent narratives of junkie lit, the subculture of heroin addiction acts as a microcosm for monstrous consumption of materials other than drugs in American culture. In fact, postwar representations of heroin addiction illuminate contemporary society's desire for wholeness, something believed to be achievable through the mass consumption of "stuff" in order to fill an ineffable void inside. The search for an identity, a meaningful life, and a soul occurs through chemical means and other addictive drives, including food, images, and sex. These literary representations of need and addiction emphasize society's obsession with consumption and commodity.

In order to fully examine how this emphasis and identity shift occurs, I turn to Kristeva's psychoanalytic body of theory to show how society shuns these "junkies." Junkie lit features an identity that pushes at societal boundaries, questioning the idea of

what is considered an acceptable form of control in American society. Because the junkie turns to drugs for pleasure, he or she is shunned and labeled as abject. Addicts are represented in junkie lit as being part of society without allowing themselves to be controlled by the rigid morals and tenets. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, as mentioned earlier, explains this theory of abjection, while her *Strangers to Ourselves* outlines the foreigner's existence as the other in society. Kristeva's *New Maladies of the Soul* and *Black Sun* further explore the concept of the abject foreigner.

I locate postwar American junkie lit through the use of a mixture of socio-historical criticism. To give an historical context of the ways in which consumption and consumerism played a large role in the postwar world, I turn to Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic*, a text that examines the politics of postwar consumption in the United States. Complementing Cohen is Gary Cross's *An All-Consuming Century*, a study of why commercialism won in the postwar years. I also turn to David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* as a way to contextualize the individual's place in American society. Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jean Baudrillard's *America and Fatal Strategies*, and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* also present a sociological and historical critique of America, illustrating how consumption and images guide our choices and lives.

Chapter II, "Unmasking the Myth: Confessions of the Unredeemed Drug Addict in William S. Burroughs's *Junky* and Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book*," locates the authors of heroin narratives in post-World War II American society. Burroughs and Trocchi bridge the gap between earlier narratives of opiate and heroin addiction,



distancing themselves from the themes of redemption, atonement, and the addict's trajectory of inevitable madness and death found in works by authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nelson Algren. Furthermore, Burroughs and Trocchi are the first two authors to seriously propose the theory that addiction occurs because it is a disease, not a result of moral turpitude, arguing against the demonized picture of the addict as a morally depraved, thieving, dirty drain on society. Burroughs and Trocchi subvert previous definitions of the concept of the "junkie" in American society, hinting at Kristeva's abject identity. As a result, Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book* allow for a launching point for later narratives of addiction.

Chapter III, "Not Fade Away: The Abject Identity of the Junkie in Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, and Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk*," broaches the larger category of heroin addiction and identity in junkie lit. I expand on the previous chapter's argument, further illustrating that the junkie acts as a scapegoat in American society. In order to fully explicate the identity of the junkie-as-other, I expand the definition of Kristeva's abject and incorporate her theory of the foreigner's place in society. I begin the chapter with a discussion of Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, a memoir written between the ages of 13-16, and use the author's search for purity as a way to show how his heroin use coincides with the search for a pure self. I next explain Marlowe's fixation on time and its relation to addiction to clarify the way heroin causes a user's identity to be suspended in time, neither moving forward nor backwards. Finally, I end the chapter with an exploration of the junkie-as-other who fades into a ghostlike state. I turn to Linda

Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* to illustrate the disappearance of self through heroin addiction.

Chapter IV, "Useless Toys and Pretty Boys: The Society of Monstrous Consumption in Hubert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*," discusses the way contemporary American society searches for a way to feel whole amidst the frenetic and commodified world of the spectacle. The characters found in Selby, Ellis, and Updike have no true connection to anything or anyone, and turn to sex, food, television, and drugs to fill the inexpressible void within. I employ the psychoanalytic theory of Kristeva to define the addict and elucidate the psychological reasoning behind "junk" addiction. The majority of the chapter, however, focuses on the socio-historical issues related to the rise of monstrous consumption in the years following World War II. I draw from Lizabeth Cohen, Gary Cross, David Riesman, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and Frederic Jameson. The socio-historical analysis is useful when examining the ways in which Selby, Ellis, and Updike show that the identity of the characters living in a society founded upon image and commodity is unstable and lacking in any real substance.

Previous narratives of addiction focused on redemption and atonement, and when these efforts failed, the only recourse left was suicide. Junkies were pictured as dirty, poor, hopeless, morally depraved individuals who flouted their addiction and were punished accordingly. This stereotype can be found in works from American authors Washington Irving to John Cheever, as well as European writers like Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Gustave Flaubert, and Robert Louis Stevenson, to name a few.

At the end of these tales, the addict is either redeemed in some way through sobriety, and if this fails, then he is dead. While much of the American attitude towards drugs stems from xenophobic concerns,<sup>11</sup> the fact of the matter is that these early narratives of addiction show that the marginality previously afforded only to people of a different race and ethnicity was being foisted onto drug addicts as a whole prior to World War II.

In the narratives published after World War II, Burroughs and the other authors of junkie lit shift the perception of the addict into the metaphorical space.

Metaphorically, the addict is a ghost, able to appear and disappear based on the amount of the drug consumed. Because these narratives focus on the pleasure and pain derived from heroin and other types of addiction, junkie literature provides a new way to understand the junkie identity is marginalized into the abject in American society. Abjection becomes used as a way to explain how, for example, a junkie can resemble any other person, but through the choice to use drugs, becomes an other—one without boundaries through the way he or she circumvents the rules and laws of society in order to score drugs.

Previous narratives of addiction also featured the junkie as a morally depraved individual. Beginning with Burroughs, however, the junkie narrator stopped bemoaning his or her lot in life and instead focused on the glee of the underworld of the addict. Pre-World War II literature suggested that addiction occurred through a weak moral character, particularly because the addicts in these novels were engaging in an activity that brought pleasure. When a person consumes without actually producing, these

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<sup>11</sup> Xenophobia will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

novels seem to say, then he or she is morally corrupt because he or she is not participating in the "greater good" for a capitalist society. The constant consumption of drugs, as well as food and television, is considered useless because it does not pump money back into the economy. Starting with the works of Burroughs and Trocchi, addiction was displayed as something that occurred because of an underlying medical issue as opposed to a moral one; that is, Burroughs and Trocchi both believed that addiction was a disease, and ought to be treated as such. As a result, these two authors were instrumental in not only presenting to the public a literature that focused on the underworld of the addict, but also one that offered a new definition of addiction for the public to ponder.

Finally, junkie literature gives us a new kind of redemption. Instead of pining for the past and lamenting addiction, the authors of junkie literature indicates that redemption can actually be found through the use of drugs, as opposed to turning away from them. These authors engage with drugs in an attempt to foment a spiritual awakening, and while many of the characters in the novels fail to achieve this, some of them do. These novels detail the struggle to fill an ineffable void inside, and their contribution to the literature of post-World War II America shows a country that is riddled with consumption, both of empty images and even emptier substances. After World War II, America became a country where purchasing power was prominent, and the citizens of the United States were encouraged to buy as many products as possible to support the economy. However, consumerism, like addiction, is totalizing, and as a result, a whole new nation of addicts was born. Junkie literature examines this

phenomenon, through the use of drugs, food, television, and images that are all flash, no substance.

Post-World War II novels dealing with addiction serve as a primer for American culture, revealing the empty spaces within that cannot be filled with drugs and other addictive drives, including television, sex, and food. While heroin addiction offers an extreme example of this phenomenon, junkie lit also provides a launching point for discussing various socio-historical issues related to consumerism and American society as a whole. The novels of Burroughs, Trocchi, Carroll, Yablonsky, Marlowe, Selby, Ellis, and Updike detail a world filled with emotionally ill people whose suffering is manifested both in and on the body, effectively erasing previously conceived categories of identity. The protagonists of these novels invent reasons that serve to justify their refuge in empty relationships, including those with sex, food, television, and drugs, causing these characters to become swept away by insignificant and valueless objects that offer a perverse pleasure, but no real satisfaction. Turning to various means of consumption in order to medicate themselves against this overwhelming yet indefinable pain, the characters attempt to fill their lives with images or neurochemistry. Unfortunately, these texts confirm the problems associated with engaging in addictive behavior, resulting in the featured characters losing what little control they previously possessed over their lives. These contemporary novels highlight how addiction and control, linked with consumerism, function in the lives of every day citizens, giving evidence that post-World War II America is a place where desire and obsession still consistently take over.

CHAPTER II  
UNMASKING THE MYTH: CONFESSIONS OF THE UNREDEEMED DRUG  
ADDICT IN WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS'S *JUNKY* AND  
ALEXANDER TROCCHI'S *CAIN'S BOOK*

When German pharmacist Frederich Sertürner first isolated the primary active ingredient in opium in 1806, he had no idea what he had found. He named this extremely strong painkiller "morphium" after Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams. In 1832, codeine was identified as the other psychoactive compound in opium (Brick and Erickson 89). However, when English research C.R. Alder Wright boiled morphine with acetic anhydride over a flame in 1874, he had enough foresight to realize that what he had produced was much too powerful, with extremely unpleasant side effects, to even consider putting out to the unwary public. A little over two decades later, Heinrich Dreser, in charge of drug development at Bayer pharmaceuticals, decided to market this mixture. In 1895, Dreser christened the chemical, diacetylmorphine, "heroin,"<sup>1</sup> as he felt the drug's powerful effects were able to cure almost any ill, from coughs to respiratory ailments (Ashton 102-103). Dreser also promoted heroin as a non-addictive substitute for the increasingly problematic morphine dependence in countries such as Great Britain and America. Unfortunately for Dreser, Wright's claims about the unpredictable nature of the drug proved to be true: contrary to the Bayer pharmaceutical company's claims, heroin, as it turns out, is one of the most addictive substances in the world (Plant 7).

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<sup>1</sup> Heroin comes from the German word *heroisch*, which means "hero" (Ashton 102-103).

Heroin, or junk, has a long history in American culture, one steeped in myth that both repels and attracts based on the reputation for being, in street lore, the "hardest" drug. In *Naked Lunch*, William S. Burroughs posits, "Junk is surrounded by magic and taboos, curses and amulets" (6), and heroin's reputation certainly supports this idea. The drug is considered dangerous because some believe that, with one hit, the experimental user will be locked into addiction for the rest of his or her life, never able to escape the siren call of the needle.<sup>2</sup> Ann Marlowe suggests that drugs are often considered pollutants and impurities, even though Americans tend to pop prescription pills without a care, and to use cosmetic products filled with suspect chemicals. These types of chemicals are not considered "dirty" the way mood-altering drugs are, and the war against drugs "derives some of its mainstream appeal from the notion of eradicating dirt, a noxious foreign body. Drugs have to be positioned as unwholesome to be hated—they can't just be stupid or dangerous, the public also has to think they're dirty, used by people who are unwashed, in settings that are disgusting," particularly heroin, because it is a "dirty thing to do; 'dirty junkie' is almost one word" (Marlowe 68).<sup>3</sup> Part of this stems from the idea that heroin is, as Frances Moraes notes in *The Little Book of Heroin*, "thought of as an active agent that entices unsuspecting victims into its net with initial pleasures of the flesh only to have these pleasures replaced by a life of slavery and misery once the victim is ensnared" (ix). Of course, many of these "victims" survive

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<sup>2</sup> While there is no accurate evidence refuting this commonly held myth, Burroughs, in *Junky*, writes, "It takes at least three months' shooting twice a day to get any habit at all. . . . It took me almost six months to get my first habit . . . . I think it is no exaggeration to say it takes about a year and several injections to make an addict" (xxxviii). For some, taking heroin is an entirely unpleasant experience, and this will be discussed in further detail in Chapter III.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* will be examined in Chapter III.

their "slam dance" with the drug and live to tell about it; contemporary American authors William S. Burroughs, Alexander Trocchi, Jim Carroll, Linda Yablonsky, and Ann Marlowe are included in this group. In junkie literature, the drug is shown as something of a mixture of magic and taboo, able to transport users to a place where need takes over desire, and thus overtakes the body, creating an identity inseparable from heroin.

I propose that the literature of William S. Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi marks a transformation in the representation of the heroin addict, or junkie, in post-World War II American society. This change responds to the evolution in thought concerning the U.S. culture's attitude and understanding of drug use and heroin addiction. Formerly, addicts were seen as deviant members of society engaging in criminal activities and possessing a distinct lack of moral fiber. I position Burroughs's and Trocchi's new brand of "junkie lit" as a way to actively challenge myths about drug addiction, particularly to heroin. I find that these authors offer a new theory as to how addiction permeates American society, and their writing provides an alternative treatment to previous narratives of addiction. I will also use Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as a way to examine the question of the shifting identity of the junkie in literary representations of addiction. In order to do so, I first examine the moral climate pertaining to drug addicts, particularly junkies, in the first half of the twentieth century. Next, I discuss the various methods of treating addiction, culminating in the idea that addiction becomes a disease rather than a lapse in morals. Ultimately, I will argue that the junkie acts as an abject figure that both fascinates and frightens the general public because he or she exists without boundaries in a society that, after World War II,



depended on rules and laws to prevent another upheaval like the once experienced in Europe during the first half of the century.

What I consider to be the early tradition of junkie literature consists primarily of cautionary tales where the addicts try, but inevitably must fail, to redeem and reinsert themselves into mainstream society. The first acclaimed American novel dealing with heroin addiction was Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*, published in 1949.<sup>4</sup> Algren's book was so popular that it won the first ever National Book Award in 1950 (Geismar 311). *The Man with the Golden Arm* tells the story of Frankie Majcinek, a.k.a. Frankie Machine, a card dealer who, at the end of the war, gets addicted to morphine. The story tells of how Frankie Machine kills his drug dealer, has an affair, spends time in jail, tries to get sober, and when he finds he is unable to quit doing drugs, commits suicide. As the *English Journal* noted in the "New Books" section of 1949, Algren's novel, "[b]ased upon crime in the notorious streets in Chicago" features a cast of gamblers, criminals, addicts, and "men and women succumbing to despair" to create "[a] grim and sordid picture exceedingly well done" (595). In an early review of the novel, George Bluestone suggests that drug addiction is not Algren's major theme; instead, Algren's goal is to express the idea that morality can only be found in relationship to others; that is, through love (394, 396). Bettina Drew, in "The Heart of the Matter," posits that Algren recreates the world of naturalism that authors like

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<sup>4</sup> *The Man with the Golden Arm* was made into a highly successful film in 1955 by Otto Preminger. The film adaptation starred Frank Sinatra as Frankie Machine. During this time period, the Motion Picture Association board of directors prohibited any films that portrayed drug addiction in a way that stimulated curiosity (Simmons, n47). As a result, Preminger's highly successful film adaptation of *The Man with the Golden Arm* caused the MPA to order a major reassessment of the Production Code in 1956 (Simmons 39).

Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris epitomize, becoming "virtually the only writer to combine the techniques of naturalism with lyrical prose," adding "a strong element of unconscious psychological self-destruction" to propagate "a profoundly moral and philosophical work, tinged with elements of a nonreligious but nevertheless Christian socialism" (434). Although Algren's novel was published in post-World War II America, *The Man with the Golden Arm* presents a theme relating to earlier schools of thought concerning addiction: the life of the drug addict, even if he or she seeks redemption, is ultimately doomed because he or she cannot abide by the rules set forth in conventional society. This idea indicates a relationship to a more Modernist school of thinking, in which even the title character's nickname—Frankie Machine—underscores his utility in the world.

Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* actually represents a fairly typical theme found in works of addiction published prior to William S. Burroughs's *Junky* (1953). Based on a search for personal redemption, Algren's Frankie Machine realizes that no matter how hard he tries to fit back into the system, no amount of atonement will ever cure him; his only way to achieve redemption is through suicide, thus ridding society of his presence. Even earlier works dealing with opiates focus on the horror of addiction and the need for redemption for addicts, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), and Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860). These texts serve as cautionary tales, detailing the horrors of addiction and serving to alert the public to the evils of opiates. There is a nightmare quality to these works, in spite of the dream-like

world they seem to present, and the insidious ineffable face of opiate addiction lurks in the background.

Two early post-World War II narratives of the heroin lifestyle, however, radically depart from this earlier tradition of addiction narratives and, with their unrepentant and hauntingly matter-of-fact style, forever alter how addiction will come to be viewed. William S. Burroughs's 1953 novel *Junky* and Alexander Trocchi's 1960 *Cain's Book* offer a non-romanticized semi-autobiographical account of heroin addiction. Instead of seeing addiction as the nightmare albatross in Coleridge's *Rime*, or through the suffering of the suicidal Frankie Machine, Burroughs and Trocchi write about heroin addiction from the point of view of junkies who are completely unapologetic about their choices in life. Burroughs and Trocchi pave the way for later junkie lit narratives in which not just the world of the addict is featured, but one where the reading audience is invited to examine this lifestyle, including the everyday world of the addict and treatment to get off the drug. Moreover, both authors tell their stories with horror, despair, sarcasm, and glee weaving through the narrative. Burroughs and Trocchi subvert the myth of the dirty junkie through their focus on the abject nature of the addict, inviting the public into this mysterious world in an effort to shift the perception of the heroin addict in society, and, more generally, to undercut the white-picket-fence version of America. In doing this, I find that Burroughs and Trocchi carve out a space for later literary narratives of addiction in contemporary America, including other novels focusing on different aspects of identity related to the junkie: Jim Carroll's

*The Basketball Diaries* (1978), Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* (1998), and Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* (1999).

When imagining a junkie, most of us picture a sort of zombie—a member of the walking dead. Junkies are thought to be dirty, living in squalid conditions because they choose to feed their addictions rather than working to become productive members of society. Junkies skulk and peer out at the world through half-hooded eyes, waiting to find another unwitting victim in order to turn them on to heroin, too, so they are not alone in their exile. The myth surrounding the heroin user suggests that all drug addicts are amoral, dirty, degenerate victims, usually of a minority group, who prey on the weak. The myth further suggests that the heroin addict will become a drain on society, existing in a space where they will only consume—become monstrous consumers, in fact.

Stereotypes exist for a reason, and while this is a clichéd way of thinking, the picture of the junkie does hold some truth. Junkies usually are thin, though this is not always the case. Junkies can sit and do nothing for hours; at the same time, "[b]eing a junkie is one of the most challenging occupations imaginable" because they "can't afford to be 'out of it.' . . . Whether a junkie has a regular job or scrapes and steals to get by, he doesn't have a lot of time. He is busy doing whatever he must to get money" (Moraes, *The Heroin User's Handbook* 28). Because the goal of the junkie is to score the drug, he or she must always be on the lookout for a dealer. Moraes also notes that when a habit becomes big, junkies are usually never well; most junkies do not do drugs to have a good time—they do them to get "straight." Furthermore, most dress for the habit; that is, they usually tend to layer clothing, as they are always cold, and some resort to always

wearing long sleeves or make-up to cover the track marks on their arms and hands (Moraes, *Handbook* 142). In some sense, the stereotypes and myths surrounding the junkie are correct, but, as Linda Yablonsky points out, "[a]nyone can be a junkie," including "[g]ood-looking guys, fat guys, wasted guys; teachers, artists, carpenters, fathers: junkies. Nobodies" (6, 9).<sup>5</sup>

In literary treatments and in gritty reality alike, Burroughs and Trocchi are the first authors to illuminate the identity of the junkie as an abject form: a creature with no direct subjectivity or objectivity, living in an imagined space between self and other. The lack of atonement and the "dirty junkie" myth Marlowe mentions invokes not only an unkempt appearance, but also inevitably an unclean self—tainted, impure, and immoral. As a result, the junkie's identity is both nebulous and abject. In order to fully articulate how these novels trace the different aspects of identity as it relates to the junkie, as well as how Burroughs and Trocchi describe the space of the addict in postwar America, I use terms from the work of Julia Kristeva, particularly *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva's work centers on abjection, and uses this concept to explore how we respond to and understand the other in society. This is particularly useful in relation to the position of both the addict and heroin to show how the junkie presented in Burroughs and Trocchi has paved the way for other novels of addiction to be taken seriously, and how these narratives highlight the melding of identity and desire in contemporary America.

In 1953, Ace Books published *Junky: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug*

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<sup>5</sup> "Heroin is an addictive drug and anyone who uses long enough with sufficient frequency will become addicted. No one is immune" (Moraes, *Handbook* 140).

*Addict* by William Lee,<sup>6</sup> a friend of rabble-rousing poet Allen Ginsberg and the transient Jack Kerouac. William Lee eventually used his real name when he published later works: William S. Burroughs (Harris xii). The semi-autobiographical novel proved to be a big seller for Ace Books, which decided to publish the text back-to-back, apparently for symmetry, with Maurice Helbrant's memoir *Narcotic Agent*. The novel sold over 100,000<sup>7</sup> copies in its first year (Harris xx). Burroughs's first person narrative, published as "pulp" fiction, offers gritty detail into the life and world of a heroin addict who makes absolutely no apologies for his deviant lifestyle. Instead, Burroughs's hard-boiled approach,<sup>8</sup> coupled with the first person style of the semi-autobiographical novel, clearly and coherently gives details into the author's foray into the underworld of the junkie. In *Junky*, Burroughs shows that the world of the heroin addict is a place where friendship is based on who has the drug and where cops are just as crooked as addicts, exposing that the world humming beneath the surface of America is corrupt and dirty. Burroughs offers the first true insight into the secret world of the junkie, and reveals why the heroin addict is abject.

Ace Books, along with editor Carl Solomon, agreed to put the book in stores as long as Burroughs wrote a special preface to the text. Like the slave narratives found in

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this chapter, I have decided to use Burroughs instead of Lee; *Junky* has gone through so many evolutions, and in the end, the book was published under Burroughs's real name. Though Burroughs often used "William Lee" as a character in his other novels, *Junky* is quite different in both prose and style. Because of this, I have decided to simply use his real last name instead of William Lee. They are, of course, the same person.

<sup>7</sup> The first Ace edition of *Junky* sold 113, 170 copies between April and December of 1953: 96, 382 copies in the U.S. and 16, 578 copies in Canada, earning \$1129.60 (Harris xxviii). Oddly enough, it wasn't Helbrant's text that drew readers in; furthermore, who now knows anything about *Narcotic Agent*? Clearly, texts detailing the lives of the underworld fascinated readers, and continue to do so.

<sup>8</sup> *Junky* reads like a detective novel from the *noir* era of the 1940s and 50s.

nineteenth century America, the preface worked as a way to inform the audience that what they were about to read was "authentic," in spite of the fact that, as Ginsberg notes in the 1952 introduction "*Junkie: An Appreciation*,"<sup>9</sup> Burroughs is "no ordinary junkie"; in fact, he "is also a man with a background that might astonish many of his readers" (Ginsberg 146). Solomon added his own "Publisher's Note" during *Junkie's* first run to inform the reading public that the novel could work as a way to enlighten society about the drug menace more than anything that had previously been published. He was quick to point out, though, that in order to be "protected," occasional parenthetical notes were inserted throughout to show where Burroughs, using personal knowledge, departed from the views of medical authorities (Solomon 151). Twenty-five years later, Ginsberg's new introduction explains that, at the time of the first publication, Burroughs had to contribute the preface in order to "give[] some hint how some supposedly normal citizen could arrive at being a dope fiend, to soften the blow for readers, censors, reviewers, police, critical eyes in walls & publishers' rows, god knows who." Addressing the original publisher's note, Ginsberg suggests, "Carl [Solomon] wrote a worried introduction pretending to be the voice of sanity introducing the book on the part of the publisher. . . . [C]rucial medio-political statements of fact or opinion by Wm. Lee were on the spot (in parentheses) disclaimed (by Ed.)" ("1977", punctuation original 157). The topic of heroin addiction was so hot that several disclaimers had to be noted throughout *Junkie's* publication run; the content of the book, unremorseful in its tone,

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<sup>9</sup> Burroughs's first novel goes through a few title changes, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

created fear on the part of the publisher's. I suggest that this came about in part because of the fear that books could influence the public to want to engage in the act of taking drugs, even though Burroughs's text in no way romanticizes the life of an addict. Burroughs had to provide rationale for his desire to turn into a "dope fiend" so that the public would take the text seriously, and perhaps this is the reason for the furor behind the publisher's notes and various introductions.

Similarly tackling the space of the heroin addict in the post-World War II era, Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* is the semi-autobiographical story of his life in the United States. Trocchi emigrated from Scotland and took up residence in New York, and *Cain's Book* chronicles his time as a drug addict in the city. The story is told from the point of view of Joe Necchi,<sup>10</sup> who is "isolated from the world; the outsider by choice but now, through drugs, by necessity" (Seaver xv-xvi). As Richard Seaver suggests in the introduction to *Cain's Book*, in Trocchi's world, drugs set the user apart from society and place him on a high moral ground "where all is permitted and all excused."<sup>11</sup> Seaver notes, "Whether one agrees with the premise—and I speak not only of drugs-as-truth but of any moral or immoral equivalent—the fact remains that *Cain's Book* documents a life, and a view, with rare power and insight" (xviii). Today, Trocchi is relatively unknown in most literary circles, though his novel is on par with Burroughs's *Junky* as one that captures and sheds light on the world of postwar America

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<sup>10</sup> While "William Lee" and William S. Burroughs are interchangeable, "Joe Necchi" and Alexander Trocchi are not. The narrator in *Cain's Book* is referred to as "Joe Necchi" on a regular basis; in *Junky*, Burroughs is never called by any name except "Bill."

<sup>11</sup> Seaver's introduction was written in 1992. It would seem that Seaver borrows the phrase "where all is permitted and all excused" from Burroughs's 1981 novel *Cities of the Red Night*: "NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" (Burroughs xviii).



as a place where the junkie carves out an identity and becomes abject. Trocchi entered America during a time when the climate was hostile towards drug users,<sup>12</sup> and though he was outside the law in his mind, the laws did exist. When Trocchi finally fled the country in 1961, "it was with the threat of a death penalty hanging over his head" (Seaver xviii-xix). *Cain's Book* provides an insight into America as seen through the eyes of a Scottish immigrant, and like Burroughs, Trocchi offers no apology for the nihilistic feelings expressed through his work.

In documenting their addiction, Burroughs and Trocchi ultimately define an abject identity. Julia Kristeva posts in *Powers of Horror* that the abject refers to our reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning. The loss of distinction between self and other causes this breakdown, thus reminding us in a traumatic way of our own mortality (Felluga). The figure of the junkie fits this model because of his or her ability to transcend the boundaries placed by normative society: the junkie functions in hegemonic society while at the same time inhabiting the darker, seedier underworld associated with the drug scene. Kristeva suggests, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*PH*

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<sup>12</sup> The climate is, of course, still hostile towards drug users in the twenty-first century. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2007, 21.5 percent of people arrested for drug possession were holding heroin or cocaine and their derivatives. The estimated number of arrests for drug abuse violations has been steadily increasing; in 1987, the percentage of arrests related to drugs came out to around 7.4, the number had risen in 2007 to 13% (U.S. Department of Justice). According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), trafficking in 100-999 grams mixture of heroin carries a jail sentence of at least five years, as well as a fine of about two million dollars for a first offense. A second offense results in at a jail sentence of at least 10 years, and a fine of four million dollars (DEA). The penalties for using, possessing, and selling heroin differ a little, but clearly, the cost is high.

4). In the discussion pertaining to the prefaces and introductions required by Ace publishers in order to market *Junky*, I note that Ginsberg and Solomon felt it necessary to prove what kind of "character" William S. Burroughs possessed. Burroughs had to tell his reading audience that he came from a wealthy family; however, he still ended up becoming a junkie, criminal, murderer, and finally, an exile. In this way, Burroughs's *Junky* becomes a text of abjection: his social class indicates that the underworld is not a place he belongs; therefore, by becoming a junkie, Burroughs refuses to respect the borders and rules that Kristeva notes refer to abjection.

Examining the junkie in contemporary American literature offers us the chance to discover why we view the drug addict as someone who is dirty, immoral, and, for some, worthless. We are able to confront this bias within ourselves while at the same time recognize the fact that we all have the ability to become abject. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva's project revolves around the idea of confronting alterity; in order to understand why and how we confront strangers in the ways in which we do, the stranger within ourselves must first be understood (Oliver 15). While I use some of Kristeva's language from *Strangers to Ourselves* in this chapter, this particular theoretical concept becomes most useful when examining the later texts of heroin addiction in contemporary American society that make up the category of "junkie lit." In this chapter, I use Kristeva's foreigner as a creature who loses "human" citizenship. Drug addiction, often described in terms of disease, is thought to be a symptom of an unstable society, and the junkie-as-foreigner acts as the physical embodiment of fear and horror within hegemonic culture; in other words, the junkie is the abject infecting society. Burroughs and Trocchi

introduce a reading audience to the real world of the addict, and by using the semi-autobiographical tone, as well as the first person narrator, the authors show how the junkie turns into the abject stranger that is articulated through Kristeva's work.<sup>13</sup>

In order to fully understand how Burroughs and Trocchi destabilize the myth associated with the "dirty junkie," and their attempt to change the perception of the heroin addict as immoral, the climate of America in respect to drug addiction must first be scrutinized. Opium, the substance from which morphine, and thus heroin, is made, was first seen as a painkiller with awesome effects; as a result, it was easily accessible in various forms as an over-the-counter medication. When heroin first appeared in the United States in 1898, it could be bought in a pharmacy, or even ordered through the mail. By 1910, heroin developed a growing underworld, becoming the staple of young urban men looking for a good time. The Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914 was enacted in order to "provide for the registration of" and "impose a special tax" upon those

who produce, import, manufacture, compound, deal in, dispense, sell, distribute, or give away opium or coca leaves, their salts derivatives, or preparations, and for other purposes. . . . *Provided*, That such remedies and preparations are sold, distributed, given away, dispensed, or possessed as medicines and not for the purpose of evading the intentions and provisions of this Act. (rpt. in Musto, *Drugs in America* 253-255)

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<sup>13</sup> Kristeva's concept of the foreigner will be discussed more fully in Chapter III. The identity of the addict, as well as the xenophobia triggered by the rising number of drug addicts in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will also be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

This landmark law decreed that certain drugs were susceptible to taxation, and anyone breaking these laws would be subject to a fine and/or imprisonment (Musto, *DA* 255). In this way, the United States government and lawmakers attempted to crack down on the increasing drug problem, predominantly the one associated with opium, and in particular, heroin. At the same time, heroin was still available through dishonest, albeit well-meaning, doctors. Burroughs notes that two different types of "croakers" exist: those willing to write a prescription to help addicts, and those who will only give morphine to people they are convinced are not addicts (*J* 17). Eventually, the Harrison Narcotic Act covered the doctors who specifically wrote prescriptions for addicts. The sensationalism surrounding doctors who did so helped to build up the taboo surrounding the junkie, creating even more fear and fascination with a figure that, as the century continued, became increasingly abject. After all, if the junkie could fool a doctor into writing a prescription for him or her, then the heroin addict was a person who looked and acted like everyone else. There were no specific markers indicating that a person was using drugs for pleasure; furthermore, people have been abusing prescription drugs for years.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This attitude is still prevalent today. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), "In 2008, 15.4 percent of 12th-graders reported using a prescription drug non-medically within the past year. This category includes amphetamines, sedatives/barbiturates, tranquilizers, and opiates other than heroin. Vicodin continues to be abused at unacceptably high levels. Many of the drugs used by 12th-graders are prescription drugs or, in the case of cough medicine, are available over the counter." According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), "From 2002 to 2007, the use of prescription pain relievers among young adults (18-25) increased from 4.1 to 4.6 percent. Among adults aged 26 and older, 2.2 percent use prescription-type drugs non-medically. Older adults (50-59) show an irregular increasing trend between 2002 and 2007. For those aged 50 to 54, the rate increased from 3.4 in 2002 to 6.0 percent in 2006, then ended at 5.7 percent in 2007, not significantly different from the rate in 2006. Among those aged 55 to 59, current illicit drug use also showed an irregular trend with an overall increase from 1.9 percent in 2002 to 4.1 percent in 2007. These patterns and trends may partially reflect the aging into these age groups of the baby boom cohort, whose lifetime rates of illicit drug use are higher than those

The Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914 curbed some of the problem, but exacerbated the issues of drugs, too. During the years following World War I, the number of heroin addicts in the United States grew at an alarming rate. Addicts returned from the war in Europe, and the public's fear that they would become drug peddlers and pushers intensified. Heroin became a new menace, and the average age of the heroin addict who showed up in court was 22 (Musto, *AD* 115). The Volstead Act of 1919, which led to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, was supposed to curtail the sale and usage of alcohol, as well as anything altering the personality of an individual; instead, the use of morphine and heroin increased exponentially during Prohibition, and by the 1920s, heroin had become a mainstay of the black market (Courtwright 3). In New England, for example, Dr. Hamilton Wright<sup>15</sup> noticed the close relationship between the use of opiates and Prohibition: "in teetotaling states morphine sales over the previous ten years had increased 150 percent" (Musto, *AD* 33); this increase in opiate abusers caused much public outrage and censure. Lay reformers took a stand against any drug based on two very specific criteria: corporate disregard of public welfare and individual immorality (Musto, *AD* 10).

As a result, the government instituted a ban on the manufacture of heroin in 1924, and the last remaining supplies of the drug in the medical world disappeared in the late 1950s with the introduction of the Narcotic Control Act of 1956.<sup>16</sup> Heroin became

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of older cohorts (NSDUH). Clearly, abuse of "doctor prescribed" medications is still rampant across all age groups.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Hamilton Wright was appointed to the U.S. Opium Commission and helped bring about the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914.

<sup>16</sup> The Narcotic Control Act of 1956 was put in place to curb the rising heroin use in the 1950s. The Act lengthened minimum sentences and allowed imposition of the death penalty for anyone over eighteen who

America's first Schedule I drug,<sup>17</sup> and the use of the narcotic was totally prohibited, except for research purposes (Courtwright 3). A careful classification of the addict in general began to take place during this time: those who had legitimate prescriptions for "medicine" were not considered addicts, even though they took opium derivatives for a myriad of both real and imagined illnesses, while other groups of people, generally young urban men, chose to engage in illegal activities to obtain the drug. This classification immediately caused a hotly contested debate over whether addiction ought to be considered a moral vice or a disease. In *Creating the American Junkie: Addiction Research in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control*, Caroline Jean Acker suggests that those considering the taking of drugs a vice argued that, when a person chronically administers opiates to feel pleasure, a moral lapse occurs (39); thus, drug addiction should not be considered a disease because it occurs as a result of seeking pleasure.

One of the reasons that people consider addiction a lapse in morals comes from the idea that anything done in excess for pleasure constitutes a weak character. The United States was founded on a Puritan principle, where pleasure came from hard work and perseverance. However, taking a substance in order to gain pleasure and feel "good" indicates that we are weak. In *On Drugs*, David Lenson suggests that pleasure is something that is self-contained in the present, and as such, does not motivate the user to

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provided heroin to children. A separate section of the act required all pharmacists and doctors still in possession of the drug to turn their supplies of heroin over to the government, effectively making heroin contraband (Musto, *DA* 276).

<sup>17</sup> According to "The Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970," Schedule I drugs have a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety for the use of the drug under medical supervision exists (rpt in Musto, *Drugs in America* 317).

work or spend—that is, the addict does not participate in consumerist society (72). In *An All-Consuming Century*, Gary Cross notes that America is a place where consumption reigns free. In the early part of the twentieth century, when religion played a more central role in defining American culture, the Catholic and Puritan traditions believed that too many options presented to consumers would lead to negative consequences. This freedom to choose ignored the "power of concupiscence"; that is, the tendency of human beings to give in to self-destruction and obsessive desire. This obsessive desire for pleasure would lead to pain if not actively monitored and resisted because life was supposed to be based on deferred gratification. Citizens were supposed to strive for a "godly society" that would foreshadow the "Kingdom of God" through "protecting the sanctity of home and community from those who would tempt sinners" (G. Cross 133). Of course, these religious traditions tended to see

temptations everywhere in a society where unfettered markets produced an inevitable excess. Few individual capitalists ever intended this result, but free competition produced ubiquitous outlets for desire and a tendency for the enterpriser to cross the line between the hard sell and manipulation of the weak or uninformed. Moralists stood ready to define and defend that boundary. (G. Cross 113)

For Necchi, heroin affords him the opportunity to avoid this boundary; choosing to do heroin allows him to stay away from the "question in the 'here-and-now,'" adding that, on heroin; he is "inviolable." Necchi further adds, "That is one of the virtues of the drug, that it empties such questions of all anguish, transports them to another region, a painless

theoretical region, a play region, surprising, fertile, and unmoral. One is no longer grotesquely involved in the becoming. One simply is" (Trocchi 11). Existing for the mere pleasure of being, and not questioning his place in society, Necchi understands that others find this inviolability disturbing because the promotion of pleasure is thought to be "unmoral." Pleasure for the sake of pleasure goes against everything we in America are taught, and as such, heroin, a drug that provides relief from the every day, is seen as abject—immoral, scheming, and shady. A life of hedonism is abject because it causes consumerism to dissemble (Kristeva, *PH* 4).

Seen as an immoral character, the junkie is a monstrous consumer who possesses an appetite that, as Kristeva suggests, cannot be sated (*PH* 123). Because of this monstrous appetite, the junkie becomes, according to the popular societal mythology, a creature that lives only to consume. Burroughs addresses this particular myth in a discussion of the 1949 film *Johnny Stool Pigeon*.<sup>18</sup> In the film, junkies are presented as people who "'tear the clothes off their skinny bodies and die screaming' for more junk," and idea Burroughs finds "preposterous," particularly since "[a]ddicts get enough and they do not have to raise the dosage. I know addicts who have used the same dose for years. Of course, addicts do occasionally die if they are cut off from the junk cold. They don't die because they need more and more. They die because they can't get any" ("Original Introduction" 141). While society may view the addict as a monstrous

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<sup>18</sup> *Johnny Stool Pigeon* "is proof that the hard-pressed film makers are running out of Federal law enforcement agencies to extol." In order to smash a dope ring, the hero of the movie, a federal agent, "makes a deal with an Alcatraz convict whose wife was a narcotics casualty, under which he is able to join the elusive mobsters." The chase leads the agent and the convict all over the west coast, and eventually the good guys win (A.W.).



consumer, Burroughs points out that it is not the desire for more that creates a problem; at any rate, he never writes about tearing his clothes off and screaming for heroin.<sup>19</sup>

The difference between need and desire should be discussed before continuing. The act of desire can be tied to want. Lenson promotes the idea that desire forever constructs a future out of the present, finding satisfaction annihilated; however, desire also "seeks its own destruction by picturing a satisfied future in which it will no longer exist" (70). Drugs can create desire; however, past a certain point, the junkie no longer just *desires* the drug—he or she *needs* heroin in order to feel normal. When an addict gets to the point where they need junk, his body requires it in order to function.<sup>20</sup>

According to Necchi, it is this distinction that the lawmakers and society do not understand: the ignorant members of society believe heroin to be something "so fucking easy they can stamp it out like syphokles,<sup>21</sup> whatever it is jewry, [or] heroin-addiction" because "getting high [is] as un-American as rabies." As a result, society labels the junkie as a "bestial, scarcely human, quivering, blubbering vomiting mass" (Trocchi 18-19). Clearly, the distinction between desire and need is quite important here, and the assertion that the heroin addict possesses an appetite that cannot be sated creates the picture of a creature that lives only to consume. To Necchi, then, the lack of understanding on the part of the government and media who propagate this myth create a

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, why would he, if it makes him look like a lunatic? It could be argued that the junkies found in subsequent works by Burroughs, most notably *Naked Lunch*, are a pretty desperate lot. I speculate it goes with the perks of being the author—one never has to admit to being made insane through need.

<sup>20</sup> I will address the biological need heroin addiction creates in the body later in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Syphilis.

larger problem than the junkies who are suffering because they cannot have what they need in order to function.<sup>22</sup>

According to Peter C. Whybrow in *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*, the experience of living, working, and learning in proximity with others creates the accepted cultural standards and moral virtues of conduct. Through the relationship with others, society moves from moral conformity to moral autonomy (226). At the same time, anyone can be considered outside this moral framework, becoming, in Kristeva's terms, a foreigner. The junkie-as-foreigner does not belong to the social group who makes the laws and rules, as this particular assemblage is the one structured around a given type of political power (Kristeva, *SO* 96). In *Cain's Book*, narrator Joe Necchi remarks that the junkie is a "bogyman who can be hanged in effigy and electrocuted in the flesh to calm the hysteria of the citizens" (236); likewise, Burroughs notes, "Official propaganda opposes any factual statement about junk so that almost nothing accurate has been written on the subject. When newspapers, magazines and movies deal with junk they seldom deviate from the officially sponsored myth" ("Original Introduction" 140). For society at large, the junkie becomes the face of their hidden fear. The junkie bodily represents the breakdown in law because he has been demonized through both his appearance and his large appetite for something bad. The junkie becomes the monstrous consumer, one who devours but never produces.

The junkie chooses to allow the boundaries to become blurred, and in doing so,

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<sup>22</sup> This is a common theme in junkie lit—the tendency for the blame for addiction to be placed on the government rather than the individual.

acts as the "bogyman" for society. Interestingly, David Lenson notes that the Greeks used the word *pharmakon* to designate both toxic and healing drugs, while the word *pharmakos* means "scapegoat," or one who must be purged in order to make the social body healthy (Lenson 12). Junkies exist in the space of the *pharmakon*; that is, they use heroin in order to heal themselves, but in doing so, society sees the use of the drug as something taken for the sake of pleasure.<sup>23</sup> Drug addicts choose to use heroin, and in doing so, allow themselves to separate from the Puritanical moral standards set forth by society. Prohibition, discussed earlier, was an attempt to eliminate alcohol from the social body, but instead of eradicating the problem of the drunkard, this merely acted as a way to exacerbate the drug problem. People began using other substances in order to feel pleasure and enter the world of the *pharmakon*. Of course, the junkies opt to actively engage in this activity, and while at first the drug use is a choice, once a person becomes addicted, heroin no longer serves as something pleasurable, and instead becomes something necessary.

Necchi believes that junkies become the scapegoats, those who must be purged to create a healthy social body, so that "John Citizen" can sit back and feel exonerated through watching evildoers get their just desserts. Necchi sneers, "Everyone gets something out of it except the junkie" (Trocchi 77). Under Kristeva's notion of abjection, the junkie does not respect the borders, rules, and positions set forth by conventional society, opting instead to engage in an immoral and sinister lifestyle. In doing so, the junkie barter the good health of the body in order to transcend these

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<sup>23</sup> I will be discussing how heroin affects the body later in this chapter.

boundaries. For the junkie, only one thing matters, to the point where the drug itself takes over the body. Ruled exclusively by his or her addiction, the junkie disregards societal notions of "right" and "wrong" and lives by a new set of boundaries specifically related to the heroin subculture. The junkie becomes perverse, neither giving up nor assuming a prohibition, rule, or law, and the narrators of these texts show that the addicts must mislead and corrupt these laws (Kristeva, *PH* 15). Turning aside and corrupting the tenets of normative society allows the heroin addict to find a way out of the repetitious and hypocritical existence of the social body. However, in doing so, the junkie acts as the scapegoat. When something goes awry in America, Trocchi and Burroughs seem to suggest that the junkies are the ones who must shoulder the blame.

In *Cain's Book*, Joe Necchi believes that the lack of moral fiber resides not in the heroin addict but in the system that opposes addiction and imposes restriction on the junkie. While society believes that embracing illegal drugs means that the user is actively oppositional and in defiance of authority (Jonnes "Hip to Be High" 227), Necchi finds those who force their "unexamined moral prohibitions" and makes laws against addiction as the ones who are "impertinent, insolent, and presumptuous" (Trocchi 40). Junkies become the face of hidden identity Kristeva alludes to when writing of the foreigner, particular since addiction, as noted earlier, is not something that can visibly be seen when encountering another person. As a result, junkies are often desperate, attacked by "[l]aws, police forces, armies, mobs of indignant citizenry crying mad dog. [Junkies] are perhaps the weakest minority which ever existed, forced into poverty, filth,

squalor, without even the protection of a legitimate ghetto" (Trocchi 73).<sup>24</sup> Choosing to use heroin forces the junkie into an abject state; however, while the junkie at first opts to use heroin, he or she eventually gets trapped into the addiction. Through this choice, the junkie forms his own community in the underworld, inhabiting a space outside legitimate society. This community functions largely like the one Necchi rails against; there are laws and rules associated with the underworld, too, though the penalties for disobeying do not end in a jail sentence. Instead, if an addict breaks the law of the junkie community, he is the one to suffer, as he will not be able to obtain the drugs he needs in order to be comfortable.

While the relationship between heroin and the underworld does hold credence—both Burroughs and Trocchi highlight groups of people, including themselves, who have no qualms about stealing, for example—*Junky* and *Cain's Book* view doing dope as a way to live outside of society while still being a part of it. For Burroughs and Trocchi, the underworld of the junkie exists outside of the "morals" conventional society puts forth, and in doing so, provides a better place to live. Abjection, while not made explicit by Burroughs and Trocchi, allows the junkie to be part of a society where the user punishes the self when he does something against another junkie. Necchi states that the government's "hysterical gymnastics" attempt to confront heroin creates more confusion;

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<sup>24</sup> According to NIDA's *Drug Abuse Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities*, indicates that, in 1999, nine percent of whites, eight percent of blacks, nine percent of Hispanic, four percent of American Indians/Alaskan natives, and one percent of the Asian/Pacific Islander population tested positive for opiate use when given a urinalysis as part of the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Program (137). In 2000, 12.1 percent of whites, 23.3 percent of blacks, and 22 percent of Hispanics went to emergency rooms to be treated for heroin/morphine-related issues (113-114). Clearly, opiate addiction spans across culture, and junkie lit offers the public a way to view this lifestyle.

the propaganda put out by the media exacerbates the effects of the drug, as well as the consequences of becoming involved in this lifestyle. The hysteria caused by this propaganda only serves to promote the identity of the junkie as abject, furthering his or her stance as an "other" in American society. Necchi believes that heroin is a highly valuable drug, though he never offers reasons for this, and feels that the governmental experts are "encouraging ignorance, legislating to keep crime in existence, and preparing the way for one of the most heinous usurpations of power of all time" (Trocchi 41-42). Necchi implies that it is not necessarily the drug users who create the problems; rather, the government imposes laws on its citizens that keep addicts from getting the drug through legitimate means. For Necchi, the fault lies not within the drug user, but in the system that prides itself on prohibition in order to eliminate unsavory characters.

In *The Heroin User's Handbook*, Frances Moraes indicates that heroin is associated with crime because junkies do a lot of stealing, though this is not an effect of the drug. Junkies see heroin as medication. As I will explain later in this chapter, heroin mimics certain chemicals in the body; in order to maintain homeostasis and to keep from experiencing painful withdrawal symptoms, an addict needs the drug. Moraes adds, "people under the influence of heroin are *less* likely to become violent than people under the influence of no drug. The effect of heroin on the user's personality is one of calming and sedation" (*Handbook*, emphasis original 10). Burroughs muses that "a lot of junkies steal to keep up their habit" (*J* 142), and admits to resorting to criminal activity to get money for the drug. For junkies, crime is a direct result of the harsh legislation against addicts; if heroin was legal, then the crime rates caused by junkies would decrease

because they would not need to engage in illicit activities to fund their habits. However, because society sees the use of heroin as something "evil" that must be eradicated because it is used to gain pleasure, the drug is illegal, and thus the addicts must resort to theft to get their "medicine." In these early junkie lit novels, Burroughs and Trocchi represent the shift that takes place between blaming the addicts for their moral turpitude to placing the fault squarely on the shoulders of the governments who institute the laws. In short, it is ignorance and misunderstanding that leads to the scapegoating of the addict, which in turn directs the junkie into a life of crime.

Part of the reason that this shift between the ways in which narratives of addiction were written, as well as received, exists came from the different approach medicine took to the world of drug and alcohol addiction. Burroughs and Trocchi are instrumental in anticipating and affecting the shift of thought that addiction is a disease, as opposed to a moral vice, and I believe that it is significant to discuss the reasoning that resulted in this change. Earlier novels dealing with addiction place the blame on the addict as one who must find some form of redemption by the end of the story. This usually occurs through both getting and staying sober, or, if this fails, ridding society of the addict's person completely through an act of suicide. An early example of this tradition in American literature would be the works of Edgar Allan Poe, who often wrote about the evils of laudanum<sup>25</sup> and alcohol, as seen in "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat," among others. The narrators of both these stories are unreliable at best, and the

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<sup>25</sup> Tincture of opium—otherwise known as laudanum or paregoric—consists of opium that has been made into an alcohol-water extract (Kuhn et al 188).

hallucinations brought about through intoxication cause them to have mental breakdowns. At the turn of the century, Jack London and others also write about the evils of intoxication. This tradition is not set only in America; European authors including Wilkie Collins, Gustave Flaubert, and Robert Louis Stevenson also deal with various addictions in their writing.<sup>26</sup> Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book* depart from this theme of redemption, offering instead, I argue, a blatant disregard for the guilt and blame the junkie is "supposed" to feel. Burroughs and Trocchi start the trend for subsequent narratives of drug addiction to fall into the realm of confession and contemplation; moreover, Burroughs and Trocchi articulate that the government needs to examine the question of addiction as a disease and not as a result of moral turpitude. In order to understand the importance of this shift, I provide a brief social history explaining how and where Burroughs's and Trocchi's premonitions about this evolution enter into the timeline of "treating"—as opposed to demonizing—addiction.

Early in *Cain's Book*, Necchi bemoans the fact that society refuses to see junkies as ill individuals, hoping that "one day they will be regarded not as criminals but as 'sick'" (Trocchi 73). Burroughs and Trocchi want the American public to see heroin addiction as a type of disease, a "virus" that infects the junkie and causes uncontrollable behavior in order to satisfy total need. *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs's second novel, mirrors many of the scenes found in *Junky*, and this is where he sets up his equation concerning addiction. As noted in the introduction, Burroughs sets up his "Algebra of Need" in

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<sup>26</sup> Collins's *The Moonstone*, *No Name*, *The Woman in White*, and *Armadale* give opium a prominent role; Flaubert's title character in *Madame Bovary* uses opiates; and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a story about cocaine (Plant 25, 46, 67).



order to inform readers that "[j]unk yields a basic form of 'evil' virus" because "[t]he face of 'evil' is always the face of total need. . . . Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: *'Wouldn't you?'* Yes you would. You would . . . do *anything* to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness . . . and not in a position to act in any other way" (Burroughs, *NL* emphasis original 201). Burroughs's insistence that addiction works in the same way as a virus does hold some credibility.<sup>27</sup>

Heroin ingestion affects the body on a cellular level, though not quite the way Burroughs imagined it. When "the body adapts to the repeated ingestion of the drug with changes that work to restore normal functioning" (West 125), addiction occurs. Heroin mimics the action of natural chemicals, endorphins, which the brain produces in response to pain. They act on specific opiate receptor sites in the brain and spinal cord, dampening the flow of impulses in the nerve tracts that carry information to the brain (Ashton 111). The concentration of the neurotransmitter dopamine is increased, causing addiction (West 95-97). Because the human body is full of opiate receptors, when heroin enters the body, the receptors located in the brain are responsible for the pain-relieving and pleasurable effects heroin offers. When taking over the body's initial response to pain by dulling sensation, heroin affects the hypothalamus, the area of the

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<sup>27</sup> Viruses attack the immune system of the creature they infect, and are considered parasitic (meaning they live off a host) in nature. When attached to a host cell, viruses completely mutate the cellular structure, all the while replicating at an alarming rate, since the "sole purpose of a virus is to ensure reproduction in kind" (Olson 2). If one has not been exposed to the virus via vaccination and immunization (currently, there are vaccines for polio, the flu, measles, mumps, rubella, and a whole host of other viral infections, thanks to people like Edward Jenner and Louis Pasteur, to name a few [Nourse 12, 14]), the chances of contracting serious infections becomes quite high, and widespread epidemics (the Black Plague, for instance), can occur. Viruses compromise the immune system and can, eventually, kill the host.

brain responsible for controlling the body's hormonal balance, thus influencing the levels of testosterone in the blood (Ashton 111-112). While heroin does not mutate the cells the same way a virus does, the chemicals do attach to the cells and alter the body's homeostasis, resulting in an increase in tolerance to the drug so that the body needs more to maintain equilibrium. Metaphorically speaking, the body changes because of heroin ingestion, but the actual mutation of the cells does not occur in the same way as a virus. Furthermore, heroin does not attach itself to cells; it mimics the action of chemicals naturally found in the body. Addiction does become the "face of total need," and while metaphorically it acts like a virus, the body can rid its system of heroin addiction, but not a viral contagion. Addiction may permanently alter the identity of a junkie, but this is not a biological change that impacts the whole body.

Burroughs was also certain that the withdrawal symptoms of heroin addiction were actually the same as having an allergic reaction: coughing, sneezing, runny eyes and nose, diarrhea, vomiting, and hives. Withdrawal also brought out "shock" symptoms that occur when a severe allergic reaction takes place: lowered blood pressure, loss of body fluid, shrinking of an organism, weakness, involuntary orgasms, and death through the collapse of the circulatory system. "If an addict dies from junk sickness," Burroughs concludes, "he dies of allergic shock" ("Chapter Twenty-Eight of the Original 'Junk' Manuscript" 136). As with his assertion that addiction is a virus, Burroughs is, in some ways, correct; symptoms of an allergic reaction include watery, itchy eyes, a runny nose, sneezing, and rashes. Anaphylactic (shock) reactions, however, include constricted airways, dilated blood vessels, increased heart beat, low blood pressure, tingling, itchy

and flushed skin, throbbing in the ears, sneezing, hives, swelling, and, in severe cases, loss of consciousness and death (Beers et al 1063, 1072). Death from heroin withdrawal is fairly unlikely; Moraes points out, "Junkies have been detoxing [cold turkey] in this way for hundreds, if not thousands of years. They survived . . ." He also notes that the symptoms of detox include everything from depression to abdominal cramps to the allergic reactions Burroughs mentions, and that "they are part of the detox, they are cyclical, and . . . the cycle will end" (Moraes, *Handbook* 157, 159).<sup>28</sup>

Burroughs's insistence on seeing heroin addiction as a disease holds merit, though not entirely the way he perceives it. Instead, the addiction as a disease model came much later, and, as an alternative of relying solely on physical symptoms to indicate illness, the psychological implications of drug abuse were first taken into consideration. In 1998, in the book *Drugs, the Brain, and Behavior: The Pharmacology of Abuse and Dependence*, Drs. John Brick and Carlton K. Erickson write, "New findings in addiction science are telling us that drug dependence (addiction) is a disease over which the individual has no control" (165). Concomitantly, in 2005, Dr. M. David Lewis<sup>29</sup> notes that addiction is "a chronic and dangerous disease," one that "strikes in many forms, feeding our obsessions—everything from drugs, to gambling, to sex, to money" (xvii). This is a fairly new idea, and it is important to see how heroin use

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<sup>28</sup> Moraes also adds, "[E]verything will suck. You will be very unhappy because your body is not used to producing endorphins (you've been feeding your body endorphins in the form of heroin). You will think the world is a very gray, awful place. Give it time; you won't always feel that way" (*n*, 158).

<sup>29</sup> Dr. M. David Lewis is the founder and director for several highly successful drug treatment programs, as well as a member of the White House Conference on a Drug-Free America. He is also the co-founder and a current board member for The Make a Difference Foundation, which represents the joint efforts of musicians, athletes, and entertainers to educate adolescents on the hazards of drugs ("M. David Lewis").

evolved from being a moral vice to a disease recognized by the medical world in order to show how the junkie identity has been informed and created through the use of heroin.<sup>30</sup>

Near the end of the nineteenth century, scientists began to perform tests on animals in order to determine the effects of acute and chronic morphine administration; however, it was not until 1918, when the Treasury Department surveyed health officials, that the question of morphine addiction as a habit or a disease was discussed. While 452 health officials stated that doctors in their communities considered addiction a disease, 542 agreed that the chronic use of morphine was a vice. Most felt that addiction to morphine fell somewhere in between; after all, morphine creates a pleasurable sensation for the addict, turning its chronic use into a habit, which in turn creates functional changes in physiology resulting from repeated administration (Acker 38-39). At one point in *Junky*, after Burroughs gets arrested, he is taken to the hospital because he is suffering from withdrawal. After examining the needle marks on his arms, a doctor, discussing Burroughs with his colleague, indicates that no morphine should be given: "[T]here is the moral question. This man should have thought of all this before he started using narcotics." The other doctor replies, "Yes, there is the moral question, but there is also a physical question. This man is sick" (J 79). Acker suggests, "The

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<sup>30</sup> Early critical examination of addiction occurred with the problem of alcoholism in the nineteenth century. On November 29, 1870, a group of fourteen people—including physicians, trustees, and lay people affiliated with six inebriate asylums—met together in New York City to form the American Association for the Cure of Inebriates (AASCI). The AASCI declared "intemperance" as a disease, and as such was able to be cured in the same way as any other illness (White 25). Many groups at the time disagreed with this "diagnosis," regarding alcoholism in particular as a habit rife with sin and crime. The argument, which included members of the AASCI, felt that alcoholics were not to be considered "cured," but "reformed" (White 26).

proposed models rested not only on scientific observations of their proponents but also on the observer's fundamental attitude toward addicts as human beings," and "explanations based on degeneracy theory or other versions of psychopathology took a generally harsh and punitive view toward addicts; in addicts, they held out little hope of cure" (39). Addicts were often treated poorly upon arrest, forced to withdraw in jail cells, suffering miserably while doing so, because of this attitude. Most felt that, if the addict was made to suffer, then he or she would be loathe to return to the drug. As it turns out, this was not the case, and the government set about finding other ways to deal with the problem of narcotics addiction in America.

One of the ways in which the government went about trying to "reform" addicts was through the building of "narcotic farms." In 1929, Congress passed the Porter Act, a bill that allocated funds for the U.S. Public Health Service to build places that would house and rehabilitate anyone considered an addict, and those who had been convicted of violating federal drug laws (White 123). William L. White, in *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, explains that, in Kentucky in 1935, the Lexington Narcotics Farm—rechristened in 1936 as the U.S. Public Health Service Narcotics Hospital—was opened, followed by a second "farm" located in Fort Worth, Texas in 1938. Both "farms" were available to people who were addicted to the drugs covered under federal law. These addicts were admitted through either voluntary application or legal commitment through the federal courts (White 123). The demographic profile of the typical addict admitted to Lexington was "a 38-year-old white male prisoner plagued with chronic health problems, who became addicted to

morphine at age 27 and later entered the prison system with a two-year sentence for illegal sale of narcotics" (White 124); however, men and women of various races, ages, and backgrounds ended up at the narcotics farms.

These farms caused much speculation and titillation throughout America, and Burroughs gives an insider's account of the situation at Lexington. The narcotics farm experiment proved to be the most interesting, and disastrous, result of these attempts to treat addiction. The farms represent a form of purging for society as a whole.

Burroughs voluntarily checks himself in—not because he wants to get sober, but because he runs out of junk. In fact, he does not plan on staying around long enough to actually work on the farm (Burroughs, *J* 56).<sup>31</sup> While there, Burroughs meets an amalgamation of people, all junkies, showing that, while the typical addict at the Lexington facility may have been a white male approaching his 30s, all types of people have the ability to get addicted to habit-forming drugs, including Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Irish-Americans, and Jewish-Americans, among others (Burroughs, *J* 51-56). Most of the conversation at the facility Burroughs is placed in centers on heroin ("Cook it up and shoot it"; "On the nod"; and "Loaded" are phrases that are repeated throughout this section [Burroughs, *J* 52-53]), and Burroughs observes that the "cure" at Lexington "is

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<sup>31</sup> Inmates at Lexington were expected to actually do farm chores, including crop production, animal husbandry, landscaping construction, and tailoring. Addicts labored four times more than they spent in therapy-related activities, and were paid in cigarettes. The progress of patients was measured in terms of signs of increased maturity, including self-reliance, self-comfort, the ability to get along with others, the ability to control impulses, and the capability of handling stressful situations. Addicts who showed progress in these ways were thought to be reformed and able to return home without giving in to the temptation of drugs (White 124).

not designed to keep the addicts comfortable" (*J* 56). He eventually leaves, stopping on his way out of town to pick up some paregoric.

In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs will eventually use his time at Lexington to promote his belief that the government is corrupt, and that the farms were actually a way for society to further control its citizens. In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs calls Lexington the "Reconditioning Center," a place where "[a] *functioning* police state needs no police" (emphasis original, 31). Furthermore, Lexington becomes symptomatic of a sick culture where "the ugliness of that spectacle buggers description" because "[w]ho can be a cringing pissing coward, yet vicious as a purple-assed mandrill, alternating these deplorable conditions like vaudeville skits? Who can shit on a fallen adversary who, dying, eats the shit and screams with joy?" Burroughs notes, "Gentle reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner. Oh Christ what a scene is this! Can tongue or pen accommodate these scandals?" (Burroughs, *NL* 33-34).<sup>32</sup> No, Burroughs seems to be saying. Places like Lexington, where everyone is treated like a criminal, whether they enter the program willingly or are forced into it through arrest, are not safe. Narcotics farms serve to further separate and scapegoat the junkie, cementing his space in society as one who is abject.

Burroughs gives insight to us through his slightly more prosaic description of his time at Lexington in *Junky*. His voluntary entrance into, and departure from, Lexington shows that the junkie does have control, to some extent, over his addiction.

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<sup>32</sup> Notice that Burroughs not only uses scenes from his own work *Junky*, but also incorporates another addict's story—Coleridge's *Rime*.

Furthermore, as Burroughs's actions show, it soon became obvious that the "narcotics farms" were not going to work. White notes that several follow-up studies "confirmed that the majority of addicts leaving the Lexington and Fort Worth facilities quickly returned to narcotic use" (260). Though several attempts were made to revamp the facilities, in the end, both closed down—Forth Worth in 1971 and Lexington in 1974. Burroughs clearly believes that these farms did little to curb addiction, instead creating more of a need through their brutal treatment of the junkie inside. Addiction, Burroughs seems to say, is something that, while at first chosen, becomes a disease that must be treated and that forcing a cure upon a junkie will backfire.

In the 1960s, Dr. Marie Nyswander, a psychiatrist, and Dr. Vincent Dole, an endocrinologist, argued that the junkie possessed "biological and social adaptations resulting from addiction to an illicit narcotic." Additionally, "the incredibly high relapse rate of heroin addicts was attributable to enduring metabolic changes that accompanied heroin addiction. In this view, addicts needed narcotics the way diabetics needed insulin: to achieve normal metabolic functioning" (White 252-253). As a result of this theory, Nyswander and Dole were instrumental in bringing about the concept of methadone treatment as a replacement for heroin in the user's body.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, in

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<sup>33</sup>Methadone was developed during World War II by the Germans in response to the decreased supplies of morphine needed during wartime. Methadone is addicting and psychoactive, but when administered in controlled clinical settings, the need to procure the drug is greatly reduced. Moreover, high doses of methadone block the euphoria produced by heroin, allowing the addict to engage in meaningful employment (Brick and Erickson 90). Nyswander and Dole's study showed that methadone maintenance suppressed narcotic withdrawal for 24 hours with a single dose, and produced no "high." Social productivity, including the ability to hold a job without cognitive, affective, or psychomotor impairment, also accompanied methadone treatment (White 253). Currently, methadone treatment is used all over the world to treat heroin addiction. Burroughs was no stranger to methadone; throughout his life, he made several attempts to get off drugs, and at the time of his death, August 1, 1997, he was on methadone (Miles 263).



*Junky*—at least a decade before Nyswander and Dole's study—Burroughs wrote, "The junkie needs junk like the diabetic needs insulin. Junk creates a deficiency so that the body cannot function without more junk at regular intervals. It seems that junk takes over the function of certain body chemicals during addiction" ("Original Introduction" 140). Burroughs predicted the idea that addiction acted as a disease, and certainly *Junky*, and to a lesser extent, Trocchi's *Cain's Book*, also prophesied that this would be the case. Burroughs and Trocchi attempt in these early junkie lit novels to convince the public that "dope fiends" are people who, as Burroughs writes in *Naked Lunch*, "cannot help but to act" in such a way because they are sick (201).

Clearly, the moral problem associated with heroin addiction caused an indecisive split down the middle of medical professionals. While junkies saw themselves as ill and in need of medical assistance, doctors and other medical professionals were hesitant to offer aid. Most believed that the heroin addict simply wanted more drugs without the hassle of having to score off the street, and in some cases, this was correct. When an addict sought treatment to get off the drug, though, they were still viewed in the same way. The addict became a creature that could not be understood; in Kristevian terms, the junkie represented what was the most abject about the junkie. Avital Ronnell, in *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*, proposes that heroin creates a "[c]risis in immanence. Drugs, it turns out, are not so much about seeking an exterior, transcendental dimension—a fourth or fifth dimension—rather, they explore fractal interiorities" (15). Ronnell comments that Burroughs hints at this with his *Algebra of Need*. Burroughs states that he has "learned the junk equation" (*J* xxxiv), and heroin is a

drug that does not cause the user to explore "other dimensions." While drugs are generally thought to be the gateway to another dimension, a place where reality ceases to exist and hallucinations transport the user to another place,<sup>34</sup> the use of junk alters the user's psyche, and the "other dimensions" actually explored through heroin change the identity of the addict permanently. Burroughs suggests that the use of junk causes permanent cellular alteration, though clearly not in the same way as a virus; heroin causes the addict to connect to a different identity, one based completely on need—the reliance on the heroin itself—in order to create a sense of wholeness.<sup>35</sup> An addict can never go back to the world he or she knew before heroin addiction; as Burroughs says, "Once a junkie, always a junkie" (*J* 97).

The threat the junkie poses to conventional society is that he or she cannot be assimilated, and thus cannot be understood. Kristeva states, "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire" (*PH* 1). The ambiguous figure of the junkie beseeches and fascinates through the inscrutable logic and unrecognizable impulse that causes a person to choose to become a heroin addict. Burroughs notes that addiction occurs "because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction.

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<sup>34</sup> I am referring here to such phrases as Timothy Leary's "Turn on, tune in, drop out," as well as the Merry Pranksters of the 1970s. Leary, and the Pranksters, desired to get the world to try LSD in order to open up consciousness. Drugs, particularly hallucinogens, are often thought to transport the user to another "dimension," an "other-worldly" place, in order to connect the user to his or her spiritual center.

<sup>35</sup> A more thorough discussion of "wholeness" will take place in Chapter IV.

Junk wins by default. . . . You don't decide to be an addict. One morning you wake up sick and you're an addict" (*J* xxxviii). To this end, Necchi muses, "There is no more systematic nihilism than that of the junkie in America" (Trocchi 36). The lack of motivation and the systematic nihilism that Burroughs and Trocchi refer to lend themselves to the idea that junkies are created through a lapse in morality. The threat of the addict is, as Kristeva notes, the one tied with the abject—the junkie is a figure that chooses to become degenerate, but this is not something written on the body. For Burroughs and Trocchi, taking heroin is not the result of moral turpitude, but a way in which to irrevocably alter identity. As such, the junkie becomes a foreigner within his or her own culture, and while the public believes that heroin addicts should be considered moral violators, the two authors blame American society for the problems associated with drug addiction.

Burroughs and Trocchi call for a new understanding of the identity of the junkie in contemporary America. Burroughs's fact-based approach, coupled with Trocchi's re-imagining the junkie as Cain cast out of his own society, show the junkie as an ill individual who cannot help acting the way he or she does. In the Prologue to *Junky*, Burroughs informs his readers that he has learned a great deal from being a junkie. For Burroughs, and Necchi, junk is "a way of life" (*J* xxxiv). This way of life that Burroughs and Necchi see is one that is chosen rather than automatically given. The junkies in these novels show a paradoxical community, a group of people who recognize their difference while living in a place not tolerant of their choice to do drugs (Kristeva, *SO* 193, 195). At the same time, Burroughs and Trocchi invite readers into this world,

allowing the American public access into the mysterious and somewhat seedy underworld associated with heroin addiction. While earlier pre-World War II texts purported to do so, the culture presented was the stuff of imagination. Addicts were written about as people who deserved harsh punishment for choosing to engage in a lifestyle associated with drugs and addiction. Junkies may choose this lifestyle, Burroughs and Trocchi suggest, but they also have their own communities and personalities, and should not just be considered an interminable line of faceless, nameless creatures. Instead, the identity of the junkie is complex, a human being willingly choosing to engage in an identity shift in which he or she becomes abject. I spend much of the next chapter showing how this comes into play in later contemporary narratives dealing with heroin addiction; however, I spend the rest of this chapter demonstrating how Burroughs and Trocchi provide a launching point for this new identity shift.

Burroughs and Trocchi make plain that heroin addicts come from all racial and religious backgrounds to form the junkie identity. As noted in the introduction, there are no specific races related to heroin addiction; however, while statistics provide us with facts, the fiction written by Burroughs and Trocchi make this more realistic for their reading audience. Burroughs and Trocchi describe the junkie as something that fades away, a person who, as mentioned earlier in a statement by Burroughs, "loses human citizenship" to the point where he or she becomes unrecognizable as a human being.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> I make mention of this here; however, the section in Chapter III on Linda Yablonsky explores the idea of the junkie-as-ghost in a more concrete way.

Burroughs describes the junkie as a type of "ghost that can only materialize with the aid of a sheet or other piece of cloth to give [him] outline" (*J* 35). The junkie is human but abject; a figure that presents to us a type of living corpse. Kristeva suggests that the corpse is the ultimate in abjection because "it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance," and shows us signified death (*PH* 3). The junkie is not dead, but the gradual fading away of the addict presents us with what it means to be at the "border of [our] condition as [] living being[s]" (Kristeva, *PH* 3), and becomes even more horrifying because this fragile condition is chosen by the junkie.

Both men and women are not immune to this corpse-like condition, as will be shown in Chapter III through the examination of the junkie lit written by Jim Carroll, Linda Yablonsky, and Ann Marlowe. Burroughs, however, does not spend much time chronicling the life of the female junkie; an undercurrent of misogyny runs through his work so that women who are mentioned become the enemy in some way—Mary with her cold smile, or Lupita the Mexican pusher, who destroys her competition by making deals with corrupt cops. At the time *Junky* takes place—during the mid to late 1940s—Burroughs had a common-law wife, Joan Vollmer. Though he never mentions her by name in the book, he does talk about beating her when she nags him about his addiction. One of the reasons Burroughs may have felt reluctant to mention any female addicts in his novels is simply because he probably did not encounter many; Burroughs was a homosexual, so he mostly surrounded himself with men. Furthermore, on September 6, 1951, during a drunken game of William Tell, Burroughs missed the glass and pierced Joan's brain, killing her (Miles 56). Perhaps Burroughs considered writing about his

addiction a way to honor Joan; in his second novel *Queer* he states, "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing." Burroughs concludes, "I have had no choice except to write my way out" (xxii). Joan's death was the direct result of his addiction, so in a way, *Junky* and his subsequent novels became a result of her death.

Trocchi, on the other hand, makes mention of several women throughout *Cain's Book*. Joe Necchi is married to a woman named Moira; has sex with a whore named Jody; mentions Ettie, an old black junkie; recalls memories of his mother throughout the text; and spends time with a junkie named Fay.<sup>37</sup> Fay is the woman he recalls the most throughout the text, perhaps because she is integral part of his little community of junkies set up on the scows of New York. Fay is the epitome of the abject, a woman who is "ridden by her terrible craving." Necchi calls her "the grey ghost of the district," a woman who "invokes horror, disgust, indignation, a nameless fear. She is the soul's scavenger, the unexpected guest, a kind of underworld Florence Nightingale always abroad with her spike and her little bag of heroin" (Trocchi 36-37). Fay is also the epitome of the junkie lifestyle, a person beyond "truth and falsity" (Trocchi 37) and thus

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<sup>37</sup> "Surveys between 1878-1885 indicated that 56 percent to 71 percent of opiate addicts in the United States" were women suffering from "melancholy," menstrual cramps, and other ailments (Fernandez 20). Women were able to legally purchase opium-laced cough syrups and elixirs, including Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, at the local pharmacy. Laudanum could even be obtained through mail order (Fernandez 20). Fernandez notes that this was "a quiet addiction, almost invisible, because the women stayed at home. This was due in part to male dominance in the social sphere and the perception that it was not right for decent women to frequent bars and saloons, let alone an opium den" (20). Because her addiction predicament was related to iatrogenic issues, the female, while seen as a problem, was excused in the way that those who actually chose to use a drug were not. If the drugs came from a doctor, though, then they were perfectly acceptable for use.

beyond human perception. She acts as a "Florence Nightingale" figure, a nurse who drifts along and shares her heroin with those who need a fix. Fay's ability to always get drugs causes Necchi to see her in a kind way, and she is welcomed into his community. Women were not necessarily thought of as drug addicts during this time, and Trocchi's inclusion of Fay, along with the other women found throughout his novel, indicates that heroin addiction is not just something that "young urban men," as noted earlier, were into.

The community of the underworld acts as a place where the junkie can open up to another addict with mutual recognition for their abject place in society (Kristeva, *SO* 12). Joe Necchi surrounds himself with companions who also use heroin: Tom, a black West Indian, and the aforementioned Fay (Trocchi 21-22). Through their addiction, Tom, Fay, and Joe recognize each other for what they are, junkies, and "[e]ach of us was conscious of the well-being of the others. The sense of well-being in each of us was reinforced by that consciousness" (Trocchi 26). Tom, Fay, and Joe look out for each other; if someone lacks heroin, one of the others will provide it. They form a family of sorts, sitting around and telling stories and supporting each other in their artistic endeavors. For example, Tom paints, Fay finds drugs, and Necchi writes. Fay tells Necchi, "*Cain* is great . . . . It's evidence" (Trocchi 32). It is, in fact, evidence—evidence of the community formed by junkies. They are all conscious and supportive of each other, because Tom, Fay, and Joe know that they can rely on one another. That is not to say that if there were not enough drugs they would share. Heroin is considered by many

to be a solitary drug,<sup>38</sup> but Necchi and his friends meet together, sharing and talking before they go on the nod. Necchi writes that, although there is a confederacy amongst users, it is often "loose, hysterical, traitorous, unstable," because junkies "know that it is very possible to arrive at the point where it is necessary to lie and cheat and steal, even from the friend who gave one one's last fix" (Trocchi 73). Trocchi provides a paradoxical world where the junkie wants to be alone but with partners; Necchi's only possible companions are Fay and Tom. They band together in a world where hatred is directed at them for their junkie lifestyle, and this relationship provides Necchi with the consistency found amongst families who do not use drugs (Kristeva, *SO* 13).

Burroughs includes this type of relationship in *Junky*, though women are rarely mentioned. He details many of the other addicts with whom he runs scams throughout the novel, including Bill Gains, who shows up in both New York in the beginning of the narrative and Mexico at the end; Pat, his New Orleans partner in crime; and Old Ike, a junkie he meets at his lawyer's office in Mexico City. Burroughs describes them as being of the same type: sallow, bitter, and thin, with twisted mouths, stiff fingers, and stylized gestures. The junkies are of various nationalities and physiques, but they all "look[] like junk" (Burroughs, *J* 22). In fact, in Burroughs's world, "There are people who look like junkies and aren't . . . It's a type that causes trouble" (*J* 108). This type is Kristeva's abject foreigner, a person without boundaries who cannot be assimilated into conventional American society. They appear to be scheming and shady, and there is

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<sup>38</sup> Heroin, a drug that may make users more tolerant of others, generally causes the addict to push away his or her social circle (Moraes, *Handbook* 138).



something sinister about them, and the junkies and the junkie "type" "carries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. . . On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (Kristeva, *PH 2*). The junkies have a human shape, but that radical otherness to them sets them apart from the rest of society so that we must consider them abject so we can save ourselves from, in the words of Kristeva, becoming annihilated. Burroughs's world is filled with these types, and all of them are willing to turn on him under the threat of withdrawal or arrest. In *Junky*, unlike *Cain's Book*, the junkie community is loosely assembled, and Burroughs manages to reveal the most base aspects of human nature in this particular subset of people (Kristeva, *SO 7*), highlighting the abject nature of the junkie.

The feeling that Burroughs and Trocchi show through their writing is the absolute regimentation of heroin addiction. While much of society during this time believed that all drug addicts were useless and morally depraved, with no work ethic or structure to their lives, Burroughs and Trocchi highlight the ritual and routine involved in addiction, disputing this claim. Necchi proposes that getting high is not only a question of feeling good or getting a kick; instead, it is "[t]he ritual itself" that keeps him coming back. He lists the steps of getting high—the powder in the spoon, the ball of cotton, the matches, the liquid drawn up through the cotton filter into the eye-dropper, and the way the tie must go around the arm in order to make a vein stand out—in order to show how "a man will stand there with the needle in the vein and allow the level in

the eye-dropper to waver up and down, up and down, until there is more blood than heroin in the dropper—all this is not for nothing; it is born of a respect for the whole chemistry of alienation. . . . At once, and regardless of preconditions, a man enters 'Castle Keep'" (Trocchi 33-34).<sup>39</sup> "Castle Keep," and the ways in which Necchi lovingly describes the ritual of getting high, indicates his awareness of his place in the world of abjection. Kristeva posits, "There is nothing like abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (emphasis original, *PH* 5). The *want* on which the junkie is founded is based on the desire and need for heroin; addiction occurs when the junkie has been taken possession of by the drug (Ronnell 55). Heroin users lose subjectivity when they become full-blown junkies—that is, when their lives become taken over by the schedule the drug commands. In doing so, junkies gain control of the defilement of their bodies through heroin and the needle, making them joyous of their states of being (Kristeva, *PH* 29).

Burroughs describes this sensation as a "fear of death" through engaging with morphine. The first time he tries morphine, Burroughs enjoys the way it affects him: he experiences a "wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines." When he wakes up from this state, though, he does

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<sup>39</sup> The decade before the Civil War brought Alexander Wood's 1853 invention, the hypodermic needle, and those experiencing vast amounts of pain found quicker relief through direct injection (Fernandez 19-20). This became particularly useful during the Civil War, when a lack of surgical space made the horror of amputation all the more real. Morphine injected via syringe provided quick and effective pain relief, allowing the wounded to forget, if even for a moment, the loss of a limb. The syringe became the instrument of choice for many heroin addicts, including William S. Burroughs, Alexander Trocchi, and Jim Carroll, to name a few, because it could deliver the drug into the human body much faster than nasal and/or oral ingestion.

so with fear, vomiting and feeling nauseated most of the next day (Burroughs, *J* 6). Eventually, he gives in to the routine, finding himself needing the drug more often. Unlike Joe Necchi, Burroughs finds this tedious; he is not happy to give his life over to the drug, and seems to be informing readers that, unless they have a love of routine, heroin is not the drug to try. While heroin may provide a relief from the tediousness of everyday living, there is a price to pay. The body demands the drug to the point where identity becomes wrapped in heroin; Burroughs indicates that "[a]ll of a sudden the addict looks in the mirror and does not recognize himself. The actual changes are difficult to specify and they do not show up in a mirror" (Burroughs, *J* 18-19). This is the point where the addict's identity begins to shift, a change so subtle that not even the junkie realizes that he or she is becoming abject. Before the heroin addict realizes it, he or she has signed on to be at the mercy of the drug to the point where he or she cannot function without it. Burroughs informs readers, "The kick of junk *is* that you have to have it. Junkies run on junk time and junk metabolism. They are subject to junk climate. They are warmed and chilled by junk. The kick of junk is living under junk conditions. You cannot escape from junk sickness any more than you can escape from junk kick after a shot" (emphasis original, *J* 81). Basically, Burroughs warns readers that, should they choose to enter the world of the junkie, they must understand that the body becomes completely immersed in both the drug and the culture, and they may find themselves doing things, such as engaging in criminal activities like stealing, they never thought they would do. As alluded to earlier, Burroughs himself came from a fairly wealthy, respectable family; most reading his background would never assume that

someone who received an allowance every month would ever feel the need to steal in order to get money.

In the end, Burroughs makes clear that when a junkie quits doing drugs, he does not find redemption. Instead, a junkie gives up a way of life. Heroin addiction provides what Burroughs refers to as a "kick," the "momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh" (*J* 128), but when a person stops doing the drug, the real world rushes back in. A junkie must find a way to reinsert back into society, to reform the boundaries erased by engaging in the abject lifestyle that heroin demands. While Burroughs cautions readers against this, he is careful to avoid saying that heroin creates some sort of spiritual enlightenment in a user. Necchi similarly observes,

The mind under heroin evades perception as it does ordinarily; one is aware only of contents. But that whole way of posing the question, of dividing the mind from what it's aware of, is fruitless. . . [I]t is that the perceiving turns inward, the eyelids droop, the blood is aware of itself, a slow phosphorescence in all the fabric of flesh and nerve and bone; it is that the organism has a sense of being intact and unbrittle, and, above all, *inviolable*. For the attitude born of this sense of inviolability some Americans have used the word "cool." (Trocchi 10-11)

As mentioned in the introduction, the perception of heroin addiction is often linked to a

rock star mentality; the "cool" factor is attached to musicians like Keith Richards,<sup>40</sup> for example. Necchi wants to show that the heroin addict is not cool, and that the inviolability of the addict is not something to be desired. Necchi considered calling the book "*Notes towards the making of the monster*" (Trocchi 238), revealing that the identity of the heroin addict is taken over by the monstrous need heroin creates in the body. Instead, he calls the novel *Cain's Book*, providing another type of monster in the title—the man who committed the first murder.

The story of Cain—found in the mythology associated with Islamic, Judaic, and Christian traditions—tells of the first murder in human history. Jealous of his brother, who made a better offering that pleased their god immensely, Cain kills Abel. When Cain lies about the act, he is forced to wander east of Eden, eventually settling in the land of Nod. Cain wears a mark upon his person so that he will always be aware of his heinous crime of fratricide (Genesis 4: 1-16). Like Cain, Joe Necchi's story tells of his wanderings: "I had traveled so often and in so many directions that I was bored at the mere thought of it. Moreover, this particular voyage had a more than usually sinister aspect; not only was I unable to produce for myself a convincing reason for going to the United States, I was tolerably certain there wasn't one" (Trocchi 194). Necchi ends up in America, working on a scow and becoming a junkie. As a result of his heroin addiction, Necchi also bears a mark on his person: his track marks. He notes, "I am looking at all

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<sup>40</sup> If you're a Rolling Stones fan, of course. If not, then perhaps John Lennon of The Beatles, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, Bradley Nowell of Sublime, Shannon Hoon from Blind Melon, Jimi Hendrix, or Janis Joplin would speak better to the rock star/cool factor. While all these artists did not die from heroin addiction, they were all heroin addicts. Of course, Keith Richards is still, surprisingly, alive, and offers a view of a type of animated corpse—embodying everything particularly horrifying about Kristeva's abject, in point of fact.

the needlemarks. They follow the length of the vein down the arm. Since the Man<sup>41</sup> looks for marks I am trying to keep them dispersed, to keep them as impermanent as possible . . . Shooting in places where the vein is more submerged has over a period of time made quite a mess of my arm" (Trocchi 82). Finally, like Cain, Necchi visits the land of Nod in his own way; a slang term for a phase of the heroin high is "to go on the nod."<sup>42</sup> While not an actual place in the world of the heroin addict, "Nod" is still a phase of the heroin high, and junkies describe the sensation as something they travel to (as in "go on the nod").

Although Cain murdered his brother Abel, Necchi identifies and sympathizes with him. Necchi calls Cain the "[t]hird profligate," the "first poet-adventurer," and a "little Lucifer constantly discovering himself after his eviction" (Trocchi 231, 232). This constant sense of discovery creates within Necchi a feeling of camaraderie with the ousted Cain. Of course, Alexander Trocchi is, in fact, a stranger in a strange land; he is an immigrant, and thus is a foreigner to America. In *Cain's Book*, many of the people

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<sup>41</sup> From the glossary written by William S. Burroughs at the end of *Junky*: "The Man" can refer to a junk seller, as well as a Narcotics Agent. Burroughs reports a similar "marking" of the junkie: "The cops began stopping addicts in the street and examining their arms for needle marks. If they found marks, they pressured the addict to sign a statement admitting his condition so he could be charged under the 'drug addicts law.' . . . Addicts ransacked their persons looking for veins to shoot in outside the arm area" (*J* 66).

<sup>42</sup> Writers of junkie lit frequently use this phrase when talking about the high. For instance, in *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, Ann Marlowe remarks,

The greatest popular misconception about heroin, after the myth of irresistible addiction, is its depiction as a "death drug." On this understanding, the nod that heralds the second phase of the high and carries the user toward unconsciousness is a prototypical near-death experience. But the reverse is the case. True, the nod's relation to death is a crucial part of its allure: you get to pull back from oblivion again and again. . . Heroin offers a voluntary analogue to the involuntary miracle proposed to us nightly by sleep: lose consciousness, but live on. (193-194)

In *Junky*, Burroughs notes that "[o]n the Nod" means "full of junk" ("Glossary" 131).

Necchi pals around with are also transplants to the country, resulting in a melting pot sensibility. Necchi identifies with the wandering Cain, particularly because "[t]here was never a wandering Jew who wandered further than a junkie, without hope. Always moving. Eventually one must go where the junk is and one is never certain where the junk is" (Trocchi 73). Like Cain, Necchi is an abject figure who separates himself from conventional society, wandering the world instead of staying in one place and getting his bearings. Furthermore, like Cain, Necchi—and Burroughs—devise a new language and territory for the junkie, constantly questioning the place of the heroin addict in America. Necchi's explanation and identification of the junkie with the "wandering Jew" shows that the heroin addict is not part of conventional society, though he or she still occupies a space within America (Kristeva, *PH* 8). Through rewriting Cain's story and imagining himself in the title role, Necchi transforms into an abject character, a stray that is part of, but contradictory to, the society in which he resides.

The same reasoning can be applied to Burroughs's title. One of the reasons, for example, that Burroughs did not get to call his novel *Junk* (as opposed to *Junkie*, and later *Junky*) was due to fear on the publisher's behalf that the reading public would associate the content of the novel with trash. Books about heroin addiction, written by actual junkies, were rarely considered anything above smut, and the fact that the subheading of Burroughs's novel was *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* furthered the idea that the content would not be suitable for any audience. In the original introduction to the novel, Burroughs writes, "In this book I have written what I know about junk and the people who use it," adding, "I would not write about junk unless I had

something special to say on the subject that had not already been said" ("Original Introduction" 139). As it turns out, this was the case; the title of the novel informs the reading public that they are, indeed, engaging with a text about a junkie, and most of the people seeing the title would assume that the novel had some sort of redeeming value. The "special something" Burroughs alludes to in the text refers to the very fact that, unlike Algren and others, he does not make excuses or attempt to justify any of his actions. Ginsberg's 1952 introduction states that *Junky*, dealing with a highly controversial subject like heroin, possesses originality of style and content: "Very little real information is obtainable on this subject, and most of it is romanticized and hyped up or distorted for mass commercial purposes. This book has the advantage of being both real and readable. It is an important document; an archive of the underground; a true history of the true horrors of a vice" (148). The novel may talk about heroin, but the title that stuck—*Junky*—tells the truth. The novel is not solely about heroin; it is about a junkie, someone who uses heroin, and is, indeed, the work of "an unredeemed drug addict," providing a departure from earlier tales of confession and deliverance.

As the titles of their novels indicate, William S. Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi are aware of their position as abject junkies in American society. At one point, Necchi remarks that questioning identity "sever[s] the I who is aware from the I of whom he is" because "[i]dentities, like the successive skins of onions, are shed, each as soon as it is contemplated; caught in the act of pretending to be conscious" (Trocchi 69-70). While Necchi attempts to metaphorically shed his identity through the act of writing, Burroughs tries to do so literally through the act of moving from state to state,



and then to Mexico. In doing so, however, both Necchi and Burroughs fail to escape the identity that being a heroin addict has given them; they are abject, without boundaries, and "within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* . . . it is thus that *they* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other" (Kristeva, *PH* emphasis original 3). Burroughs and Necchi may wish to subvert the moral code, and insist that addiction is a disease, but they cannot escape that their addiction causes them to become something else—a junkie. Furthermore, though these books are early works by the authors, both Trocchi and Burroughs stayed addicted to opiates until their deaths—in 1984, Trocchi died of complications from pneumonia, and he was still an addict, and Burroughs was on methadone until his death (Marcus viii; Miles 263). Of course, their deaths made them more legendary, and their identities became inseparable from their addictions.

Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book* offer the first true insight into the not-so-privileged world of the heroin addict in order to subvert the myth society perpetuated at the time—and still does—of the picture of the dirty, immoral junkie. In doing so, they allow readers to enter the illicit world of the junkie and still escape relatively unscathed. Kristeva notes that the only way out of anger and fear, and the only way to understand the abject, is through literature:

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression. Through that experience . . .

'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. (*PH* 18)

The aesthetic project allows the subject to foster a better understanding of the addict, and to recognize fact from fiction when confronted with the junkie. Necchi suggests literature does this because it is symbolic, transcendent, and indirect (Trocchi 247). Junkie literature lets readers peer into the underworld, experiencing a place transcendent of what they think they know, and upset the myths surrounding heroin addiction. The literature plays out this ruse, and instead of proving readers correct in their assumptions about the addict, the junkie becomes something else—the abject. Burroughs states, "I do not intend to correct popular misconceptions about junk by presenting the facts that are already known to anyone informed on the subject. I am using known facts as a starting point in an attempt to reach facts that are not known" ("Original Introduction" 143). What Burroughs and Trocchi open up to postwar readers is the option of entering an unknown and highly publicized world egregiously termed as evil and insidious. These authors show that junkies are not lurking corners of dark alleys, hoping to accost innocent bystanders and lure young children into the world of addiction, as seen in various propaganda films like the aforementioned *Johnny Stool Pigeon*, *Subject: Narcotics* (1951), *Curfew Breakers* (1957), and *The Narcotics Story* (1958). Instead, Burroughs and Trocchi offer the boundary Kristeva mentions—the one that exists between what is unknown and what is thinkable.

The identity present in Burroughs and Trocchi provides a launching point for a larger discussion of the abject found in later narratives of heroin addiction. While only lightly touched upon, as a whole, in Burroughs and Trocchi, I believe that the examination of texts on heroin addiction causes readers to consider the possibility of being abject in their own lives. Reading Burroughs's account, for example, of how an upper-middle-class white American male ended up as a junkie shows us that the background of an addict does not have to be one filled with poverty and desperation. Kristeva notes that the abject addict, a foreigner in his own country, "confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply—humanly—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself" (*SO*, emphasis original, 13). When confronted with the possibility of drug addiction, particularly by authors who come from backgrounds similar to their reading public, boundaries are shattered and composure is lost (Kristeva, *SO* 187). This is particularly relevant when looking at Burroughs and Trocchi, who, unlike Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*, are writing in first person and come from similar backgrounds to most readers. The seemingly fictitious world present in *Junky* and *Cain's Book* "neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable" while at the same time "depriving us of the dangers as well as the pleasures of strangeness, [narratives are] the instruments of their liquidation" (Kristeva, *SO* 17-188). When readers finish these novels, the pleasure and hope for redemption fades: Burroughs is off to South America to find another drug, and Necchi, still high, does not feel that his story has even started. Heroin acts as an anti-

hero, inserted throughout *Junky*, *Cain's Book*, and other junkie lit novels to follow, as the insidious character who never quite allows for a peaceful resolution. Letting readers experience the community junkies set up outside of conventional society, Burroughs and Trocchi allowed for Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk*, and Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* to show the abject identity of the junkie.

## CHAPTER III

NOT FADE AWAY: THE ABJECT IDENTITY OF THE JUNKIE IN  
 JIM CARROLL'S *THE BASKETBALL DIARIES*, ANN MARLOWE'S *HOW TO STOP  
 TIME: HEROIN FROM A TO Z* AND LINDA YABLONSKY'S  
*THE STORY OF JUNK*

Near the end of *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim Carroll muses on the hypocrisy of American culture as it relates to the drug scene. Carroll, when asked if he feels guilty about using junk, rants, "I think now and that pisses me off. Like just what is guilty or who is guilty for fuck sake," pointing out crooked politicians, the Vietnam War, and the practice of tax evasion by those involved in the world of big business. Carroll notes that he swims in the river and has "to duck huge amounts of shit and grease and 'newly' discovered miracle fibers" because "smokestack companies don't give a flying fuck" about the environment, adding "[I]t's so *all there* that no one's seeing it anymore. And it's dumbass of me to bring it up even now because it's all so much bull-pap corn and I cut out of that a long time ago, so maybe that's why I don't feel too guilty right now" (Carroll, emphasis original 199). In the same entry Carroll tells us, "You just got to see that junk is just another nine to five gig in the end, only the hours are a bit more inclined toward shadows," and that "if you wanna play, you got to pay. If you can't dig that, then haul your ass out quick" (Carroll 199). Like William S. Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi before him, Jim Carroll believes that the problem resides not in the people using drugs; instead, the corrupt government—the ones who make the laws, who are

facilitating the war in Vietnam, and who pollute rivers—hold the blame for the turmoil in American society. For Carroll, the world of the junkie is akin to employment, and he feels no remorse about engaging in this occupation. The government, not the junkie, holds the blame for the turmoil in American society, a key point of the arguments made by both Burroughs and Trocchi in Chapter II. Carroll holds a similar view that junkies should not be scapegoats for scorn in American society.

After World War II, a new breed of literature emerged in American society. Ushered in by Burroughs and Trocchi, junkie lit showed a frank and unrepentant view of the subculture humming beneath conventional American society. Burroughs's *Junky* and Trocchi's *Cain's Book* provided a new lens with which to view the heroin addict, subverting preconceived notions about the immoral nature associated with the junkie. By doing so, I suggest that they opened the door for other authors writing about heroin to publish works that reflect the view of addiction as seen from an insider's perspective. Moreover, Burroughs and Trocchi hint at the identity of the junkie as being somehow both more and less than human—the figure of the abject. This view of the junkie as abject, I believe, allowed authors writing in the turbulent 1960s through the glossy and pseudo-sophisticated 1990s to further define the junkie as a new type of identity that emerged after World War II. Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, and Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* examine the world of the junkie in much the same way as Burroughs and Trocchi did before them: these books are all semi-autobiographical and offer no displays of remorse or atonement for the actions performed in the throes of addiction.

In order to fully explicate the identity of the junkie as abject, I rely on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, as well as her *Black Sun, New Maladies of the Soul*, and *Strangers to Ourselves*. Kristeva's work centers on abjection, purity, and defilement, and I use these concepts to explore how we respond to and understand the addict. The junkie lit written by Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky affords us a new definition for the identity of the junkie in postwar American society. Furthermore, junkie lit cements the characteristics of the addict by focusing on three separate facets of the junkie's identity: the desire for purity, the suspension in time, and finally, the disappearance of self through heroin addiction. The importance of this new identity, and the theme associated with the construction of this sense of self, reside in the way these authors set up the search for meaning through "junk," which will greatly affect later narratives of addiction, particularly those dealing with substances other than heroin.

Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, a memoir written between the ages of 13 and 16, details his growing addiction to heroin. Carroll's memoir begins when he is a basketball star on the rise, complete with an athletic scholarship to the elite Trinity High School in 1960s New York City. The memoir ends with Carroll as a full-blown junkie, living in relative squalor, unable and unwilling to shake his addiction. Living in the underworld of the junkie, where addiction becomes a "nine to five gig," Carroll is an abject figure, one who slips in and out of society in order to feed his habit. His writing shows that any boundaries placed upon him by this society are easily transgressed and hardly important. In Carroll's world, doing heroin is preferable to starting a war or engaging in shifty and notorious behavior in the name of politics and government,

activities he considers impure and immoral. Carroll's obsession with purity is one of the major themes running through his memoir, and he sees this state of being as something unrelated to getting off drugs. Instead, Carroll's search for purity is rooted in a sense of spiritual redemption and salvation, stemming from his childhood foundation of Catholicism, as well as his experiences in the world around him. While Carroll seeks purity through heroin, he does not realize that, through physically and emotionally purging himself, he comes as close as he possibly can to achieving this ineffable state of being.

Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* offers a straightforward narration of heroin addiction, carefully chronicling various aspects of the world of the junkie. Marlowe's didactic tone, coupled with the fact that the book is set up in the style of a dictionary, complete with alphabetized entries, focuses on the idea of the junkie as a monstrous consumer. A major theme running through Marlowe's text is the idea that the use of heroin alters the perception of time, and that the junkie desires to live in the world of nostalgia. As the title of the book indicates, the use of heroin arrests the junkie in a world that does not move forward, and the addict spends much of his or her life longing for the past in some way.

Finally, Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* concentrates on the idea of disappearance of the physical, mental, and emotional identity of the addict. In this novel, the unnamed narrator tells of how, after starting to use heroin, she quits her job as a short order cook at a bar called Sticky's so that she can become a full-time drug dealer. Throughout her discussion of her relationship with Kit, a musician for the band Toast, to



her anger over the fact that Kit eventually turns her in to the law for dealing dope, the narrator describes herself and the other junkies around her as turning into ghosts as a result of their addiction. These "ghosts" disappear as the novel progresses, through both their appearance and personality. The narrator describes the relationship with Kit in these terms, ultimately describing herself as one of the grey, spectral, and anonymous beings.

Ann Marlowe notes, "A fair number of post-Beat novels have been written about junkie life and the dope trade, but . . . [n]one measures up to Burroughs, or to Alexander Trocchi's undeservedly obscure 1960 novel *Cain's Book*" (141). In the previous chapter, I focus on how Burroughs and Trocchi set the foundation for junkie lit through their careful detailing of, and objection to, the moral question related to addiction, as well as framing the junkie as someone with a disease rather than a flaw in character. As Marlowe notes, several novels have been written about heroin addiction before and after World War II, but prior to Burroughs and Trocchi, most narratives about the junkie lifestyle centered on the search for redemption and atonement.<sup>1</sup> Marlowe suggests that, because junkies confuse, fascinate, and provoke heated debate, "Dope is antifiction. A novel about heroin is weighed down by the inherent consistency of everyone's experience of the drug in a way that a novel about love or revenge is not; those experiences are universal but not identical. . . [H]eroin demands nonfiction, memoir, truth-telling, but even here the trick is to outwit the drug, to introduce what the drug will

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated in Chapter II, some of these works include: Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*. The last book is discussed more in-depth in the first chapter.

not: surprise" (141-142). The "surprise" offered first by Burroughs and Trocchi, and later in the work of Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky, is that of the emergence of a new identity for the junkie—the abject who is a foreigner in his or her own country.

Kristeva's notion of the abject borrows from the original usage of the word. The words "abject" and "abjection" first appear in the fifteenth century, and describe a thing that is "cast off, rejected; cast out, expelled" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The word abject is also used to describe a person, an action, or a situation that is "of low repute; despicable, wretched; self-abasing; servile; obsequious." In later parlance, abject means something that is "complete" or "utter." Abject is also used as an adjective to describe something that is "cast down, brought low; of low status; downtrodden, desperate," and when applied to goods or commodities, means "of poor quality or little value; inferior, base" (*OED*). As a class or persons, the abject is "downtrodden" or "outcasts," and the abject person is one who is "cast off or cast out; an outcast, exile; a degraded or downtrodden person" (*OED*). The verb form of abject coincides with these definitions, particularly since, when used to describe an action, abject means "to cast off or away; to cast out, exclude, reject, especially as inferior, unworthy, or repugnant; . . . to throw down; to lower, degrade, debase; to subject, subjugate" (*OED*). Abjection is "[t]he state or condition of being cast down or brought low; humiliation, degradation; dispiritedness; despondency," as well as "[t]he action or an act of casting down, humbling, or degrading; an act of abasement, esp[ecially] of oneself." Furthermore, a more obscure usage of the word describes "[t]hat which is cast off or away, esp[ecially] as being vile or unworthy; refuse, scum, dregs," and a rare application of the word occurs when

speaking of rejection (*OED*). Finally, both abject and abjection refer to, in the scientific world, the ejection and discharge of spores by particular fungi (*OED*).

In the previous chapter, I explain that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject works as a way to categorize the junkie as a new type of identity. Under Kristeva's theory of abjection, the junkie becomes perverse, neither giving up nor assuming a prohibition, rule, or a law; instead, the junkie, and the junkie narrators of these texts, turn these laws aside, misleading and corrupting them (Kristeva, *PH* 15). As I argue with Burroughs and Trocchi, the junkie chooses to engage with the drug and places him- or herself into the underworld. Kristeva's definition of the abject refers to something that has been cast out and rejected, but the application of the word to junkie literature signifies something beyond the act of humiliation or degradation. While the junkie is seen by society as a person who ought to be cast out and degraded, the addicts featured in these novels see themselves in a different way. Instead of being humiliated or despicable, the junkies bond together and form a type of community, seeming to revel in their abject state. They are only without boundaries because society cannot make sense of someone who would choose to use drugs and, in the words of Burroughs, willingly "lose" human citizenship. I use Kristeva's definition as a whole to describe the junkie, but take it one step further and examine the state of abjection both inside and outside the world of the heroin addict; that is, I explore how the junkies experience the way society labels them, as well as how the addicts label themselves, as it pertains to the question of abjection.

In these narratives, the junkie comes from all class structures of life; when he or she enters the abject world of heroin addiction, boundaries are blurred, the self is

obliterated, and the junkie continuously attempts to thwart the repetitious and hypocritical existence of rules and laws. Linda Yablonsky remarks, in *The Story of Junk*, that drugs work in different ways, whether through alleviating pain or exciting the mind, but that heroin "plays with the soul—or whatever it is that makes a person uniquely appealing and distinguishable." Heroin obliterates identity, taking away "whatever that joy is by which you live," making a person "smaller and smaller, a tiny flame burning down. And when you're so small you're barely an ember, something happens . . . I've never felt so small as I do at this moment . . . Yet this thing, this drug that has brought me lower than I ever thought I could go, is the one thing I want to salve my soul" (Yablonsky 15-16). For the junkie, heroin may bring them to the state of abjection as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*—that low, degraded place—but it also helps to alleviate the pain of living and drug addiction. The paradoxical nature of heroin addiction as described in these narratives shows the junkie as one who burns out the joy of living through drug use, but who also attempts to assuage the pain of addiction through using more heroin.

Heroin not only replaces the "soul" of a person, as Yablonsky remarks, but also causes an illicit feeling on the part of the user, bringing together groups of people who would probably never be in contact with each other if it was not for the drug. Marlowe notes that the word "copping" is about transgression; "copping" means stealing, and "cop" refers to a policeman. She adds, "Buying hard drugs is the main personal contact most of the middle-class people have with the criminal world" (Marlowe 82-83). By transgressing the lines between classes, the boundaries become blurred and a state of

abjection is achieved. Heroin allows people of different races, classes, and backgrounds to come together and be equalized; in order to get heroin, a junkie must step out of the space where she is most familiar. The identity of the junkie is obscured because it does not matter where a person comes from, or what they look like, when buying drugs. Everyone has to go through the same channels in order to get high. The use of heroin results in the addict becoming an abject figure that refuses to adhere to rules related to prohibition, religion, morality, and law—the things Kristeva refers to as arbitrary, oppressive, and prevailing (*PH* 16).

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva introduces the concept of the foreigner. As noted in the previous chapter, the foreigner acts as the hidden face of our identity. While it could be argued that a reading of the heroin addict as foreigner seems to be taking Kristeva's work out of context, I would point out that in much of junkie literature, the addict is described as someone less than human. In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs writes that anyone involved in the heroin scene gives off "a narcotic effluvium, a dank green mist that anesthetizes his victims and renders them helpless in his enveloping presence" to the point where the junkie must be destroyed; such actions are justified because a junkie "los[es] his human citizenship and [is], in consequence, a creature without species" (17). If a junkie loses human citizenship, as Burroughs suggests, then he or she becomes a foreigner in his or her own society, one who cannot be assimilated in the normative proceedings of the culture in which he or she resides.

Foreigners upset the social balance, and a reading of the junkie-as-foreigner fits this idea. The narrators of junkie lit cross the imaginary boundary between hegemonic

society and the heroin subculture. Recognizing that identity shifts and remains unstable allows these narrators to take on the appearance of a foreigner who willingly abandons this conventional citizenship. Kristeva suggests that analyzing the foreigner causes us "[t]o discover our disturbing otherness" so that we confront "that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid 'us.'" The foreigner gives us something which we can identify against; however, Kristeva indicates that when we recognize

*our* uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners. . . [This] sets the difference within us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being *with* others. (*SO*, emphasis original 192)

Addiction generates a new type of foreigner in American society. The abject identity of the junkie generates a space for a user to feel excluded from the hegemonic culture; however, when we all recognize this difference and ability within ourselves, we understand that the idea of the foreigner is completely constructed. In the junkie literature written by Carroll, Yablonsky, and Marlowe, it becomes clear that when we recognize that we all have the ability to become addicted to something, we will realize that we are all foreigners. This makes studying the abject identity of the heroin addict important because the world of addiction, particularly in contemporary American literature, is not confined solely to drug use; different substances are abused, including television, food, and sex, for the same reasons that Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky

elucidate in their narratives. Wholeness stems from wanting purity and escaping into nostalgia, where things are deceptively simpler; in the end, though, what is left is merely an empty shell—a complete disappearance of any identity on the part of the addict. Kristeva's theory of the foreigner is particularly helpful in this respect, as it shows that everyone has the ability to cross into the world of addiction and become an "other" in contemporary American society.<sup>2</sup>

The problems associated with addiction in America began, interestingly enough, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, with the influx of Chinese immigration. The fear of opium can be directly tied to xenophobia, particularly since, between 1852 and 1879, more than 70,000 Chinese came to America in order to work on the railroads and in the gold mines of the West Coast (Fernandez 21). Problems arose when economic depression caused the swell of immigrants to become a labor surplus, and Americans began to feel antagonistic towards the Chinese, who had trouble speaking English, for taking jobs. All these factors led to many Americans blaming the Chinese for attempting to undermine society through the immigrants' use of, and relation to, opium (Musto, *The American Disease* 6). First seen as the answer to the labor problem in the United States, the Chinese soon became the target for all that was wrong in the country. However, to suggest that the Americans were in no way familiar with opium and its derivatives is erroneous; the population of addicts in the United States during the nineteenth century

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<sup>2</sup> This idea will be further explored in Chapter IV of this dissertation.

continued to climb long before the Chinese came and introduce the opium den to America.<sup>3</sup>

Opium was well on its way to being criminalized in the United States, and problems with the Chinese association to the drug only helped to propel legislative acts that would eventually ban the drug and its derivatives, particularly heroin.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Hamilton Wright, the United States opium commissioner during the early part of the twentieth century, commented that opium had America in its grip, particularly the women, who were purportedly cohabitating with Chinese men in Chinatown (Derlacher 14). While opium dens were being found all over the country in the bigger cities like New York and San Francisco, the "grip" Wright and others were concerned with was the loss of white women to the "foreigners." The outcry over young urban white men hanging out in opium dens was hardly heard at this time. This comes as no surprise; after all, the "mythic virtue of the white woman" was, according to popular belief in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, being threatened by "cocainized" black men, following Emancipation, in the South (Fernandez 23). This mythic virtue, while not truly being threatened by any particular race, was being tainted through the vast numbers of women addicted to opium containing products. It was believed, ludicrously,<sup>5</sup> that

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, in contemporary America, codeine and morphine are still available via prescription. Other drugs that include "opium" derivatives fall under such names as Vicodin, OxyContin, and Dilaudid.

<sup>5</sup> I say "ludicrous" based on the description of opium's effect on the body: a pleasant, drowsy state; decreased sensation of pain; and decreased sexual desire and behavior. The decreased desire and behavior occur because opiates affect the release of various hormones and neurotransmitters, including the ones involved in the regulation of sexual behavior. Opium and its derivatives also cause slow breathing, pupil constriction, and nausea (Kuhn et al 192-193). In *Junky*, William S. Burroughs also says, "Junk [heroin] short-circuits sex. The drive to non-sexual sociability comes from the same place sex comes from, so when I have an H or M [morphine] shooting habit I am non-sociable" (104).



opium gave Chinese men an unfair sexual advantage in their affairs with white women (Plant 238). With the supposed threat of advanced sexual prowess and control, the hatred and racism towards the Chinese played out in many forms. In *Heroin*, Humberto Fernandez notes that newspaper stories circulating throughout the nineteenth century described "'horrifying opium dens where *yellow fiends* forced unsuspecting white women to become enslaved to the mischievous drug'" (emphasis original, qtd. on 23).<sup>6</sup> The "threat of the yellow peril" grew throughout America, and many people even began to suspect Chinese laundries of participating in white slave trade (Derlacher 14). However, the white members of society were just as guilty—perhaps more so—of opium-related crimes.<sup>7</sup>

The latter half of the twentieth century would bring even more problems. In the 1930s and 1940s, Harry Anslinger, the first "drug czar" in the United States, capitalized

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<sup>6</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, Sax Rohmer, an English author, began writing the popular and sensationalist Dr. Fu Manchu stories. The books prominently featured the theme of American as overtaken by Asia (Wu 117). In *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, Rohmer describes the title character as "tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long magnetic eyes of the true cat-green." The physical description was enough to frighten anyone, but the mental prowess that Dr. Fu Manchu possesses makes him an insidious figure:

Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government—which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man. (Rohmer)

Clearly, with this type of attitude pervading the minds of Americans, it is no wonder that the "lusty" Chinese men were thought to be luring white women into their clutches!

<sup>7</sup> In the February 18, 1895 issue of *The New York Times*, an article entitled "Finely-Fitted 'Opium Joint'" details the raid on the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Bailey. The police found three heavily embossed opium pipes (copper, gold, and silver); six lamps of "great beauty"; three ivory sticks; a pair of scales, made of ivory and inlaid with gold; four empty cans that had contained prepared opium; one pound of crude opium; a dozen lichee nut shells full of opium; a jimmy; a pair of iron knuckles; a sweatboard cloth; a roulette cloth; and a revolver. Furthermore, the Baileys were "well dressed" and "indignant." Another opium "joint," belonging to John D. Barr, was also busted after Policeman Cohen of Inspector McAvoy's staff "knocked once, [and] scratched three times" on the door.

on the existing xenophobia America had previously foisted on the Chinese. Anslinger accused Japan of promoting the narcotic traffic in order to control nations they had already invaded, as well as to corrupt the west and gain money. Anslinger also continued to blame the Chinese—this time, the Communists—for the rising problem of heroin addiction in the U.S. during the Cold War. These charges were echoed in the *Pravda* following the 1964 Sino-Soviet split, and again in 1972 by the Taiwanese. By the 1980s, though, the finger would be directly pointed at the United States and the Soviet bloc by Ayatollah Khomeini, who felt that the end of the Cold War could only bring about a conspiracy to distribute heroin in order to control and corrupt Iran (Courtwright 171). As a result, just as the British and the East India Company became the world's first—and largest—drug cartel in the nineteenth centuries (Plant 231), other conquering and imperialist nations would be accused of using drugs to control another country.<sup>8</sup>

Kristeva's theory of the foreigner fits with the history of xenophobia as it relates to addiction, and is particularly useful when dealing with the way junkies narrate in the works of Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky. Kristeva suggests that the foreigner

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<sup>8</sup> The United States would continue to grapple with the "yellow peril," well into the twentieth century. The Vietnam War brought its own heroin problem, and when President Nixon declared the War on Drugs in 1973, the drug became public enemy number one. There was speculation that Nixon declared this homegrown war to divert attention from the increasingly disastrous "real" war in Vietnam, though the fact that a rising number of heroin addicts were returning to the U.S. from Asia could also be the reason behind the War on Drugs. An estimated "30,000 to 40,000 addicts among a total of U.S. troops at that time of approximately 300,000, or about 10 percent" (Musto and Korsmeyer 50-51) were stationed in South Vietnam in 1970, and the reports of servicemen using, smuggling, and pushing drugs appeared at regular intervals in American papers. As a result, heroin continued to rise in popularity in the United States; when cocaine entered the picture in the 1980s, though, heroin quickly lost its popular status. If Nixon was using the War on Drugs as a diversionary tactic, it was one that worked well; addicts became even more demonized in the eyes of society, and the scapegoating of junkies increased in the latter half of the century.

develops into a symptom of an unstable society, the physical embodiment of fear and horror: in other words, the abject. Symptomatically, the foreigner/abject infects society with "Otherness," infiltrating what had once been perceived to be a "stable" community. Psychologically, a foreigner "signifies the difficulty we have of living as an *other* and with others; politically, he underscores the limits of nation-states and of the national political conscience that characterizes them and that we have all deeply interiorized to the point of considering it normal that there are foreigners, that is, people who do not have the same rights as we do" (Kristeva, *SO* emphasis original 103). As is evidenced by the early treatment of actual foreigners—that is, immigrants—who engaged in opiate use, it is not hard to make the leap that anyone associated with drugs would be placed in this category. As seen in Chapter II, the tendency to scapegoat drug addicts became a way for the government to find a group of people to blame for the rising crime rates and instability in American society. As a result, more strident laws and regulations were increasingly enacted against drugs in America in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Carroll opposes the idea that junkies are to be blamed for every immoral infraction in American society. He contests the assumption that junkies are the "slob wastes" of society, stating instead that "[t]he real junkie should be raised up for saying fuck you to all this shit city jive, for going on with all the risks and hassles and cons, willing to face the rap." He fills readers in on the different type of junk user, from the "rich dilettante square ass who dabbles now and then" to the "middle class Westchester weekend dope head, preppies." Finally, he writes of the street kids. While he itemizes each of these "types," Carroll is quick to point out that "[a]ny way counts, folks" (189-

191), a sentiment echoed by Burroughs: "Whether you sniff it smoke it eat it or shove it up your ass the result is the same: addiction" (*NL* 200). Each of these different types Carroll outlines fits with Kristeva's cataloging of the foreigner, because each type infiltrates society with "otherness" at different levels, from the rich to the middle class to the street kids. In the end, the result is always the same: addiction. It does not matter where the addict comes from, or what race he or she is; instead, once a user gets involved with heroin and crosses the line Burroughs draws between desire and need,<sup>9</sup> the junkie no longer has discernible boundaries.

Like the foreigners Kristeva presents in *Strangers to Ourselves*, junkies obviously and explicitly occupy the place of difference, challenging the identity of the group, as well as their own (41-42). In *How to Stop Time*, Marlowe says, "[I]f those you encounter recognize pinned eyes<sup>10</sup> for what they represent, they have to decide how or whether to acknowledge your condition, while if they don't know what they mean, they're dealing with you under false premises" (225). Marlowe's description of the pinned eyes, coupled with the characterizations of junkies that include track marks and grey skin—found in Trocchi, Burroughs, Carroll, and Yablonsky—indicate that the junkie-as-foreigner explicitly occupies a place in society through the physical marking of the addiction.<sup>11</sup> The junkie narrators of these texts become foreigners because they are aware of their different appearance, and know why and how it has come to pass.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>10</sup> In *Heroin*, Humberto Fernandez states that, when a person has used heroin, "[t]he pupils of the eyes become constricted, or 'pinned' in street vernacular. Medically, the constriction of the pupils is known as miosis, and it occurs almost immediately after injection. The 'pinning' is a measure of how strong or pure the heroin is—the smaller the pupil becomes the purer the heroin" (56).

<sup>11</sup> Trocchi addresses this in particular in *Cain's Book*, through his identification with the name in the title.

Through this awareness, the junkie is able to transcend a boundary: he or she is still able to go out in public, and only those who are also heroin addicts will recognize the symptoms of being high. In other words, the straight, non-addicted members of society may comment on the strange pupil size, but will not understand the how or why of it.

The new category of junkie literature shows a group of individuals, considered abject through their choice to engage in illicit drug-taking activity, transgressing the boundaries placed on them by straight society. I suggest that Carroll, Yablonsky, and Marlowe participate in their own act of revolt through writing about their addiction. Marlowe notes that, while many people feel writing about heroin "glamorizes" the drug, "to be silent about it is also to glamorize it by making it secret and forbidden" (153). Junkie literature illuminates the abject lifestyle of the heroin addict, creating a voice to show how the lack of boundaries of the junkie creates a place for a different identity to take root. The junkie's identity shifts in these texts based on why the narrators turn to heroin in the first place: Carroll wishes for a pure self; Marlowe, using heroin to relieve boredom, remains in a state of entropic stasis, halting time; and Yablonsky, in an effort to fit in with the Bohemian crowd, disappears. These themes echo throughout other contemporary narratives of addiction, broadening the definition of the word "junk" to show how identity changes when people turn to various substances in an effort to assuage their fears and fill an indefinable emptiness inside.

In *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim Carroll spends a lot of time chronicling his illegal acts and continuously defying authority. He engages in decidedly impure activities, including robbery, grand theft auto, purse-snatching, and hustling, in order to maintain

his drug habit. For example, Carroll mentions that, in spite of the fact that he does not "dig" mugging people, "it's [his] only way out now" because he has grown disgusted with hustling (199). Carroll spends a majority of the text either robbing someone at knifepoint or engaging in the act of prostitution, even playing gigolo to an older woman who likes to play games, including one where Carroll must dress up in women's clothes (168).<sup>12</sup> While he engages in these illegal and impure acts,<sup>13</sup> Carroll sees no connection to this and his desire to be pure. Instead, I argue that Carroll's hustling, thieving, and acting as a gigolo constitute survival, allowing him to score heroin. There is nothing impure for him in these illegal acts, and indeed, there are times throughout his memoir where Carroll recounts these activities with relish. However, he spends most of his time during *The Basketball Diaries* searching for a pure sense of self.

In order to explore exactly what Carroll is attempting to achieve in *The Basketball Diaries*, the definition of purity must first be examined. Purity is defined as "[t]he state or quality of being morally or spiritually pure; sinlessness; freedom from ritual pollution; ceremonial cleanness; innocence; chastity" (*OED*). Purity is further used to describe a "state or quality of being physically pure or unmixed; freedom from impurities, contaminants or foreign matter; cleanness," as well as "[t]he state or quality of being free from extraneous or foreign elements, or from outside influence; the state of being unadulterated or refined; clarity" (*OED*). Objects can be considered pure on a

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<sup>12</sup> Carroll, however, is quick to remark, "[A]t least I make one fine looking woman in those glowing originals she drapes me in" (168). In spite of all that he loses throughout the narrative—good relationships with his parents, his basketball scholarship, and his good health, to name a few—vanity is something he holds on to.

<sup>13</sup> In the sense that prostitution (both straight and gay), stealing, and doing drugs are considered to be, as explained in Chapter II, socially deviant. Carroll, of course, sees nothing wrong with what he does.

sexual, physical, or moral level. In the case of junkie literature, and in particular Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, the desire for purity develops into something that has little to do with being "clean" and everything to do with returning to a state of innocence. Carroll uses heroin in an attempt to achieve this state of innocence, finding that the drug allows him to return to a nascent state, where everything appears warm and uncomplicated; in short, where the outside world does not intrude. Kristeva notes that purification rites act as an essential ridge, prohibiting the impure or dirty object. As a result, the impure body becomes abject (*PH* 65). For Carroll, the ritual that accompanies heroin, including the steps he takes when he uses the drug, as well as his chronicling his addiction, acts as his argument for achieving a pure sense of self. He loses the innocence of an uncomplicated youth through entering the underworld of the heroin addict, and by doing so, literally purges his body, and metaphorically his soul, permitting the accomplishment of attaining a sense of purity for which he is not aware. Though Carroll willingly injects his bloodstream with heroin, he never quite feels that he has found a type of purity. He does not realize that, through his drug use, he achieves throughout his memoir the purity he desires.

Throughout *The Basketball Diaries*, Carroll uses the literal act of purging in an attempt to attain purity. The last image Carroll leaves us with is the act of vomiting; he writes, "I got to go in and puke. I just wanna be pure . . ." (ellipses original, 210). The act of vomiting causes the body to expel noxious substances, cleaning out the system. One of the definitions of purity is that of a clean body, and Carroll's vomiting is a direct result of his heroin use, and his body's attempt to purify itself of the drug. Vomiting acts

as a compensation for the "collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guarantee[s] the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, . . . g[ives] way before the dejection of its contents" (Kristeva, *PH* 53). In *The Heroin User's Handbook*, Frances Moraes explains that the vast majority of neophyte heroin users experience nausea upon injection, becoming painfully ill and vomiting five or more times from a single dose of heroin. People eventually become inured to the nausea and are able to experience heroin's euphoric effects without the sickness, but for some, queasiness is the price paid for getting high (Moraes 2).<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of his memoir, Carroll belongs to this pack of inexperienced users, but by the end, he is a junkie, and vomiting acts as a way for his body to purify itself. Carroll's vomiting causes him to be caught in a place between human and animal, wallowing and coming closer to what is essential when searching for purity—violence, blood, and a form of death (Kristeva, *PH* 147).

Vomiting is the body's way of purifying itself and maintaining homeostasis, though in the case of heroin, it is not the gastrointestinal system reacting to the presence of something hostile. Instead, as Drs. John Brick and Carlton K. Erickson state in *Drugs, the Brain, and Behavior: The Pharmacology of Abuse and Dependence*, heroin stimulates the neurons in the medulla responsible for the vomit reflex (96). Of course, the ingestion of other drugs, including alcohol, can also cause a person to vomit, but

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<sup>14</sup> Marlowe notes that the skinniest junkies she knows were either people with some type of eating disorder or those "prosaically unable to keep food down on dope," adding, "They're the ones I wonder at ever getting started, the ones who throw up every time they get high. And who knows, maybe they're attracted to their vomiting" (Marlowe 128).



morphine is one of the few drugs that works directly to stimulate the chemoreceptor trigger zone in the brain, where vomiting is the response to the ingestion of a toxic substance (Kuhn et al 193). Heroin is ingested in several ways, including snorting, smoking, subcutaneous injection, intramuscular injection, and intravenous injection. Intravenous heroin injection provides many advantages to a user, including the allowance of a very concentrated dose of morphine to be delivered directly to the brain with little loss of the drug, resulting in a profound rush (Moraes, *The Little Book of Heroin* 46-50). While the method of ingestion does not much matter—the heroin will eventually get into the system in one way or another—the resulting actions from the drug do. The body cleanses itself from the undesirable element, but eventually the nausea will cease as the addict's tolerance grows stronger.

Oddly enough, heroin causes the body to purge itself through vomiting but conversely increases the tension of muscles in the gastrointestinal tract, resulting in constipation (Kuhn et al 193). The same drug that demands bodily purity through vomiting also creates a blockage of excretion. Both vomit and feces, the body's wastes, must be expelled in order for healthy existence. When nothing remains, the body falls beyond the limit. However, feces, as Kristeva suggests, act as one side of the border, "the place where I am not and which permits me to be"; vomit, on the other hand, signifies abjection through the part of the body rejecting something (Kristeva, *PH* 3-4). While constipation indicates a waste that cannot be expelled because the body will not allow it, vomiting shows the violent expulsion of the body's contents, including bile and blood. Kristeva suggests, "Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes

out of the body, out of its pores and openings, . . . gives rise to abjection. Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become *autonomous*, distinct from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it" (emphasis original, *PH* 108). That is, fecal matter is always formed from the waste of the body, but vomit is composed of something not yet fully digested, and therefore not necessarily waste. Essentially, the body must pay, ejecting the contaminants and foreign matter in order to become pure, or, in Kristevian terms, "clean and proper" (*PH* 53).

The necessity to vomit on the part of the junkie depends on several factors. While some heroin addicts cease getting ill after tolerance to the drug is formed, others continue to vomit. A lot of this is based on the purity of the drug itself. Unadulterated heroin causes no damage to the body's organs, but street heroin often contains additives that do not wholly dissolve, resulting in the clogging of blood vessels that can lead to infection and, potentially, death (Ashton 115). Some of the impurities found in street heroin—which Carroll and most of the other authors of junkie lit would be using—include anything from coffee to quinine to glass particles. Moraes remarks, "Most impurities—like coffee—are harmless. You might even like some of them. Coffee, for example, can be tasted after injecting heroin that has been cut with it. Some impurities, like glass and even quinine, can be deadly" (*Handbook* 64). Before ingestion, heroin must go through a "purification process" of its own, which involves cotton, ammonium hydroxide, ethyl ether, water, and baking soda (Moraes, *Handbook* 65-66). This purification process involves pouring the powdered heroin from a glassine envelope into

some sort of receptacle (a spoon, metal lid, or bottle cap), squirting water from the syringe into the powder, applying heat to the bottom of the vessel so that the powder fully dissolves and any adulterants burn away, and finally, once the heroin is fully liquefied, a piece of cotton is used to filter the liquid into the syringe. The higher the purity level of the heroin, the quicker the powder dissolves; the impurities left behind are in the form of a milky liquid (Fernandez 54).

The impurities found in the drug cause the body to implement its own process of purification. For Carroll, impurities are not much cause for concern; in fact, they are cause for celebration. Vomiting, apparently, is something Carroll enjoys:

I don't know what the fuck these cats on 16<sup>th</sup> St. are cutting their dope with, but I can't get off a single shot now without puking . . . [The] bags are excellent in both quality and quantity, empty one of these bags out and you got a happy little white mountain in front of you, so much more convenient . . . Only objection is the puking but dig [. . .] it's no hassle puking while you're getting your rush off this shit. It's fun now. I puke four times a day and I love it now. Puking's the newest thing on the junk scene. Soon *Life* is gonna have a cover story on puking as the new rage, soon the college dudes will have a new campus craze. (Carroll 176)

Carroll's experience with his body's rejection of the drug is to take more rather than less. The heroin allows him access to a novel world where, as he sarcastically comments, "puking" is the newest rage because it indicates how big his habit is, as well as his good connections in the drug scene. His body willfully rejects the drug, but Carroll continues

to engage in, and be enthusiastic about, this behavior. He sees himself as "cool" for being able to do this; his identity is wrapped up in the abject spectacle of the body's insides showing on the outside in a violent way. Vomiting exposes Carroll for the junkie he is, and upsets the borders of the body (Kristeva, *PH* 69), helping him to attain a type of physical purity through cleansing his body of the contaminant of the drug. His status as a junkie, and his willingness to admit the monstrous size of his habit, indicates that this physical purity is not what he is seeking; it is, however, a purity that he perhaps takes for granted.

Carroll, in fact, finds another form of purity through the act of writing. The use of heroin allows Carroll to recognize reality in the face of illusion, a facet of purity explored in Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave." In *How to Stop Time*, Ann Marlowe remarks that heroin acts as a "stand-in, a stop-gap, a mask, for what we believe is missing. Like the 'objects' seen by Plato's man in a cave, dope is the shadow cast by cultural movements we can't see directly" (155). Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave" examines what happens when one prisoner escapes from his bonds and glimpses the outside world. Before he does so, he is chained with his fellow prisoners and forced to view shadows of various objects on the wall, though the captives are not allowed to discuss what they see. When the man frees himself and views the outside world for the first time, he finds himself overcome by the sun. He returns to the cave to inform the other prisoners of the world beyond their limited view; however, they disbelieve what he says, and threaten him with violence if he does not stop talking about the world outside (Plato 227-231; Robinson and Groves 96-97). Plato notes that the parable works as a

way to demonstrate the ways in which our nature is enlightened or unenlightened; once freed from his bonds, the prisoner realizes that "what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhere nearer to reality and turned towards a more real object, he [gets] a truer view" (Plato 227, 229). Purity can thus be achieved when a "prisoner" of daily life finds a way to escape the boundaries placed upon him by society, and sees that the world previously experienced has been nothing more than illusion. Carroll attempts to attain this purity through using heroin; in actuality, he achieves the Platonic version of purity through the act of writing, though he tries other ways, too.

Part of Jim Carroll's obsession with purity stems from his desire to return to a time before he recognizes the world for what it is. Carroll starts writing the diary in 1963, when he is just 13-years-old. During the early 1960s, the world in which Carroll comes of age is one blighted with problems. The war in Vietnam occupies much of his thought, as well as his very real fear of the Russians dropping the bomb on New York City. In the "Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition" of *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas remarks that the 1960s "had progressively convulsed by the experiences of the Vietnam War," resulting in a culture which "rejected domination in any form. Commerce and war were shamed, along with all forms of self-seeking and hypocrisy; formally organised [sic] religion and ritual were decried, formality as such was rejected, [including] clothes, food, [and] bodily comportment" (Douglas xvi). Carroll's world is that of the 1960s, and though the book takes place in the earlier part of the decade, the very real dread of an unstable society and a corrupt government causes him to turn to

heroin in an effort to escape. Furthermore, as Gary Cross observes in *An All-Consuming Century*, the late 1950s and early 1960s ushered in a new kind of environmentalism, one that went beyond advocating resource and wilderness management. Fairfield Osborn, author of *Our Plunder Planet* (1948) and *The Limits of the Earth* (1953), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), and Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1960), all showed that environmental problems were directly related to mass consumption (G. Cross 150-151). This fear of pollution, Douglas notes, caused the "passionate moral principles of the 1960s" to give way to the "attack [on] monstrous technological developments" that endangered the environment (xviii-xix). Carroll's world is one dominated by the threat of impurity from several sources, and it is no wonder that he seeks a way to retain a sense of purity, particularly through the use of something as ritualistic as the ingestion of heroin.

The world of the 1960s is a frightening place for Carroll, and the use of heroin allows him a temporary escape from the insidious threats of nuclear war, Vietnam, and environmental pollution. Carroll decides that he does not bother caring anymore, ranting, "I just refuse to give the slightest fuck anymore and o.k. if I'm all fucked up and, yes, every other race, creed & color sucks and the war in Nam is sanctioned by the Pope who is flawless of course and if I could . . . [I would] load up on some good scag and live in a closet," because "you can't beat them but you can ignore . . . [them] and you begin to cry in the closet because your veins are sore" (145). Carroll's knowledge that he cannot change anything facilitates his desire to use heroin to forget this helpless feeling, and his identity as a junkie in search of a pure self allows him to escape into a different

world, one where the most pressing need is how to return to an innocent state where he no longer has to feel threatened by the impure world around him.

One scene in particular supports my suggestion that Carroll sees purity and innocence as two states that are not mutually exclusive. After the entry detailing Carroll's growing "Pepsi-Cola" habit,<sup>15</sup> in the Fall of 1965, he finds a note in the pocket of his pants during a history class. The note, which turns out to be a poem, was written "a while ago," indicating that the contents, along with his sense of self, are both history. The poem reflects his turn from innocence:

"Little kids shoot marbles  
where branches break the sun  
into graceful shafts of light . . .

I just want to be pure." (Carroll, punctuation original 122)

Carroll offers no explanation for this poem, but clearly he is searching for an innocence he has lost through his growing addiction to heroin. This is even more apparent when he recounts his relationship with a man named Ju-Ju. Earlier, before becoming a junkie, Carroll would pretend to be Ju-Ju's son, acting as though they were homeless, injured, and in desperate need of money. When he later asks Ju-Ju about resurrecting the scheme, Ju-Ju informs him that he looks too grown up; in fact, Ju-Ju says, "[Y]ou got the junk halo now all over. No more innocence man. And frankly, you look totally

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<sup>15</sup> A "Pepsi-Cola" habit occurs when "you're telling yourself, 'Shit, I been fucking around with junk for three years and I know when to lay off and I ain't getting me no habit.' But one morning you wake up" and begin experiencing withdrawal symptoms, including sore muscles, a runny nose, and teary eyes. Carroll concludes, "The laugh's on you finally, no matter how long you think you got it 'under control.' So now I look in the mirror and realize I better cut loose, no jiving myself any longer" (Carroll 122).

seedy" (Carroll 206). Carroll recognizes that he is no longer a child (though he is, technically, barely fifteen), and that the "junk halo" surrounding him has stolen his youthful and innocent appearance. The purity he is searching for cannot be found in acting like a child; he can no longer be one of the children from his poem, innocently shooting marbles in the graceful shafts of sunlight. Instead, because he is shooting his veins full of heroin, Carroll's childhood is something that he cannot return to, and as a result, he begins to understand that in spite of the feeling heroin bestows upon him, he still looks "totally seedy" and no longer appears innocent to the outside observer.

While Carroll realizes that he no longer appears young and innocent after his interaction with Ju-Ju, the poem shows what Carroll himself cannot recognize. Through his writing, he comes close to the catharsis of exposing his wound—his addiction—to the world. When he is thrown in the Riker's Island Juvenile Facility for three months, after getting arrested for possession of three bags of heroin and a syringe,<sup>16</sup> he makes the decision to stay off heroin during his incarceration. The time in Riker's further thwarts Carroll's desire for purity; he decides to put his time in jail behind him "for now and for later, and we won't have any more about it . . . I found a broom closet at the end of my cell-block where I could hide from the ugly screws and filthy cock and sad-eyed forms and learn to love silence and suffice to say that, though I spent four hours a day in that

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<sup>16</sup> Whether by coincidence or not, "three" is a number generally believed to have some sort of meaning across mythologies and religions. In Christianity, "three" represents the holy trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In paganism, "three" stands, in certain cases, as "mother, maiden, and crone." Hinduism incorporates devotion to the three major gods, Siva, Vishnu, and Brahma. These are just three examples of how the number symbolizes a major moment in various religions and mythologies throughout the world. Carroll's "three months" spent in jail for having "three" bags of dope on him could, again, be coincidence, though I found this very interesting based on the fact that, throughout the latter half of his memoir, Carroll spends a lot of time getting high at religious sites.



closet, I didn't become pure on Riker's Island" (Carroll 183-184). Interestingly, Carroll hides from the activities he engages in on a daily basis; throughout his memoir, he has made no attempt to hide the fact that he whored himself out to men to score money for drugs. While in prison, and off heroin, Carroll searches for purity by escaping from these sexual practices. Carroll's body may have gotten clean while on Riker's Island—he gets off heroin and avoids having sex of any kind—but the purity he searches for throughout the text eludes him because he can only attempt to attain this state through using heroin. Writing about his experiences, though, allows him to show a sense of enlightenment. Carroll is aware that he is a junkie, resulting in his acceptance of being object; in this particular passage, he is close to understanding where his pure sense of self comes from, though he cannot quite articulate, or comprehend, that it is the drug that allows him to feel the way he so desires.

Kristeva remarks that, in terms of religion, the ideas of "[p]urity or impurity are thus situated in relation to cult because the latter represents or serves as a *logic of distribution* and behavior on which the symbolic community is founded: a Law, a reason" (*PH* 91).<sup>17</sup> Carroll's knowledge of the Catholic religion is another attempt at attaining purity. This is most evident when he gets in touch with an old junkie friend Franky Pinewater after he gets out of Riker's Island. Pinewater tells Carroll that he attempted to get clean by attending a Catholic high mass. Unfortunately, while there, Pinewater first notices the votives, which remind Carroll of the candles he "clipped out of that same church to get a nice solid flame to cook up the dope on windy nights in the

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<sup>17</sup> Here Kristeva is actually referring to the Old Testament of the Christian Bible; however, she also alludes to the basic tenets of Catholic faith, something Carroll is very aware of.

park." Pinewater continues that he "stare[s] at these candles imagining a little spoon or twist-off bottle cap over each with bubbling dope within. Then the altar boy walks toward the altar lugging a giant candle . . . and it's visions of glassine stamp holders the size of shopping bags and a ten foot long soup spoon over that candle cooking pounds of junk from powder to sweet juice." Finally, when the priest wafts incense over the congregation, Pinewater admits, "It was the absolute, exact same smell as dope when it's cooking, no mistake about it," prompting him to add, "I got up, left, and tore ass home to my bottom drawer and emptied my entire stock into the cooker and over the red candle," where he proceeds to get "stoned" (Carroll 202-204). At this point in the memoir, Carroll's vision of purity shifts, and he becomes immersed in the world of spiritual redemption, his Catholic background providing access to a different type of purity altogether.

Franky Pinewater's story about getting high after attending mass causes Carroll to rethink his own ideas of what it means to be Catholic, and he can identify completely with the religious symbols Pinewater relates. For Carroll, the ritual associated with both heroin addiction and Catholicism acts as a way to attain purity of self. Franky Pinewater's story resonates with Carroll because they are both junkies; each addict sees the world around him in terms of his heroin use. The candles are instruments used to boil the heroin, and the incense becomes the scent of the drug cooking. Both activities—the high mass and getting high—reflect the ritual the user goes through when he wants to get stoned. Carroll begins to equate the religious ceremony with shooting dope because both represent that ritual, and both allow the junkie to experience a form of resurrection.

Death is the absence of life, and heroin provides a junkie with a type of living death. In an interview, Carroll relates, "My dreams, my unconsciousness, that is my inner registry, was made up of Catholicism, for good or bad . . . That was the myth that was thrust into me, and which . . . made sense intellectually in a certain way . . . as well as in a heart sense. So I kind of came to terms. I threw away my anger and looked at the ritual and mythology of it" (qtd. in Gray 220). The ritual and mythology Carroll mentions affords him another opportunity to achieve purity. Franky Pinewater's story, and Carroll's relating the tale in his memoir, mirrors his fascination with the ceremony of Catholicism compared to the ritual of heroin addiction.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the memoir, Carroll eschews the idea of Catholicism. His parents rarely attend mass, and he has never been confirmed or been to confession. When he is forced to go for the first time, in the Winter of 1964, he grouses, "I hated that fucking school and that whole religion worse than anything before with their tiny dark boxes you enter like they were phone booths to God" (Carroll 25).<sup>19</sup> Carroll's feelings about Catholicism indicate that he sees religion as another hypocritical institution; however, throughout the latter half of the memoir, as Timothy Gray in "A World Without Gravity": The Urban Pastoral Spirituality of Jim Carroll and Kathleen Norris" observes, Carroll gets high at various places with some sort of religious connotation,

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<sup>18</sup> In the film version of *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim Carroll makes a cameo appearance, playing the character of Franky Pinewater. In the film, Carroll-as-Pinewater tells Leonardo DiCaprio—who is playing the young Carroll of the memoir—that he "loves the ritual" associated with getting high. This mirrors his fascination with the rituals and mythologies associated with Catholicism, particularly since this comes about from the incident Pinewater relates about the need to shoot heroin after attending a Catholic mass.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, near the end of *The Basketball Diaries*, Carroll will once again engage in the act of confession when he hides out in his broom closet while on Riker's Island.

including St. Mark's Place and outside the Cloisters Museum (219).<sup>20</sup> The ritual accompanying heroin addiction correlates to the one practiced by Catholics. As an adult, Carroll hearkens back to what he has written as a teenager; in the song "Catholic Boy," he sings that he is, in fact, a "Catholic boy" who has been "[r]edeemed through pain/not through joy" because he "make[s] a contribution" and "get[s] absolution" in an attempt to purify his soul. Carroll's contribution, murky as it is, can be seen in the form of his writing; he believes that purification is made possible because he cannot be touched since he has "every sacrament behind" him ("Catholic Boy"). Clearly, Carroll believes his desire for purity has been attained in some way based on the sacraments—the rituals—that accompany the Catholic religion. In doing so, Carroll adopts the tenets of the Catholic religion as they relate to the ideas of death and resurrection, finding absolution in the ritual of heroin addiction. The idea of a junkie resurrecting from the dead in the same way as Jesus and Lazarus in the Bible helps Carroll to make this connection, particularly since he is obsessed with the idea of reclaiming some sort of childhood innocence through the use of drugs.

In an interview given as an adult, Carroll warns potential addicts that "'it's not hip to indulge yourself at the bottom unless you're planning one hell of a resurrection'" (qtd. in Gray 221). Junkies have the unique chance to rise up and start over, a feeling that

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<sup>20</sup> St. Mark's Place is a series of streets in the East Village area of New York City, home to, among other things, the first Hebrew-Christian Church in America, St. Marks-on-the-Bowery, and other religious establishments. It became a mecca for the hippies, beatniks, and counterculture rebels throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (East Village History Project). The Cloisters houses the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of art and architecture from medieval Europe, and incorporates elements from five medieval French cloisters, as well as from other monastic sites in southern France ("The Cloisters").

stems from a metaphorical return to the womb. The idea of resurrection brings to mind something that is untouchable and impossible; in short, the abject. Kristeva refers to this impossible and untouchable thing as the body of the mother, which the abject is always attempting to confront (*PH* 6). For Carroll, the ability to crawl back into a state of innocence occurs through using heroin, causing him to feel that he returns to the womb. In the last entry of *The Basketball Diaries*, Carroll writes that he is nodding out in a dirty basement, "Headquarters," with a friend. He tells us that he has been high for four days of "temporary death," unable to "attempt [a] human posture" (Carroll 209-210). This inability to obtain a "human posture" causes Carroll to resemble a fetus; recounting a conversation with another junkie, Carroll notes, "Ever notice how a junkie nodding begins to look like a foetus after awhile?' That's what it's all about, man, back to the womb" (210). Heroin creates in the body a warm, euphoric feeling (Fernandez 57), and dissipates fear, pain, hunger, frustration, stress, and anxiety, providing the junkie with a safe place, "[w]rapped up in cotton wool" (Ashton 114). Indeed, a majority of the writing Carroll does while high reflects the "warm beautiful pain" in his veins as he attempts to sort out what it means to be pure (177).

This return to the womb, particularly the safety offered by such a space, lets Carroll get as close to the innocence he associates with purity as he possibly can, and the rebirth, the coming down off the high, indicates a form of resurrection. The feeling of returning to the womb echoes the "immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva, *PH* 10). The purity Carroll searches for is thus found through his heroin addiction, as well as through the

chronicling of his junkie lifestyle. He realizes the world for what it is, escaping the illusion and leaving his childhood behind, finding solace in the warm, comfortable feeling—like being in the womb—that heroin offers, without actually becoming a child once again.

Mary Douglas observes, "The quest for purity is pursued by rejection" (199). Purity must be something that we are willing to sacrifice for in order to attain, and the search attempts to "force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction" (Douglas 200). Carroll's problem throughout the text is that he does not truly understand what it means to be pure; purity and wholesomeness are two different states of being, and for Carroll, the desire for purity is that same as what other junkies want—a feeling of being whole. While I speak more to this concept in the next chapter, I find it important to note that Carroll's quest for purity does become somewhat fulfilled, though he ultimately rejects the way it does. Not only does Carroll physically purge his body of toxins, he also sluices his soul through the act of writing. The "wound" where one enters into the analytical must be kept open, allowing for a truer version of the experience to be written (Kristeva, *PH* 27), and Carroll's writing causes his "soul to reach *orgy* and *purity* at the same time. What is involved is a purification of body and soul by means of a heterogeneous and complex circuit" (Kristeva, *PH* 28). Writing allows Carroll to purge his soul, and Carroll's honest and uncomfortable rendering of his pubescent years allows a type of purity to take place. Jim Carroll's submersion into the underworld of the junkie, as well as his careful detailing of his pubescent years, causes society to view him as abject, particularly since the activities he engages in—whoring and stealing, for

example—are decidedly impure and unclean. At the same time, *The Basketball Diaries* provides a space for Carroll to articulate a wide range of passions, employing the very Catholic idea of confession in order to do so. Carroll fills the pages of his memoir with enthusiasm and suffering, with getting high and vomiting, and through this honest depiction of his junkie identity, he achieves, without realizing it, his goal of "being pure."

Carroll's cycle of death and resurrection throughout *The Basketball Diaries* shows how the junkie is able to pull back from oblivion and return to waking life. While the second phase of the high carries a user towards unconsciousness and seems to be the prototypical near-death experience, heroin is really about humans convincing themselves of their immortality (Marlowe 193-194). The ability to stop time and experience both death and resurrection without actually leaving this plane of existence causes a "hologram" persona for the junkie. Marlowe suggests that, in spite of the selfishness that heroin favors in its users, "the drug erodes individuality" (176). Junkies turn into a "vague projection, a scattered set of data points that doesn't seem big enough for the body from which it's emanating"; when confronted with "'holograms' for the first time, you are struck mostly by the gaps, the areas where the personality appears to have leached out. It's as though you can pass your arm through their bodies, for all the psychic space they take up" (Marlowe 176). While Marlowe herself uses the drug, she separates herself from these holograms, claiming that she avoids being a junkie because she calibrates her dope so that she does not need rehab; in reality, she wishes she could "just give up the struggle against addiction" (Marlowe 188). In spite of this resistance,

Marlowe joins the group of junkie lit novelists and autobiographers, telling the story of junk as one that halts the passage of time and arrests the junkie's identity in a place that moves neither forward nor back. By viewing the junkie as a hologram, for instance, "we are confronted with a limit that turns the speaking being into a separate being who utters only by separating," and the "constituting barrier between subject and object . . . become[s] an unsurmountable wall" (Kristeva, *PH* 46-47). The junkie has no clear boundaries marking her body and cannot be assimilated into conventional modes of categorization; the junkie becomes abject.

The entrance into the world of heroin addiction, chronicled in her memoir *How to Stop Time*, shows Ann Marlowe as someone desperately wanting to fit in with a crowd with whom she clearly does not belong. Marlowe admits the appeal of dope came to her as a purely aesthetic thing based on the "relative suavity, and hard-edged[]" reputation of the drug (Marlowe 173). Instead of advocating the free-love hippie ideal of a drug like marijuana, heroin consumption represents materialism. There is no righteousness surrounding the drug because, to Marlowe, "[h]eroin was bad for you, period," allowing "access to a secret world, and like all secret worlds, it bestows a feeling of belonging, and enforces its own conformities" (Marlowe 102). This desire to be part of this consumerist world fascinates Marlowe because she wishes to be part of something that enforces its own conformities while remaining decidedly rebellious in the eyes of hegemonic culture. The underworld of the heroin addict is a place where, as seen in Trocchi, laws and prohibitions do exist, but not in the same way as they do in straight culture. Marlowe's writing indicates that she feels the junkies surrounding her



give her something to identify *against*, and though her self-awareness and self-confidence permits her to observe these other addicts, she is, according to society, a junkie, too.

In Marlowe's estimation, the junkie does not belong to any place, love, or time; he or she loses an origin, resulting in a present that is in abeyance. I propose that Marlowe's purpose in writing the book is not to give a glossary for the public about heroin addiction, but to erase taboos associated with junkies and show the abject identity inherent in use of the drug. Marlowe confesses, "The biggest, darkest secret about heroin is that it isn't wonderful: it's a substance some of us agree to pursue as though it were wonderful, because it's easier to do that than to figure out what is worth pursuing" (155). Of course, for Jim Carroll, this is not necessarily the case; Carroll clearly feels that heroin affords him an opportunity to attain purity. For Marlowe, heroin starts out as something wonderful, but quickly becomes something that she uses to fill an ineffable void and to provide her an identity that is arrested in time, which may seem glorious while high, but, in the end, is always detrimental to the junkie.

By entering the underworld, Marlowe—a middle-class woman from a quiet family—can identify with her bad "other," the one who transgresses the fragile boundaries of an uncertain self (Kristeva, *SO* 188). She admits to trying the drug so she can be considered cool, implacable and "outlaw" (Marlowe 188). One of the most seductive aspects of heroin involves the immediate access to people of other races, cultures, and incomes, groups she approaches cautiously so as not to appear ridiculous or uncool (Marlowe 100, 83). The outlaw nature associated with heroin, and the business

aspect related to the buying and selling of dope, acts as a microcosm for capitalist society as a whole. Much like the larger consumer culture, heroin is, in Marlowe's estimation, a drug used by "bossy wired hustling obsessive-compulsives" who are "ashamed" of their behavior. Marlowe adds,

We decide we would rather be cool, but we gravitate to those aspects of this aesthetic that can be purchased because this is an action we understand. While dope is in some way the ultimate hipster buy . . . it's still a purchase and the user is a consumer. Centering your life around coping is not so different from centering your life around shopping or making deals. Same activity, different aesthetic. (46)

While Marlowe equates heroin addiction with the ultimate act of consumption—a type of shopping—the fact of the matter is that the world of dope revolves around schedules where a timetable must be adhered to in order to refrain from sickness. It may be a fashionable aesthetic to be a junkie in Marlowe's world, but even the hippest user cannot escape sickness when the need for heroin arises and supplies are short. In Carroll's world, vomiting proves that an addict is tragically hip, and when a user ingests enough junk to get a habit, then he possesses the identity of the junkie; for Marlowe, becoming a junkie is a decision based on aesthetics. However, if a person uses enough heroin, then she will become a junkie regardless of how "cool" it is to do the drug. Clearly, the reasons for choosing to do heroin are lost when a casual user becomes addicted, and whether it is fashionable or not to use heroin does not matter.

In *Junky*, Burroughs points out that the heroin addict must adhere to a schedule, and this idea is found in subsequent junkie literature following World War II. In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva indicates that the female body poses a problem in respect to the concept of time because she represents "an anxiety that other temporalities hide from our view" (205-206). While Kristeva refers to female subjectivity, I would argue that this conception of temporality can also be applied to junkies. Junkies rupture traditional chronology by "reshaping it, reorganizing otherwise pointless and fragmentary time around the 'need' for a drug, setting up a schedule that is as independent of clock and calendar," reinserting herself "in[to] a harsh chronology based, like the old, outmoded one, on the body, but this time on the waxing and waning of heroin in [the] bloodstream, making time fungible but harmless" (Marlowe 58-59). Linear temporality is rejected (Kristeva, *NM* 208) when the junkie forms a schedule around the act of heroin consumption. She remains where she is, stuck in one place, neither moving forward nor back. Carroll refers to using heroin as a "nine to five gig," but in reality, the junkie's life revolves around using the drug, unless some sort of mishap occurs, such as an overdose that leads to death.

When an addict stops doing a drug for pleasure and crosses over into addiction, her use, like the concept of time, is something that cannot be contained. Marlowe explains that heroin addiction is a way to control the elapsing hours and, by doing so, stop time completely. Of course, time continues through the haze of heroin addiction, but the drug does provide a schedule to live by and keeps death at bay. Every day resembles the previous and next, and the fact that time inevitably passes is unnoticed by

the junkie (Marlowe 263). In the end, addiction is, as Carroll notes, a job. Instead of being surrounded by the office detritus of staplers and paper, though, the tools of the drug—syringes and spoons—clutter the space and act as constant reminders of the passage of time. This paraphernalia provokes, rather than eradicates, the anxieties associated with growing older, and though the junkie believes that she obtains an immortal identity, heroin actually stops the act of living. Marlowe laments, "Your last few years of use are like suspended time, and this absence of living tells on your face, and, alas, on your heart" (11). The corruption of the aging process, and the absence of living, causes the "socialized appearance of the abject" (Kristeva, *PH* 15-16), and though the junkie experiences a state of entropy, the world around her does not, and the wear and tear associated with the drug, from the constant cycle of death and resurrection, eventually appears written on the body.

The ability to stay in one place, at least psychically, without the threat of impinging time, holds the junkie in stasis. Each individual user brings her own "time-linked terrors" to the drug; Marlowe muses that someone living in a housing project in the ghetto may turn to heroin to keep an early violent death away. Others, including Marlowe, want to halt the "injuries time might bring," among these, painful relationships, incurable diseases, and loneliness (293-294). No matter how powerful the pharmacological means, though, the end result is that the junkie shuts herself out through this denial of time (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 65-66), providing an existence in the barest definition of the word. When a junkie refuses to live in the same temporality as the rest of society, she denies herself the right to be a subject of that world. Heroin allows

Marlowe to experience her feelings as remote and feeble, as opposed to the overwhelming ones associated with "straight life" (Marlowe 129), but her identity as a junkie excludes her from being part of hegemonic society. She is accursed by her choice to enter into the world of heroin addiction, and becomes an abject other (Kristeva, *SO* 43).

Under the guise of the heroin high, time no longer acts as an active agent that encroaches on life. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva suggests that a singular moment, one that is massive, traumatic, and weighty, depresses temporality and removes perspective (60). For the junkie, this means using heroin to return to a time when life, and one's identity, were easily ascertained; junkies regress to the "paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience," remaining faithful to the past; however, if "no revolution is possible, there is no future" (Kristeva, *SO* 60). Marlowe finds this retreat into nostalgia appealing because "[w]e are ever more aware of the arbitrariness of the way we imagine time, but there is nothing we can do about it" (48-49), which makes the identity formed while on heroin seductive. Heroin provides a space to grieve for the past and keep it close at hand because the constant cycle and schedule provided allows the junkie to incorporate the past into the present; like other forms of mourning, though, heroin keeps count as "a defense against entropy, everything running down, collapsing into hopeless chaos. Addiction relies on the tension of enough/not enough, now/not now to organize life and ward off chaos" (Marlowe 130). The psychic tomb where junkies exist permits them to anchor themselves to the past and to ignore the world around them (Kristeva, *BS* 61), though Marlowe notes there is "nothing unique about the past to mourn, and nothing

unique about the future to fear" (58-59). Stuck between the past and the present, the junkie never moves anywhere; while she feels no tension, those around her do, and heroin addiction merely replaces one type of grief with another.

Like Carroll's desire to return to the womb, the comfort provided by heroin is short-lived. The only true nostalgia the junkie feels is one that hearkens back to the search to "re-achieve the First Time" and "continues as an expression for love of repetition itself" (Marlowe 262). The first time a person tries heroin, a rush is felt, but once a user becomes a junkie, she rarely gets high. Instead, addicts get "well" (Moraes, *Handbook* 70). Marlowe wishes for the time "when heroin felt instantly, overwhelmingly wonderful," and states that if she were to offer a definition for addiction, she would "call it a form of mourning for the irrevocable glories of the first time" (9). This search merely locks the junkie into a schedule, and she still cannot thwart the grim ambiguous specter of time. The truth is that time is not something we can ever stop, no matter what unsafe methods—Botox, heroin, or plastic surgery, for example—we turn to in order to try. The drive to return to the past is not innocent. Marlowe shows this through the identity of the junkie, who dwells in a state of constant fear of both death and normal life, and creates only the love of predictable experience (Marlowe 10).

Marlowe's suggestion that the use of heroin halts time mirrors Carroll's desire to attain a sense of purity. Both ideas indicate a desire to stay in, or return to, a past that no longer exists. For Carroll, the purity he wants is directly tied to the innocence of his childhood. For Marlowe, addiction develops into a case of diminishing returns. For

both Carroll and Marlowe, this drive to return to the past creates in the junkie the need for more heroin. As a result, the less an addict gets heroin, the more the junkie needs the drug. This happens when, according to Marlowe, using heroin grows less rewarding and, as a result, the past begins to look better, which is something Carroll begins to realize in his search for purity throughout *The Basketball Diaries*. Furthermore, for both Carroll and Marlowe, the future is worse than the present, and certainly more so than the past, which indicates that the worst has already happened (Marlowe 193). The stopping of time creates a new identity for the addict and the junkie's schedule revolves entirely around the drug. Like Carroll, some turn to heroin to return to an uncomplicated time, while others, in Marlowe's estimation, let time elapse without being immersed in the actual process of aging. In Marlowe's world, the real threat of heroin is the metaphorical addiction, the one that promises to stop time so the junkie stays rooted in one place. Heroin keeps the junkie in a state of suspended animation, but kills any pleasure that real living brings. The drug takes over, and the time that is so desperately fought against actively erases the previous identity of the addict, turning her into a junkie.

While Marlowe refers to this loss of identity as holographic, Linda Yablonsky uses the image of the ghost to show disappearance in her novel *The Story of Junk*. Earlier in the chapter I note that Marlowe posits that using heroin is about humans convincing themselves of their immortality, as the drug offers the chance to lose consciousness but still maintain life (193-194). This ability to stop time and experience both death and resurrection without actually dying creates a nebulous persona, and the junkie, as a result of this constant return from the edge of death, becomes a ghost, a

creature Burroughs refers to as "grey and spectral and anonymous" (*NL* 7). The junkie not only teases and defies death, but she also takes on the appearance of one that has somehow transcended into immortality: the ghost, powerless outside and impossible inside (Kristeva, *PH* 49), a creature without boundaries who can only be viewed as abject.

Junkie literature focuses on this ability to turn into an apparition, to be alive without existing in the usual sense of being. Kristeva suggests that the fear of dying dictates an attitude of ambivalence because we imagine ourselves as enduring, and death always remains the survivor's enemy; as she notes in *Strangers to Ourselves*, "Apparitions and ghosts represent that ambiguity and fill with uncanny strangeness our confrontations with the image of death" (Kristeva 185). Death represents both an end and a beginning that frightens us when we confront it; as a result, we invest these spectral beings with some sort of evil. For the junkie, however, the ability to transcend the boundaries between life and death and back again causes the image of heroin to possess a malevolent power, one that creates fear. The presence of the power of something that allows navigation through such ambiguous space worries, because we can somehow dimly sense that we all have the ability to go to this space ourselves (Kristeva, *SO* 185). Of course, heroin, referred to as "Satan in a Syringe" by many (Moraes, *Handbook* 11), is widely considered an evil substance in which only the dejected and lower class members of society would engage with, though I show in Chapter II how morals are subverted through the use of, and reading about, heroin addiction. Heroin allows the junkie to flirt with death, and then return to the land of the



living. The identity of the junkie disappears, replaced with a grey, spectral presence. The body loses boundaries, fading in and out, unable to stop the flow of time or become truly pure. The idea that heroin is "Satan in a Syringe" also brings to mind the idea of selling one's soul to the devil in order to get something in return. Instead of getting a fabulous life, fame, or wealth, the junkie disappears.

Ann Marlowe remarks, "Dope can make you bad looking, especially if you're using a lot: you retain water, so your face grows puffy and aged, you develop blemishes, your skin looks green" (10). She later adds, "But heroin also seems to retard the aging process. People who've been involved with dope are pickled by it, preserved from decay" (Marlowe 10). While Marlowe's contradictory views on the process of time and aging indicate that the wear and tear of dope use shows on the body, the fact of the matter is, dope also strips the addict of his or her identity. The idea of disappearance emerges in both Carroll and Marlowe, but Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* shows that the junkie slowly grows fainter, piece by piece, until there is no true identity left. The narrator of Yablonsky's story remains unnamed throughout the novel, and this acts as the first indication that, even pre-heroin, she possesses no real identity. While she is, in fact, the narrator of the novel, the fact of the matter is that she spends most of her time detailing the antiheroes of the story: heroin and Kit. Her life is made up entirely of the world around her, and the fact that she has no name, and clings to Kit and the junkie identity, indicates that she is somehow the missing piece in her own story. She appears to be made up of an almost cardboard identity—a woman who comes from a blue collar family and nothing more. She tells us that she moves to New York City, but gives no

real indication of why, and before she meets Kit, she seems to be on the outside of the hip crowd, looking in but not really accepted. As the story progresses and she gets involved with Kit (who leads a band with the name Toast, an apt metaphor for getting burnt), the narrator links her identity to that of her lover. Finally, through the love triangle formed between the narrator, Kit, and heroin, any identity she has, whether through her lover or the drug, completely fades until she becomes grey, spectral, and anonymous.

The narrator begins the novel feeling adrift, searching for a community where she can belong. Heroin allows the narrator to enter a world she previously longed to be part of, the hip bohemian community of early 1980s New York City. She desires this trendy lifestyle, seeking out a way to escape the straight middle-class world of her youth. Growing up in the north of Philadelphia places her family "in between, not working-class but not professional, either. Truly middle—just where [she] hated to be" because "middle meant ordinary. Middle meant safe" (Yablonsky 80). She meets Kit while working at Sticky's, a bar, and their subsequent relationship allows her to enter a world that is neither middle-class nor ordinary. Her previous identity of the middle-class, "ordinary" woman is erased, and she enters the realm of "filmmakers, poets, painters, [and] musician[s]." Not all of these artsy people are into drugs, but "they all come together and hang out," explains the narrator. "It's not a big scene but I enjoy it. I was always such a loner. I have a community now" (Yablonsky 94). This community is made up of the people who do not care what others think; this group includes people who are gay and straight, addicted and sober, artistic and blue collar. By blurring the

lines between identities, the community she yearns for shows itself to be abject, and the members of this group have found a way in which to reconcile how they do not fit with hegemonic culture (Kristeva, *SO* 195). This enables the narrator to shift her identity from suburban middle-class to hipster rebel junkie, and she becomes the center of attention in a group she had previously only been able to admire from afar.

The narrator of Yablonsky's book integrates herself into this community of hipster rebels, but we are never told her name. She tells us that she no longer stands out among "the living ghosts" in the streets, and admits that she "like[s] the look; it makes [her] interesting" (Yablonsky 62). She does not have a name, so in many ways, she is already missing from the book. She willingly immerses herself into this culture in order to facilitate some sort of identity, and she is proud of being anonymous to her readers and to the society surrounding her. Kristeva posits, "Exile always involves a shattering of the former body" (*SO* 30). In order for the narrator to truly be part of the "in crowd," she needs to shatter her repressive, middle-class past. Using heroin allows her to do so, and when she meets Kit, she finds the identity to which she wishes to become attached. Kit, she is informed, is a "real" junkie (Yablonsky 39), and after meeting her, the narrator gives up her own life because Kit's life is "more important" (Yablonsky 50) because she is the one who has a career. The narrator joins Kit in using heroin, and the musician acts as the catalyst for the narrator's exiling of her former body—from a mere dabbler in drugs to a full blown junkie, as well as from a straight to lesbian lifestyle. She and Kit "dress[] in each other's skin—the skin of the High House of Heroin, in the mythical Land of Grim" (Yablonsky 151). The narrator forms an identity through

another; Kit is the "distinguished" type of person whom Kristeva mentions because she is the one who is talented and famous, and the narrator's relationship with both her lover and the drug both frees her from, and causes her more, distress at the end of the novel.

While the narrator has no real identity at the beginning of the novel, the character of Kit is clearly outlined. The narrator is self-aware, but one of the main focal points of the novel is Kit. Kit stands out because she is a talented musician; at the same time, her appearance suggests that she is already vanishing into the world of heroin addiction before the two get together. Kit's initial appearance resembles that of an albino: white hair, light blue eyes that appear red on occasion, and very pale skin. When she does not have heroin Kit's skin turns "the color of a sky before a snow" (Yablonsky 46). Kit's skin, already pale, shows her other identity—that of a junkie. She has crossed a threshold that suggests she is not quite human, though not quite other, either. The presence of this border, which the narrator will also eventually cross, causes both vivid concern and delight, acting as a standing invitation to an inaccessible journey where the junkie holds on to a physical, mute, and visible memory of what she was like before heroin (Kristeva, *SO* 4). Kit appears otherworldly, but her addiction shows itself on her skin, further highlighting her difference for all to see. The grey color indicates this border: she is somewhere between being alive and dead, and there are no clear shades of black and white in the story. Kit inhabits a different place, and her ashy skin marks her not only as a junkie, but also as one who is becoming a type of walking corpse.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva proposes that the corpse represents the ultimate in abjection, since it is "death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which

one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object . . . [I]t beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). As the ultimate signifier of abjection, the corpse reminds us that we will all die; in the case of heroin, though, the use of junk acts as a type of death infecting life. Junkies, with their ghost-like appearance, act as walking corpses. The idea of a walking corpse is particularly true of Kit, particularly since the narrator fears Kit leaving her, either through addiction or death, because then she would have to be alone, and once again would have no real identity. As her own addiction to heroin grows, the narrator begins to see her lover as a spectral figure that is slowly fading away. This is perhaps the most clear when Kit develops bone-crusher symptoms (Yablonsky 180).<sup>21</sup> Kit's required hospitalization and her reaction to the treatment frightens the narrator, particularly since she can see her lover fading away, the boundaries separating her from life and death disappearing into abjection (Kristeva, *PH* 18): "[Kit's] walking on air. I grasp her arm. I'm afraid she'll float away" (Yablonsky 185). While it turns out that Kit has endocarditis, an infection of the lining of her heart, instead of some sort of bone-crusher disease, the fact of that matter is she enters a new phase of addiction. Kit's new phase of addiction resembles the purity Carroll searches for in *The Basketball Diaries*, particularly since it is a type of resurrection that recalls death and what came before it, but misses what comes beyond, so that only a feeling of reprieve, at having gotten away from it, remains (Kristeva, *SO* 8). That is, the junkie

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<sup>21</sup> Yablonsky defines this as "what you get when a piece of cotton from the spoon slips inside your vein. It induces cold-turkey chills, fever, cramping, and retching, but feels even more intense, as if your bones are crumbling and you're going to die, soon. Only another shot can put you out of your misery. If you're steady enough to hold the needle and have something left to shoot" (180). Again, this becomes a question of purity within the heroin itself; if the injection is tainted, then the body can become tainted and sickness arises. See section on Carroll for more on purity.

does not die, but returns to the land of the living, though each time she comes back to life, she loses something of herself. Kit becomes even more of an apparition because of her sickness, hovering near literal death, and slips into a new kind of crisis, becoming even more detached. She claims that heroin is the only thing that helps her, and though it does make her feel better, the narrator notices that Kit's skin turns even greyer and that there is no life behind her eyes (Yablonsky 196).

Using heroin makes Kit's escape from actual death counterproductive because she refuses to feel the pain of life and continues to use heroin to dull this. The narrator believes this is counterproductive, because "[s]ome things have to hurt, that's all. It's the way life goes. We don't have to like it. I wonder if miracles really happen. But drugs were made for people to believe in miracles. Chemistry is magic: it can turn shit to gold and gold to shit, just like that" (Yablonsky 196). Even though their connection fades along with their physical appearance, the narrator always describes Kit in an awestruck way: heroin gives Kit an edge that makes her music intense and wonderful, and helps her feel better in spite of the seriousness of her illness. Heroin manages to turn "shit into gold." At the same time, heroin impedes Kit's complete resurrection into the land of the living, turning "gold into shit." Kit literally fades away in front of the narrator's eyes, turning grey and diminishing in appearance. The dope creates a spectral appearance, but in the same way that ghosts are able to be seen and exist in some ways, heroin also manages to sustain a type of life for the junkie.

Kit's reliance on heroin repels the narrator, though she admits that if heroin has yet to kill Kit, it probably will not (Yablonsky 195). The narrator seems less concerned

about her own dope use; in fact, she resembles Marlowe, who felt that she never had to worry about being a "real" junkie who "didn't have to get high to function" because she "kept to this side of what [she] considered the junkie divide." Marlowe adds, "I measured myself against the notion of the junkie, half with dread, half with envy . . . I existed in opposition to the state of 'the junkie'; I might approach it asymptotically, but never touch" (188). Yablonsky's narrator, like Marlowe, appears to be measuring her drug use against that of Kit's, who, as we were informed earlier, is a "real" junkie. In the end, though, the narrator seems to accept what Marlowe does not—that drugs became a problem instead of a pastime (Yablonsky 24), complaining about the fact that the "devil D, it got into my life . . . and threw itself over my senses. It thinks for me, it breathes for me, it fucks for me. Master and servant, it lives for me. *It lives*. It has no passion, except for me. Everything I want, it gives me, but it doesn't give enough. I want that devil to die. But how do you kill a devil? There's no part of you that doesn't belong to it." She concludes, "Everything you do to it, you do to you" (Yablonsky 19).

In the end, the narrator realizes that heroin has destroyed her past, her identity, and her future. She no longer exists in the "real" world, and when the novel starts, she is actually being arrested for dealing dope. The narrator spends most of her time chronicling Kit, not realizing that she is the one who has become the most lost. She admits to feeling like "Styrofoam" (Yablonsky 299), disconnected with Kit and her own sense of self. She feels she is virtually transparent and unrecognizable to those she once knew, even passing old friends on the street who "[don't] notice" her (Yablonsky 299). She ceases to exist, even among her friends, and though she is not, in the words of

Burroughs "exactly invisible," she is "at least difficult to see" because her "presence attract[s] no special notice" (*NL* 60). Once the center of attention in her bohemian circle, the narrator, a "real" junkie like Kit, is now completely unrecognizable. When the novel concludes, she finds that she has lost any identity she ever had: her job as Sticky's cook, her standing as Kit's lover, her position as a dope dealer, and even her existence as a human being. As a junkie, the narrator no longer stands out from the other living ghosts floating in the streets. Whereas this was something she was once proud of—it made her "interesting"—she is now appalled at her own lack of substance. She once belonged to the untouchable universe of the other dope addicts that was not "threatened by the war between same and others, ghosts and doubles" and now sees, as Kristeva notes, "nothing more than smoke, [and] imaginary structures" (*SO* 191). Like Styrofoam, the narrator is something generic, a thing unrecognizable not only to those she once considered friends, but also to herself.

Identity, always fluid, never fixed, fades into something unrecognizable in the world of junkie lit, a creation that is neither pure nor impure and exists in a state of ambiguity. The lack of boundaries associated with the identity of the junkie resemble the spectral figure of a ghost, a creature overlooked and, if noticed, rejected, by members of the mainstream. Junkie literature "stocks a ghostly world with this second and secondary discourse. As in hallucination, his verbal constructs—learned or shocking—are centered in a void" (Kristeva, *SO* 32). Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky represent this void, showing the junkie as an abject stranger in a familiar country whose constructed figure lacks psychic space and personality. Carroll's desperate search for



purity, risked through boundary transgression and dependent upon ritual (Douglas 199), is realized through the state of abjection that accompanies heroin addiction. Marlowe's junkie, suspended in time, represents an abject identity that can move neither forward nor back, in spite of the desire to escape into the world of nostalgia. Marlowe warns that addiction shows what is deeply suspect about this, as the desire to return to the past is not innocent; instead, "[i]t's about stopping your passage to the future, it's a symptom of fear of death, and the love of predictable experience. And the love of predictable experience, not the drug itself, is the major damage done to heroin users. Not getting on with your life is much more likely than going to the emergency room, and much harder to discern from the inside" (10). This entropy locks the junkie in the moment, thus causing her identity to fade into the world of Yablonsky's ghost. Junkie narrators exist in the world of abjection, and junkie literature exposes the world where the inner and outer borders created by society cease to exist, risking a place where the symbolic order associated with identity and subjectivity are permanently exposed (Kristeva, *PH* 69).

Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky, in writing about junkies, show that anyone can enter this world of addiction and lose the boundaries associated with identity. Each narrator uses heroin in an attempt to achieve an impossibility: Carroll wants to return to the past, Marlowe wishes to stop the aging process, and Yablonsky's narrator desires the time when her relationship with both Kit and heroin were fun. In writing about these activities, I find that each author poses the real threat of heroin—anyone can become a drug addict. All three authors stem from a working class background, and in spite of

their ages, and even their gender differences, they all turn into junkies throughout the course of their narratives.

Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, Marlowe's *How to Stop Time*, and Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* represent the junkie as a foreigner who chooses to be outside of society, forever changed through his or her addiction. The unnamed narrator of *The Story of Junk* explains that these stories, and the junkies showcased, are a compendium of all heroin addicts. Her story, for example, is one that is told to her through her friends and customers. She believes that drug addicts are some of the best people she has ever known, and in writing *The Story of Junk*, she wishes to answer the question of why anyone would choose to lose her identity to heroin addiction, noting that it has nothing to do with being considered "nice" or not. She explains that junkies engage with heroin for several reasons, and attempts to subvert typical thoughts associated with junkies' reasons for getting addicted:

It's not because our lives have been so tragic, or so lonely, though that might be the case. And it's not because our parents didn't love us, though that might be the case. It's not because of any personal failures or unmet expectations, though you could count on all of it to play a part. And it's not because some of us died too young, even if it's true. It's not even because we like heroin—that's just a song and dance. There's no way to excuse or explain it. The whole story of junk is a song and dance. Everyone's got a story to tell, and most of these stories will change in

some way, every time they're told. Not this one, not the story of junk.

This one's always the same. (Yablonsky 325)

In spite of her assertion that the story of junk is always the same across the board, I believe that this is not the case. In fact, Yablonsky's narrator contradicts herself, as her reasons, like Carroll's and Marlowe's, for engaging with heroin are numerous. While the story of junk inevitably involves the tales of addicts, it also makes way for a new type of identity to emerge; one that seeks to loosely position itself against what is perceived as normal, ordinary, and boring, on the one hand, and confining on the other. The junkie narrators featured in the world of junkie lit are interchangeable only to the extent that, after World War II, they begin to focus on subverting social beliefs associated with the question of the dirty drug addict.<sup>22</sup> Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky indicate that the identity of the junkie is multi-faceted, in spite of Yablonsky's claim that the story is all the same, because the reasons for using heroin in the first place are subjective. Carroll wants purity, Marlowe wishes to stop time, and Yablonsky yearns to fit in with a different crowd, eventually losing herself in her addiction.

The confrontation with the junkie causes us to question our own beliefs associated with identity in post-World War II America. Junkie literature shows that the addict cannot be framed within the normal boundaries placed on other members of hegemonic culture; we are crushed because we negate the addict, turning away from this identity because it is typically considered to be dirty and immoral (Kristeva, *SO* 187). However, the literature produced by Burroughs, Trocchi, Carroll, Marlowe, and

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter II.

Yablonsky causes the confrontation with the junkie, a creature with whom we reject, but with whom we can also identify, resulting in a loss of our own boundaries and composure because the junkie "repeat[s] the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other." This results in an iteration of the "identification-projection that is at the foundation of my reaching autonomy" (Kristeva, *SO* 187). The negation of the junkie, and the ability to reach autonomy, occurs because the heroin addict, previously an imperceptible creature, comes to light in the writing of the authors of junkie narratives. These authors leave us with a sense that we cannot situate ourselves opposite of the junkie because they are abject and thus lack true boundaries. The junkie transcends the boundaries of typical identity through the creation of an ambiguous persona that repels and fascinates.

If the junkie cannot be considered a true member of hegemonic American society, what kind of identity can he or she truly hope to possess? A spectral one, I argue, and though old personas can be erased and new identities formed, the danger of heroin addiction, as shown from Burroughs to Yablonsky, indicates that there is no escape from the self, the search for autonomy, and the feeling that, once identity disappears completely, the junkie is little more than "Styrofoam." We all have the ability to occupy this place of difference, and though we may not be addicted to heroin, there are plenty of other dangers to over-consumption present in our daily lives. American culture is full of the opportunity for monstrous consumption, and any time the barrier is crossed from necessity to pleasure, the consumer runs the risk of becoming an addict. What these literary narratives of heroin addiction show us is the idea that, when

completely ruled by desire, we lose our sense of autonomy and, like the junkie, become little more than generic beings who cannot escape the ravages of time any more than the heroin addict. The danger of using substances, ranging from food to television to empty spectacular images perpetuated by the media, creates in the American public the desire for a feeling of wholeness, which most people mistake as being "full." Junk addiction is not limited to heroin; as these texts show, anyone, despite race, class, gender, or other totalizing identity categories, can enter into the world of addiction.

## CHAPTER IV

USELESS TOYS AND PRETTY BOYS: THE SOCIETY OF MONSTROUS  
 CONSUMPTION IN HUBERT SELBY'S *REQUIEM FOR A DREAM*, BRET EASTON  
 ELLIS'S *LESS THAN ZERO* AND JOHN UPDIKE'S *RABBIT AT REST*

Near the beginning of John Updike's 1989 novel *Rabbit at Rest*, the title character suffers a heart attack. While in the hospital, a doctor who hails from Australia asks Rabbit's wife Janice how much junk food Rabbit eats. Janice enthusiastically replies, "[H]e's a real addict." Rabbit, wishing he could switch his wife off the same way he does the television, listens while the doctor lists all the negatives about the American diet: nuts, Rabbit's favorite things to nibble, are "full of fat, not to mention sodium . . . Anything made with hydrogenated vegetable shortenings, coconut oil, palm oil, butter, lard, egg yolk, whole milk, ice cream, cream cheese, cottage cheese, any organ meats, all these frozen TV dinners, commercial baked goods, almost anything you buy in a package . . . is poison, bloody poison" (Updike, emphasis original 153-154). After the doctor leaves, Rabbit grouses, "'That guy keeps attacking America. If he doesn't like the food here, why doesn't he go back to [Australia]?" (Updike 155). For Dr. Olman, America is a place full of dangerous foods that contribute to the declining health of its citizens; for Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, food acts as a comfort, and many of his memories throughout *Rabbit at Rest* refer to memories connected to the act of eating. Rabbit's food fetish reveals that the realm of addiction is not limited to drugs; addiction incorporates anything that has the potential to cause negative consequences for the

person over-indulging in the act, whether it is one of eating, ingesting drugs, or engaging in an unhealthy, destructive relationship with another person.

In the "Atrophied Preface" to the 1960 edition of *Naked Lunch*, William S. Burroughs writes, "*The junk virus is public health problem number one in the world today*" (emphasis original, 205). In 1991, Burroughs clarifies that the "junk virus" pertains not only to opiates, and is exacerbated by "the hysteria that drug use often occasions in populaces who are prepared by the media and narcotics officials for a hysterical reaction . . . Anti-drug hysteria is now worldwide, and it poses a deadly threat to personal freedoms and due-process protections of the law everywhere" (Burroughs, *NL* 211-212). Narratives of heroin addiction, as discussed in the first two chapters, provide an interesting template for introducing the concept of junkie literature. Authors such as Burroughs, Alexander Trocchi, Jim Carroll, Ann Marlowe, and Linda Yablonsky chronicle different facets related to heroin addiction, including modifying the ways addicts are viewed in post World War II America. These authors use a first-person narrator in their works, and their texts are semi-autobiographical in nature. However, the latter half of the twentieth century brings forth the concept Burroughs details in his "Atrophied Preface": the idea that "junk" addiction is a problem worldwide. In this chapter, I expand the terminology of "junk" to include the monstrous consumption of anything from drugs to sex to television, finding this extension particularly apt considering that current anti-drug hysteria encompasses substances like tobacco, caffeine, and prescription drugs, as well as sugar and grease-laden fast food. The difference in the novels discussed in this chapter resides in the fact that *Requiem for a*

*Dream* (1978) by Hubert Selby, Jr., *Less than Zero* (1984) by Bret Easton Ellis, and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* (1989) deviate from the semi-autobiographical approach taken by Burroughs and the others, and, with the exception of Ellis, rely on a third-person narrative style to detail the growing "junk" problem in contemporary American culture.

Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*, Ellis's *Less than Zero*, and Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* each focus on a different facet of this new form of "junk" addiction, detailing the feelings of apathy and emptiness experienced in the spectacle that is post-World War II America. Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* links heroin addiction to other forms of monstrous consumption, including the watching of television and the use of prescription drugs. Ellis's *Less than Zero* shows the early world of the 1980s, and the consumption of drugs, sex, and television. Finally, Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*, the last novel in his popular "Rabbit Angstrom" series, details both the end of Rabbit's life, as well as the end of the 1980s, and concerns itself with the ways in which spectacular consumption has infected American life in the form of obesity and the media, particularly television and advertisements. Jean Baudrillard, in his theoretical deconstruction of the United States, entitled *America*, indicates that emptiness is indicative of Americans as a whole. He notes that the perfect metaphor for American culture is that of the desert, an endless empty space stretching out into nothingness. Baudrillard implies that America consists of "[i]nordinate space." He writes that American culture is heir to the deserts because "they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as



the perpetuity of the simulacrum" (63). The emptiness of the desert juxtaposed with the apathy and meaninglessness of the lives found in the novels of junkie literature that deal outside of heroin addiction creates the search for the elusive feeling of wholeness on the part of the characters.

While each of these novels deals with similar forms of addiction—for example, "uppers" can be found in all the novels, in the form of methamphetamine or cocaine—they also indicate that a lack exists despite the mass amount of junk pushed into the lives of the characters. I suggest that this lack manifests itself in the search for a feeling of wholeness on the part of the characters; however, in these texts, the characters confuse the sensation of "being full" as the same as "being whole," when these are two entirely different concepts. Like the novels of heroin addiction, Selby, Ellis, and Updike indicate the same search for the sense of self through the use of outside influences in order to form some sort of identity, but in the end, instead of the abject body of the heroin junkie, the characters in these novels find that nothing can fill the void inside.

Hubert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* tells the story of four characters searching for a way feel "full," mistaking this concept for being "whole." Harry Goldfarb, his mother Sara, his girlfriend Marion, and his best friend Tyrone C. Love pursue the mythical "American Dream." Harry and Tyrone obsess over obtaining a pound of pure heroin, but end up using more than they sell. Marion, through her relationship with Harry, gets hooked on heroin, eventually prostituting herself in order to maintain her addiction. Finally, Sara consumes both food and television in order to fend off loneliness, entering a dangerous world of amphetamine addiction that eventually causes

her to end up in a mental asylum. Throughout Selby's dark story, he emphasizes the desire to be whole, and though each of the characters believe that the version of the American Dream they pursue will lead to eventual happiness, they instead find themselves more miserable and alone than ever. Selby's novel ultimately deals with the search for, and loss of, the mythical "American Dream." Selby shows that living in a world where empty substances are used and create more of a void creates a dangerous and devolving lifestyle where, in the end, there can only be a requiem for something that never existed in the first place.

Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* tells the story of Clay, a young man returning home to Los Angeles from an eastern college. Clay finds that, while the world he left behind when he headed to the east coast has not changed, he has. Clay details the loveless encounters and casual drug use he and his friends engage with throughout the novel. Ultimately, Ellis shows that addiction is merely another way to numb the pain of living and the lack of connections in Clay's life. At the same time, Ellis details how the absence of pain and connection creates addiction, as Clay feels that he needs cocaine and indiscriminate sexual encounters to survive his "vacation." Ellis's use of images to tell Clay's story reflects the empty world both around and within himself.

Finally, John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* tells the last story of Rabbit Angstrom. All the *Rabbit* books focus on a particular decade in the main character's life, and the final installment encompasses the end of the 1980s. Most of the narrative is filtered through Rabbit's thoughts, and he spends a lot of time comparing the present American society to his past. Rabbit sees the world of the 1980s as one that he cannot understand; he finds

that he is unable to relate to his son Nelson, though he can have sex with his daughter-in-law Pru; that the role of women is changing, as is evidenced by his wife Janice no longer needing to rely on Rabbit for money or happiness; and finally, that his grandchildren do not possess the same values that he had as a child. At the end of the novel, Rabbit has a heart attack while playing basketball, and the final scene shows him dying in a hospital bed, surrounded by those whose lives he helped both build and destroy. Through the disappearing landscape, the constant bombardment of television sitcoms and advertisements, and the rampant consumerism present in the novel, *Rabbit at Rest* provides a microcosm for American society's desire to be constantly entertained and satisfied, and the devastating consequences that occur when more is not enough.

These novels usher in a new definition for the addict in the world of contemporary American junkie lit. In order to show how Selby, Ellis, and Updike borrow from and relate to the previous category of junkie literature, I continue to incorporate terms from Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's psychoanalytical terms are useful when defining the addict and explaining the psychological reasoning behind junk addiction; however, the bulk of this chapter focuses on the socio-historical issues related to the rise of monstrous consumption in the years following World War II. I turn to David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* to illustrate the ways the American culture moved from the pre-war inner-directed to the postwar other-directed personality type. While, clearly, sociological research has continued the conversation Riesman started in 1950, I use his seminal work because it provides the dominant contemporary understanding of the American self, and thus is a useful point of departure to contextualize the literary

works I treat here, especially in terms of identity and addiction.<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* offer differing views on the spectacle of consumption in the postwar world. Along with Riesman, Debord, and Jameson, I rely on Jean Baudrillard's work, particularly *America* and *Fatal Strategies*, to display the lush and exorbitant decade of the 1980s. In order to critique capitalism and articulate the ways in which American life began to focus on the act of voracious consumption, I integrate Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* and Gary Cross's *An All-Consuming Century*. Kristeva, Riesman, Debord, Jameson, Baudrillard, Cohen, and Gary Cross provide a socio-historical analysis that is useful when examining junkie literature that deals outside the world of heroin addiction and enters what Debord broadly refers to as a society founded upon image and commodity that creates a type of identity that is unstable and lacking any real substance.

After World War II, the United States cemented its status as a superpower on a global scale. Fresh from the victory in Europe and the Pacific Theatre, Americans began celebrating a period of unparalleled prosperity. The 1950s seemed to usher in an era where the original unalienable rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence—Life,

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<sup>1</sup> Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* was first published in 1950. Like Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, many ideas that Riesman introduces in the book stand true today. As Todd Gitlin notes in the Foreword, *The Lonely Crowd's* "subject was nothing less than a sea change in American character: as America was moving from a society governed by the imperative of production to a society governed by the imperative of consumption" (xii), and remains one of the important studies of American culture in the postwar boom. Gitlin also observes that Riesman "sympathetically exposed the anxieties of a middle class that was rising with the postwar boom, suburbanizing, busy availing itself of upgraded homes, machines, and status, relieved to be done with the Depression and the war but baffled by cultural and psychological upheavals beneath the surface of everyday life" (xiii). For the reasons Gitlin listed, and many others that will be made clear as this chapter continues, the use of Riesman is not only important when studying the postwar literature of addiction, but imperative in many ways to understanding the world of junkie lit.

Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—were once again achievable. Along with the perceived ability to once again grasp these unalienable rights came the reemergence of the American Dream, the idea that every citizen of the United States could not only pursue luxury and wealth, but also attain these material goods. The rise of suburbia, new technological advances including television and other household appliances, and a stable economy fueled the idea that the American Dream, once considered merely a myth, was alive and well.

A definitive shift exists between the early parts of the twentieth century to the postwar years, creating what Riesman refers to as an "other-directed" type of person. According to Riesman, those who existed in the pre-World War II America are of the "inner-directed" type, a group whose internalized goals are acquired early in life; however, this group eventually evolved into the other-directed members of society, whose conformity is dependent upon the expectations and preferences of their peers (8). Americans in the postwar world, says Riesman, "impress us with their unanimity. The American is said to be shallower, freer with his money, friendlier, more uncertain of himself and his values, [and] more demanding of approval than the European" (19). The reasoning behind this characterization stems from the fact that the newly other-directed American persona is entirely dependent upon his contemporaries for a sense of direction, as well as becoming influenced by the mass media, including movies, radio, comics, and popular culture in general (Riesman 21). Julia Kristeva, in *New Maladies of the Soul*,

refers to this other-directed type<sup>2</sup> of person as one who is overwhelmed and carried away by the images surrounding him or her (8).

In the third edition of his manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle*,<sup>3</sup> Guy Debord defines the spectacle as "not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). Debord adds that spectacular consumption manages to preserve the old culture, "going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations" in such a way that "the spectacle's cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality—*the communication of the incommunicable*" whose "aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent" (emphasis original, 136-137). Debord contends that the function of the spectacle is "to bury history in culture" so that, "[w]herever one looks, one encounters this same intent: *to restructure society without a community*" (emphasis original, 136-137). The

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<sup>2</sup> Stjepan G. Mestrovic, in *Postemotional Society*, rereads *The Lonely Crowd*, claiming that "the other-directed type of the 1950s has become the postemotional type of the 1990s." He notes that "Riesman's emphases in *The Lonely Crowd* on the media, culture, tolerance, the cults of fun and being nice, consumerism in politics, and eventual dissolution of authentic passion into a shallow manipulation of instantaneous feelings all seem remarkably fresh." He also argues that "Riesman's depiction of modernity prophetically foretold and still captures the most visible icons, landmarks, and markers of the 1990s: The other-directed focus on tolerance blossomed into the full-blown and highly organized cults of multiculturalism and political correctness" (43).

<sup>3</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published in 1967. In the preface to the third edition, published in 1991, Debord notes that the third edition is identical to the one published in 1967. He adds, "A critical theory of the kind presented here needed no changing—not as long, at any rate, as the general conditions of the long historical period that it was the first to describe accurately were still intact. The continued unfolding of our epoch has merely confirmed and further illustrated the theory of the spectacle" (Debord 7). While the preface was written in 1991, this theory still stands up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let alone the end of the twentieth. Debord was a member of the Situationist International movement. The Situationists were a "small transnational group of artist-revolutionaries that came out of the neo-Dadaist Lettriste movement" who "developed a variant of Marxist revolutionary theory notable for its sweep and attention to the situation of the working class, then undergoing radical change through the implementation of Fordism and the crisis of Stalinism" (Hastings-King 26-27).

"spectacle" Debord refers to here is the remaking of culture into a non-object; that is, turning history into what Frederic Jameson terms "postmodernism." While I am not specifically writing about postmodernism, contemporary American narratives of addiction strongly reflect both Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Jameson's words on culture and capitalism. Concerned with the ways in which contemporary American culture causes members of society to turn to various substances in order to create a sense of wholeness, I use a socio-historical critical approach in this chapter in an attempt to explain why the literature of addiction works as a way to explore contemporary society's need for these chemical (among others) romances. Both Chapters II and III show this spectacular consumption in the form of heroin addiction, but in this chapter, I am particularly concerned with the ideas of monstrous consumption outside of heroin, expanding the definition of junkie lit into all types of "junk," not just opiates.

In order to first understand why these novels deal with the search for fulfillment, I find it crucial to examine the ways in which postwar America came to be a culture devoted to the act of consumption, which generated a nameless void that needed to be filled. In *A Consumer's Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen suggests that in post-World War II America, citizens were theoretically made "a people of plenty," and undergirding this newfound wealth was an infrastructure of policies and priorities, or what she refers to as "the Consumers' Republic." The political and business leaders of postwar America hoped for a dynamic mass consumption economy that would deliver prosperity and fulfill society's loftier aspirations, including more social egalitarianism, political freedom, and democratic participation. This mass consumption-driven economy would,

in an ideal America, provide jobs, increase the act of purchasing, and allow Americans to live better than before the war. As a result, America's social landscape, where Americans lived and consumed, helped reshape the nation's class and racial profile, as well as the gender dynamics, both in the family and the workplace (Cohen 404-406). The American society in the postwar world was one embellished by a commercially contrived illusion of infinite opportunity (Whybrow 4), and in spite of all of this, or perhaps because of it, most Americans felt increasingly lost. In turn, the illusion of infinite prosperity and the individual's feeling of aimlessness resulted in the "[s]pectacle appear[ing] at once as society itself, as a part of society and a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated . . . this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness" and creates only "generalized separation" (Debord 12). In short, the mass consumption perpetuated by the American government managed to increase spending and wealth for the citizens, but also increasingly isolated them from each other, creating only the illusion of unity.

In *America*, Jean Baudrillard asserts that America has no past, and therefore no founding truth. As a result, America "lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs" (76). This perpetual image of signs and simulation is echoed in Jameson, who asserts that the spectacle of America is akin to addiction based wholly on an "historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself" such that "the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced" (18). This simulacrum comes about because, as Gary Cross notes, in spite of



the clashes of ideologies, two devastating world wars, and "a cold war that ultimately made the United States a leading global power, the century did not culminate in the victory of American political ideas. Rather, the real winner of the century was consumerism" (1). Essentially, the postwar world developed into a place where the act of consumption took over; that is, it became "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (Jameson x). Through Debord's notion of the spectacle, "[t]he real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form" (32). In short, through the consumption of illusion, the lack of connection results in a general feeling of apathy and emptiness, and although Americans attempt to fill this space with "junk," the end result is addiction in its most spectacular form.

The spectacular consumption of junk coincided with the emergence of a new character in American society. After World War II, in spite of the desire to consume as much as possible, a feeling of emptiness on the part of American citizens was soon felt. In postwar American society, the craving for the satisfaction of others, as well as the desire to connect with them, drives consumers to have most of their potential individuality trained out so that their desires are directly related to the envious feelings of their peers (Riesman 79). It would seem that contemporary American culture has pulled away from this idea—the satisfaction required by others in order to feel whole and important to one's peers—but the way the spectacle works shows that this is not the case. According to Stjepan G. Mestrovic's *Postemotional Society*, the other-directed type of person has become powerless in the wake of an emotional life that has developed

into "curdled indignation and being 'nice.'" As a result, the long-term effect proposed by Riesman, that the other-directed person becomes unemotional, is incorrect. Rather, as Mestrovic notes, "the post-other-directed or postemotional type takes cues from peers and the media as to when he or she should rationally choose to exhibit a vicarious indignation, niceness or other pre-packaged emotions" (xi-xii). In contemporary American literature, this can be seen through the use of various forms of "junk" in order to make a connection with one's peers, and I argue that Selby, Ellis, and Updike show that many of these characters turn to the empty illusions of the spectacle in order to find a way to not only feel whole, but also to make connections with those around them. This fails spectacularly, and junkie lit shows that the futility of trying to fill our lives with "junk" in no way creates a sense of wholeness on the part of the consumer.

In order to understand the difference that exists between the feelings of being "whole" versus "full," some basic definitions must first be given.<sup>4</sup> When something is whole, it is without injury and in good condition. Something that is whole is also intact and free from disease. Finally, something that is whole contains "all its parts or elements" and has "its complete or entire extent or magnitude; full perfect" and "sane" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). While something that is whole can be "full," the definition of "full" indicates an entirely different picture. Something that is "full" has, "within its limits all it will hold," with no empty space. Something that is full can be "overcharged with emotion, ready to overflow." Fullness implies that something is "occupied, not

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<sup>4</sup> I turn to *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* because it is important to define these words in order to place them in the context of contemporary narratives of addiction, and the world of junkie lit, outside of the chronicling of heroin use.

vacant," and contains an "abundance of" and might be "crowded." In a non-material sense, something that is full can be "abounding (in)" or "characterized (by)" the act of being "engrossed with or absorbed in." Fullness occurs when a person has "eaten or drunk to repletion." Finally, in the sense of both material and immaterial things, something or someone that is full has its needs or appetites satisfied in an abundant, amply sufficient, copious and satisfying way (*OED*). However, the saturation of the body with substance or the home with possessions provides only temporary satisfaction, a fullness which is incorrectly interpreted as wholeness.

When someone feels full, when his or her life is "filled," he or she is able to navigate the world in a satisfied manner. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva suggests, "Through oral-dietary satisfaction, there emerges, beyond it, a lust for swallowing up the other, while the fear of impure nourishment is revealed as deathly drive to devour the other. A primal fantasy if ever there was one, that theme unremittingly accompanies the tendency toward interiorizing and spiritualizing the abject" (118). Fullness is often used when we speak of the consumption of food; in the case of Kristeva, fullness occurs through the oral-dietary satisfaction that involves a connection to another human being. Essentially, the feeling of fullness is, in fact, the act of being fulfilled in some way. Kristeva's idea that "swallowing up" the other can be used in such a way that the "other" becomes a commodity to be used to attain satisfaction. The addicts in junkie lit believe that "fullness" comes in the form of something material, such as food. Through the act of devouring, whether it is another person or a substance, the characters in these novels mistake the feeling of fullness with that of wholeness.

In reality, wholeness is metaphysical in meaning because it indicates the act of being complete and satisfied on the inside. In postwar junkie lit, the desire for this sensation manifests itself in a yearning for wholeness. This search for wholeness is, in fact, akin to Jim Carroll's search for purity in *The Basketball Diaries*: Carroll finds, in heroin, purity. He uses the drug in order to achieve this feeling, and Kristeva notes, "the purity/impurity distinction and inside/outside division of subjective space is thus effected," adding that the act of purifying includes "redeeming all sins" and "punctually and temporarily gives back innocence" (*PH* 119). The desire to be whole, and to be consciously aware of this feeling, is sought through "junk." However, turning to different forms of junk creates addiction. Addiction acts as a way for the junkie to achieve a sense of fullness, though inevitably, the addicts of these novels mistake this feeling for one of "wholeness." "Whole" identities cannot exist, particularly since human beings tend to rely on outside influences to achieve this state of being. Wholeness is never attained in these novels because the characters spend the majority of their time searching for a way to achieve a feeling they can only articulate through the rhetoric of being "full." The characters of these novels act on their desires, but they fail in spite of their best efforts because they are unaware that what they use to achieve this feeling is as empty as they are.

Hubert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* is one of the first novels in postwar junkie lit that directly addresses the distinction between "full" and "whole." In the preface to

the newest edition of *Requiem for a Dream*,<sup>5</sup> Selby writes that every individual has his or her own preconceived notion of the "American Dream," but that too many are afraid to pursue it, or to even recognize and accept its existence. Selby writes,

I believe that to pursue the American Dream is not only futile but self-destructive because ultimately it destroys everything and everyone involved with it. By definition it must, because it nurtures everything except those things that are most important: integrity, ethics, truth, our very heart and soul. Why? The reason is simple: because Life/life<sup>6</sup> is giving, not getting. (vi)

For Selby, the American Dream represents an archaic myth, one that may have been prevalent during the early years of America's foundation, but has long since disappeared. This illusive—and elusive—dream nurtures the idea that, in order to be happy, we must first achieve success and money; however, Selby advocates that this is a false happiness. *Requiem for a Dream* deals with the consequences of following an illusion over truth, and the characters get so entangled in their various addictions that any attempt to connect to a sense of wholeness is immediately thwarted. As Darron Aronofsky suggests, this occurs because no human in the novel acts as the "hero." Instead, the novel "is a manifesto on Addiction's triumph over the Human Spirit," and the enemy

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<sup>5</sup> The "newest" edition refers to the copy of the novel that accompanied Darron Aronofsky's chilling cinematic version of *Requiem for a Dream*, released in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Selby's separation of "Life" and "life" indicates the difference between those who live to give (Life) as opposed to those who simply wish to take (life). Those who give (L)ife are able to attain a sense of wholeness, while those who take (l)ife are merely looking for fullness. I assume that "Life" is also probably hearkening to the Biblical capitalization of the word "god" and the way in which "He" is used (as opposed to "he"). Selby's epitaph in the novel comes from the Bible. The capitalization indicates a type of higher being, or, I suppose in the case of Selby, a more enlightened form of (L)iving.

lives "deep in the characters' heads" (Aronofsky 1). Like the narratives of heroin addiction, the commodity the characters tie themselves to becomes their own worst enemy, and instead of salving their soul and allowing them to feel whole, the addiction takes over so that they can only live their life for the next fix.

When Selby first published *Requiem for a Dream* in 1978, the United States was still dealing with the aftermath of the turbulent Vietnam War. The end of the Vietnam War signaled what Baudrillard, in *Fatal Strategies*, considers the end of the war scene, since there is no longer any space for war because "[i]n its orbital and ecstatic form war has become impossible to exchange, and this orbitality protects us" (Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* 33). Jameson suggests that the sixties gave birth to a media that became "a collective actor on the historical scene, feared by politicians and tolerated by the 'public'" and becoming "virtually a human being in its own right" (347). As a result, the media broadcast to the world what was happening in Vietnam, projecting the struggles of society and the war onto President Lyndon B. Johnson and the generals—authoritarian figures considered to be pursuing, without rational motive, a war "out of sheerly patriarchal malignancy" (Jameson 347-348). Christopher Lasch notes that many Americans desired to forget the 1960s and all that went with the tumultuous decade: the riots, the new left, the Kent State University shooting, Watergate, Nixon, Vietnam, and "their entire collective past" (Lasch 5). In forgetting this past, however, a new collective character of the American citizen was formed. Jameson remarks that the consequences of this new collective character result in a "representational paradox" that takes away any individual subjectivity and autonomy (348) because the image is not evocative of the

actual object. This stripping of the individual resulted in the desire for the feeling of wholeness, and the characters in *Requiem for a Dream*—Sara Goldfarb and her son Harry, Tyrone C. Love, and Harry's girlfriend Marion—each turn to different substances in order to assuage this empty feeling brought about by the tumultuous times in which they live.

Selby uses these four characters in order to show his hypothesis that "Life/life" is about "giving, not getting." Each of the characters featured all search for their version of the American Dream in different ways, and though the substances used are different, the final feeling desired is the same: Sara, Harry, Tyrone, and Marion want to feel whole. In order to obtain this feeling, Harry and Tyrone obsess over getting a pound of pure heroin so that they can make money, and end up using more than they sell. Harry eventually loses his arm from a gangrenous infection brought about by his addiction. Tyrone ends up on a chain gang in a prison in Georgia. Marion prostitutes herself to feed her addiction, and loses not only her sense of self, but her relationship with Harry, too. Finally, Sara consumes both food and television in order to stave the loneliness of her life. When she receives a call from the McDick<sup>7</sup> Corporation informing her that she

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<sup>7</sup> While "McDick" is Selby's invention, the name is reminiscent of McDonald's, bringing to mind something generic and prepackaged. The word *dick* is also interesting, and once again, I turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to explain. Dick can be defined in several ways:

- 1) The abbreviation of the word *dictionary*; hence, "Fine language, long words." Also, from the *Slang Dictionary* section of the *OED*: "A man who uses fine words without much judgment is said to have 'swallowed the dick'."
- 2) The penis.
- 3) Dick-ass: a jack ass.
- 4) Dick-head: a stupid person.
- 5) To take one's dick: to take one's declaration, i.e. "To this (in the commercial sense of 'declaration as to the value of goods) is perhaps to be referred the vulgar phrase *up to dick*—up to the proper standard, excellent, 'proper'" (*OED*).

has been selected to be a contestant on a game show, Sara devises a plan to lose weight in order to appear polished and beautiful so that America will fall in love with her. In order to do so, she enters the dangerous world of amphetamine addiction, ending up in a mental asylum. Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* emphasizes that the desire to feel whole can only end in more misery and loneliness.

In the case of *Requiem for a Dream*, the feeling of being complete comes through the relationships the characters have, both with each other and, in the case of Harry, Tyrone, and Marion, with heroin.<sup>8</sup> Harry and Tyrone, with the financial backing provided by Marion, score a pound of pure heroin. They know that that "dont [sic] want to get into it heavy" because they have "seen cats get strung out and they blow their whole scene and end up in the slammer" (Selby 31).<sup>9</sup> At first they make good money, but after awhile, the three find themselves falling deeper into their addiction, using the drug to create a sense of "wholeness," and are "a part of something . . . [to be] looked forward to with the greatest of joy and anticipation . . . symbolic of their life and needs" (Selby 184). After finding a favorite vein and injecting the drug, for instance, the feeling of excitement and a warm contentment occurs; Harry, Marion, and Tyrone "s[it] back feeling whole and invulnerable and safe and a lot of other things, but mostly whole" (Selby 184). While they believe that using the drug makes them whole, the trio fails to realize that it is, in fact, stealing their autonomy and individuality and creating an empty

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Any and all of these definitions of the word "dick" juxtapose nicely with Selby's use of "McDick" as the name of a corporation who "dicks" Sara over and employs people who "swallow the dick." Also, Selby appears to be making the argument about the superficiality and generic nature of television game shows with his choice of the name for the company.

<sup>8</sup> Sara will be discussed later.

<sup>9</sup> Selby sporadically uses punctuation throughout the novel.



space. As described in the previous chapters, the use of heroin creates the need for more of the drug. Because of this, there is never enough heroin to fill a void. They may pump their veins *full* of the drug, but they can never be *whole* because they rely on junk for this feeling.

Using heroin may afford them a type of prepackaged emotion, but their feeling of being whole is completely skewed. Instead of possessing an identity that is whole, they instead lack the ability to comprehend what this means. Marion tells Harry that one of the problems in America is the fact that "nobody knows who they are" because everyone is searching for some sort of identity. Marion rants,

only they dont [sic] know it. They actually think they know who they are and what are they? Theyre [sic] just a bunch of *schleppers* . . . who have no idea what a search for personal truth and identity really is, which would be alright if they didnt [sic] get in your way, but they insist that they know everything and that if you dont [sic] live their way then youre [sic] not living properly and they want to take your space away . . . and they just cant [sic] believe that you know what you are doing and that you have your own identity and space and that you are happy and content with it. You see, thats [sic] the problem right there. If they could see that then they wouldnt [sic] have to feel threatened and feel that they have to destroy you before you destroy them. (Selby 130-131)

While Marion appears to be railing against consumer culture and being bound up with the judgment of her peers, as based on Riesman's definition of the other-directed

personality, she herself is a victim of the invisible hand of the market in the same way as those she rants against. Marion is a victim because the spectacle in which she resides, and her reliance on heroin for her insight, erases what Debord refers to as a dividing line between the idea of self and the world. The self is always "under siege by the presence/absence of the world" and is overwhelmed by the loss of division between what is true and what is not. People are "condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality" and steered towards a form of madness where they believe that what they see is actually truthful; as a result, a "consumption of commodities" occurs in order to communicate because a response is simply not possible (Debord 153). The reason Marion feels that her identity is being threatened by some alien outsider resides in the fact that she has no real identity; instead, she is a conglomeration of images and events dictated through her use of heroin in order to feel "whole." The same can be said for Harry, Tyrone, Marion, and Sara, though the latter's wholeness comes from a different source entirely.

In the previous two chapters, I speak exclusively to junkie literature in terms of heroin addiction. Because of this, I mention Harry, Tyrone, and Marion in conjunction with the idea of being whole, but the bulk of the discussion will be placed on Harry's widowed mother Sara. Sara's yearning is different from that of the heroin addicts in the novel. Her relationship to her son is fairly nonexistent, and Sara wishes that Harry could be in her life more. Sara's loneliness and emptiness stem not only from being a widow, but also from her inability to have any type of relationship with Harry. In fact, the only way they are able to communicate is through the medium of commodities. Harry, in a

rare fit of consciousness, elects to replace Sara's battered television set (one that he constantly pawns in order to get money to feed his habit before he hits it "big" with his pound of pure) with a new one. Harry describes Sara as "a TV junkie," telling Marion that he is going to get his mother "a big, fat super color TV that will make her forget about the times I borrowed her set." Harry does not really love his mother, though he does want her to be happy; he sees her as lonely, sitting in her apartment and "wearing the same old house dress, you know even if it isnt [sic] the same it is, and I dont [sic] know what to do. . . Its [sic] not important. Now that Im [sic] set I can take care of her and visit her once in awhile" (Selby 128-129). Harry misses the point completely, though. He wants to ease her loneliness by giving her a television set; in reality, Sara would much rather have her son in her life. Of course, he participates openly in giving her something to help her replace the void he believes she feels, but instead of love, which he is not capable of giving, he attempts to fill that emptiness with prepackaged emotions in the form of television programs. Because he uses dope to fill his own void, Harry assumes that something material will make Sara "whole," too.

Television programming allows an escape from the banal and tedious routine of every day life. Debord posits that television acts as a consumption of time via social image, offering "moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, *at a distance*, and as desirable by definition. This particular commodity is explicitly presented as a moment of authentic life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to" (Debord, emphasis original 112). In this way, Harry's gift is not so far off base; in fact, the opening scene of the novel shows Sara huddled in a closet while Harry steals her

television set to score drugs. Sara talks to her dead husband Seymour about the incident, reassuring herself that "it wasnt [sic] happening. And if it should be happening it would be alright, so dont [sic] worry Seymour. This is like a commercial break. Soon the program will be back on and youll [sic] see, theyll [sic] make it nice. . . . In the end its [sic] all nice" (Selby 4). Sara's world exists almost exclusively in and around her apartment building where, widowed for many years, she has only the memory of Seymour, scant visits from her itinerant son, and the friendship of the Jewish<sup>10</sup> ladies who inhabit the building. Sara's true companion is the television set, as she prefers the shows to real life because they always have a happy ending. Sara relaxes while watching TV because she is possessed with the knowledge that everything will turn out perfect, even though Harry "is a little mischief" and her life really is not all that great (Selby 14). In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva states, "if drugs do not take over your life, your wounds are 'healed' with images, and before you can speak about your states of the soul, you drown them in a world of mass media." Images harness anxiety and desire, taking on "their intensity and suspend[ing] their meaning" (Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* 8). Technology has the power to addict and overload (Whybrow 243), and for

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<sup>10</sup> While it may not seem relevant to name Sara and her friends as Jewish, it actually establishes the close-knit community in which she lives. Sara's friends are *yentas*, busy-bodies who want to be a part of her business just as much as she wants to be involved in theirs. Furthermore, it serves a way of highlighting the rare friendship between Harry, a white Jewish kid, and Tyrone, an African-American. When Tyrone enters Harry's mother's neighborhood, he is usually ill-at-ease; the same can be said when Harry enters places close to Harlem. Having characters of different ages, races, religions, and socioeconomic (Marion hails from a wealthy family) backgrounds provides a realistic and interesting tapestry for Selby's work. Of course, New York City, where the novel takes place, is a city where "the mad have been set free. Let out into the city, they are difficult to tell apart from the rest of the punks, junkies, addicts, winoes, or down-and-outs who inhabit it" (Baudrillard, *A* 19). In Baudrillard's view, though, everyone in America is mad in some way, and Selby shows that madness comes in many different forms, including the catalogue Baudrillard provides.

Sara Goldfarb, the images present on her television screen fill the void in her life. She believes that, eventually, as her television stories depict, she will also have a happy ending.

Sara imagines her life as a television program, and each moment of her day is part of a sitcom or soap opera, a type of special moment that Debord indicates can only be the spectacle. Television, the illusion of an illusion that punctuates time in the cycle of hour and half-hour programming interrupted by the ghostly afterimages of commercials (Jameson 76), "pass[es] off as authentic life [what] turns out to be merely a life more *authentically spectacular*" (Debord, emphasis original 112). Baudrillard suggests that television "reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages" (Baudrillard, *America* 50). Television causes no physical side effects,<sup>11</sup> though Sara's reliance on the electronic device leads her to believe, in a way, that the life presented to her through these programs is authentic and that she can have what the families on television do: happiness and wholeness. These problems are exacerbated when Sara herself gets the chance to appear on a television game show; when Lyle Russell of the McDick Corporation calls her and informs her that she has been chosen to appear on a new program some time in the vague future causes Sara to find new meaning in her life.

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<sup>11</sup> I say this in spite of the fact that many children—and my youth was no exception—are often told by their parents that their eyes will "go bad" if they keep watching television all the time. Of course, the argument could be made that a physical side effect of television is obesity, as is evidenced through the term "couch potato." As for physical addiction, however, television does not cause one to go crazy. Sara finds a different way to achieve schizophrenia, and though television is at the root of the problem, it does not cause her madness. This will be discussed shortly.

Sara willingly trades in reality for the guise of illusion. Sigmund Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*,<sup>12</sup> writes that when happiness is sought through a disconnection with reality, illusion becomes the only way to obtain satisfaction. The line between truth and fiction becomes erased (Freud 30-31), and the images presented to her provide valid compensation for the loss of her loved ones (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 5, 6). These images cause Sara to believe that, once she appears on a show, her life will also have a happy reconciliation. Sara insists that people will see her and love her, and the promise of a television appearance gives her "a reason to get up in the morning." She tells Harry she needs this reason because she is lonely and old (Selby 142-143). Sara's addiction to television, and her desire to appear on a show in order to have a reason to exist, further informs the use of the appliance as a way to thwart the unhappiness in her life. Sara's life becomes something not just to endure, but to live; she "ha[s] been given a future" (Selby 66). Not only does she imagine making Harry proud, but she also believes that she will soon have the adoration of America because everyone will love her and be rooting for her success. By appearing on the television, and becoming one of the spectacular images she so desires to be, Sara's loneliness will disappear, and she will have her happy ending.

Unfortunately, Sara's addiction shifts in a dangerous direction the more obsessed she gets with appearing on television. She trades a somewhat harmless addiction to television for the frightening world of drugs without even realizing that she is doing it.

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<sup>12</sup> Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* provides much of the theoretical framework for Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to literature. I quote him here, and throughout, to show the base Kristeva uses in her work.

Sara enters the world of dieting with good intentions, but soon realizes that the rules set forth in various diet books do not work for her.<sup>13</sup> She turns to the world of medicine to help her lose the extra pounds, returning from a visit to the doctor with a packet of pills that makes her feel young and full of energy. In fact, Sara informs her friends that she has found "the fountain of youth" (Selby 124). Selby's shift of Sara's addiction resides in the fact that, in America, there is an omnipresent cult of the body. Everyone will see her body, and her figure becomes "an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance" (Baudrillard, A 35). In order to be accepted, and acceptable, Sara must rely on drugs to alleviate this frantic concern. As a result, she becomes frantic thanks to pills, which keep her so full of energy that she can no longer sit still and dwell in her favorite pastime of watching television. Sara replaces the happy families and resolutions on television with the purple, red, orange, and green amphetamine<sup>14</sup> pills she receives from the doctor, effectively substituting one addiction for another.

The substitution of one addiction for another in terms of mental stimulation is Sara's attempt at feeling whole. Neurochemical substances treat anything from insomnia to anxiety to depression, and as the body conquers "the invisible territory of the soul," images inundate Sara. She finds that "[t]he rapture of hallucination originates in the

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<sup>13</sup> Sara finds that she cannot live on a diet of, for example, a cup of lettuce and coffee. Sara tries to "think thin" throughout this time, believing that when she walks past the refrigerator, she knows "that she ha[s] conquered the enemy and that he [shakes] with fear—listen to him grumbling, shaking in his boots already—and she walk[s] like a queen, a television queen" (Selby 85-87).

<sup>14</sup> Sara's doctor has prescribed her what are colloquially known as "dexies"—dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine), a stimulant with biobehavioral actions similar to cocaine (Brick and Erickson 83). Diet pills were a common thing in the 1970s, and doctors often prescribed amphetamines to help women lose weight. Unfortunately, the "miracle" pills created more problems than they solved; doctors realized that tolerance develops very rapidly to amphetamines and that they are highly addictive (Brick and Erickson 83-84).

absence of boundaries between pleasure and reality, between truth and falsehood. The spectacle of life is a dream" (Kristeva, *NM* 8). This once again echoes Debord's assertion that the spectacle inundates our everyday lives through a series of images, and once Sara replaces television with drugs, this action still takes place. Sara's life takes on a surreal quality as she gets more deeply entrenched in her amphetamine addiction, and the chronic use of a drug like this produces "a toxic psychosis or schizophrenia characterized by confused, disorganized behavior, stereotypy, paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions" (Brick and Erickson 84-85). Sara imagines that she becomes the images she sees on the screen: "[s]he saw the announcer, the audience, the prizes, and heard the laughter and applause . . . she couldn't [sic] control herself and she left the screen and came into the room and walked around the apartment . . . trying to get back into the set" (Selby 162). Debord suggests that schizophrenia is a byproduct of the spectacle because we are "[i]mprisoned in a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle's *screen*, the consciousness of the spectator has only figment interlocutors which subject it to a one-way discourse on their commodities" (emphasis original, 152-153). This flat universe, in Sara's case, is that of the television screen, and Sara's use of pills finds her trapped inside the addiction she tries to escape through another form of consumption. Her relationship to the pills and the television is, as Debord notes, a "one-way discourse," surrounded by figments of her hallucinations about belonging in the television. Sara's dream to be on television is slowly replaced by the nightmare in which she cannot get out. When she does get out, she tries to get back in, only to find that she cannot.



Like the many Americans abusing prescription drugs, Sara believes her use of pills is legitimate because she gets them through a medical doctor. Harry, a denizen of the drug world in his own right, notices her strange behavior. On his visit to inform her of the impending arrival of her new television set, he notices that she continually grinds her teeth and will not sit still. Harry asks her if she is "making a croaker for speed" and Sara tells him that the doctor is legitimate; the pills are to help her lose weight, not for any other reason. Harry comments that the "croakers [sic] no good. Ya gotta stop takin those pills. Youll [sic] get strung out" (Selby 139-140). Harry, of course, sees his own drug use as harmless, but the fact that his mother takes speed in order to give herself the pleasure of a slimmer body and more pleasing form bothers him. For her part, Sara does not believe the drugs give her any enjoyment; they are a means to an end, and the amphetamine affords her the body she desires. She feels that receiving a prescription from a doctor validates the drug's legitimacy. Sara believes her life is finally coming together: Harry returns (if only for a minimal visit—he never comes back again after this); she loses weight; and soon, she will appear on a television show, which will validate her existence in the spectacle to anyone who watches her. The drugs help her retain her reason for living—Sara simply wants to matter to someone, anyone.

In the end, the pills prove to more trouble than they are worth. Despite Harry's warning, Sara continues on her destructive drug-taking path, eventually developing the schizophrenia Debord notes accompanies living within the spectacle. Sara must break off any relation with reality so that she can stop her suffering (Freud 31). She ignores the warning of her well-meaning friends and peripatetic son, and begins to obsess over

appearing in the McDick Corporation's obviously fictional television game show. She lives, as Kristeva proposes, in an accelerated space and time, lacking any identity, and turns into a body that simply performs (*NM* 7-8). Sara's drug use, like her love for television, simply serves to mire her in a false consciousness that does not accede to self-knowledge (Debord 154). She attempts to use television to paint a picture in her head of the perfect family only to be thwarted in reality by the one she actually has. She turns to diet pills to achieve the perfect body, and though she loses weight and gets skinny, she also loses her mind in the process. Sara's desperation to feel whole is never met, and the means by which she attempts to achieve this feeling fail her in the end. Instead of achieving her ultimate goal of earning the love of millions of television-viewing Americans, Sara Goldfarb ends up in Bellevue Mental Hospital where her only audience is the doctors and nurses who administer the shock treatment therapy she has been prescribed to treat her schizophrenia.

Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* tells of four individuals searching for their version of the American Dream. Selby indicates that they ultimately fail because Harry, Tyrone, Marion, and Sara focus on "getting" rather than "giving." Baudrillard finds that "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams" (A 28). The characters in Selby's novel attempt to live in this utopia that does not exist. They focus on themselves, and in doing so, they attempt to fulfill their lives through empty means. Sara's use of the television, for example, indicates a time period before

the 1980s, when mass media began to encroach on people's lives through advertisements and shows displaying the "perfect" family, something Sara longs for but never gets.

Gary Cross notes that the 1970s intimated a definition of self based on goods rather than relationships (181); in *Requiem for a Dream*, these goods come in the form of heroin, diet pills, and television. The passion Selby's characters place in these objects responds to the end of the turbulent Vietnam War and the shattering of the perceived utopia. The wholeness Harry, Sara, Marion, and Tyrone seek through substances causes them to become victims of their own desires, and in the end, they are all alone and even emptier than they were at the beginning of the novel.

According to Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney in their critical collection of essays *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*, the "Dirty Realism" Hubert Selby employs, along with his evocations of angst, paved the way for writers like Bret Easton Ellis (iii). Young and Caveney include Ellis, and his forefather Selby, in a group of writers they term the "Blank Generation" based on the way that they portray "[d]azed consumers, urban deviants, middle-class bohemians, sexual outcasts and other disconsolate riff-raff . . . [T]he city is the same. These are novels much concerned with the eternal verities of urban life: popular culture, fashion, music, and style" (iv). These eternal verities are what make up the spectacle, a place where illusion is fueled by empty commodities. The spectacle makes it unfeasible to "distinguish goods from commodities," and as a result, true satisfaction cannot be found (Debord 30). Selby's characters in *Requiem for a Dream* steep themselves in illusion, searching for meaning in their lives through altering their own version of reality, sacrificing their

sense of self to become victims of their own desire. They are the "urban deviants," disconsolate and willing to drift in the spectacle. Bret Easton Ellis offers a somewhat different view of this gloomy and dissatisfied set: in *Less than Zero*, the narrator Clay comes from an affluent Los Angeles family. While Clay is not obsessed with fame and wealth in the same way as the characters of *Requiem* are, he still exists within the spectacle and searches for his own version of wholeness within the novel.

Filled with a sense of ennui, Clay returns home to L.A. for his college<sup>15</sup> winter vacation and begins using cocaine in order to cope with the empty world around him.<sup>16</sup> As it turns out, L.A. is much different than Clay envisioned; in *Less than Zero*, Ellis presents a world where neither the time nor the space needed to create a sense of self—a soul—are present (Kristeva, *NM* 7). Elizabeth Young asserts that *Less than Zero* is often talked about in terms of "soullessness," something typical of "Blank Fiction." While the conscienceless character has always existed in literature, the definition of the "affectless" teenage rebel has diminishing resonance as "everyone in society is increasingly reduced to that state of immaturity requiring instant gratification that used to be the hallmark of

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<sup>15</sup> Clay apparently attends Camden College, a fact made known in Elizabeth Young's "Vacant Possession: *Less than Zero*—a Hollywood Hell." However, I found no mention of the name of the college in Ellis's actual text.

<sup>16</sup> While it is not explicitly implied that Clay uses cocaine when he is at school, the reader can infer that this is probably the case. Cocaine is *the* drug of the 1980s. To give an indication of this, I use statistics found in the National Institute on Drug Abuse's (NIDA) *Drug Abuse Among Ethnic/Racial Minorities*. While there was no "adult" drug offenders listed, the use of cocaine by 12<sup>th</sup> graders comes close enough to Clay's age in order to give an idea of the prevalence of the drug in the lives of teens. In 1980, 12.3 percent of all American teens surveyed had used cocaine. By 1985, this number jumped to 13.1 percent (NIDA 77). These surveys, however, differentiate between the uses of "cocaine" and "crack cocaine." Cocaine comes in the form of a white powder that is either snorted or dissolved for injection. Crack is a solid chunk of cocaine that is heated directly in a pipe to form a vapor that is inhaled into the lungs. Crack is prepared from the powder by boiling it with sodium bicarbonate. Crack absorbs faster in the system than does cocaine, and is cheaper than the more pure powder form of the drug (Kuhn et al 227).

angry adolescence" (Young, emphasis original 30-32). In short, Young suggests that the orgy of empty consumption present in *Less than Zero* helps numb the pain of every day living. In *Less than Zero*, Ellis shows the desire to live in the illusion of personal well-being, health, and psychic security (Lasch 7) through Clay's ability to be swept away by the insignificant objects found in the spectacle, the ones that offer him perverse pleasure but no real satisfaction (Kristeva, *NM* 7). While Young makes an interesting point, the character of Clay signifies something much deeper, tied in with the big cocaine boom of the 1980s, and his use of images to tell the story reflects not just the "orgy" Young points to, but a much deeper problem—the use of drugs and sex to numb the pain of a communication breakdown. Clay uses the tools of the spectacle—drugs, sex, empty slogans, random club names, and various song titles—to show the utter lack of any serious connection among other human beings. Clay observes all this through the haze of cocaine, and he spends the four weeks of his vacation trying to figure out some sort of meaning to his empty life, realizing that the "insignificant and valueless objects" he once invested himself in no longer provide any sense of satisfaction.

Ellis points to the lack of connection in *Less than Zero* with a series of phrases repeated throughout the novel. One of the first sentences Clay hears upon his return to the West Coast is that "[p]eople are afraid to merge on the freeways in Los Angeles." This stays rooted in Clay's mind for "an uncomfortably long time," and he muses that everything else "seems irrelevant next to that one sentence. . . . Nothing else seems to matter but those ten words. All it comes down to is that I'm a boy coming home for a month and meeting someone whom I haven't seen for four months and people are afraid

to merge" (Ellis 9-10). While Baudrillard comments that the freeway of Los Angeles is a "place of integration," the city and all roads in and out of it are symptomatic of the emptiness of America—"you have the whole of space before you," and the city has been built around this "arterial network" (A 53-55). In short, the freeways, places where people are "afraid to merge" are actually areas where a different type of merging takes place, the merging of illusion with illusion. The freeway, and L.A. itself, are simply empty spaces where it appears that integration takes place, but in reality, there is no connection. The phrase Clay hears becomes Ellis's way of showing his narrator's inability to integrate and connect with the people around him. Ellis shows Clay's life is nothing more than a series of "[i]mages so violent and malicious that they seemed to be [his] only point of reference for a long time" after he leaves L.A. (208). These images and empty relationships terrify and fascinate Clay; in order to cope, he continuously snorts cocaine throughout the text. Ellis weaves various pulp culture images through his narration, showing that the emptiness Clay feels inside is mirrored in the spectacle around him, and though he attempts to fill this void with drugs and random sex, the truth of the matter is that nothing can stem the horror of not merging, and thus connecting, with another human being. The freeway merely acts as another signifier of this empty integration in the society of the spectacle that is Los Angeles.

Unlike heroin, cocaine is not a drug steeped in nostalgia.<sup>17</sup> It does not, as heroin seems to, allow the user to have a feeling of warmth or a return to the womb, as

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<sup>17</sup> For a full description of nostalgia and heroin use, please see the section on Ann Marlowe found in Chapter III.

evidenced in particular by Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*. Instead, cocaine is the drug of the "bigger, faster, more" set. Gary Cross remarks that cocaine fits with the caricature of the "yuppie" class of the early 1980s, a group that included lawyers, wall street brokers, supposedly hip entrepreneurs, and anyone who wanted to be *someone* (in the "hip" sense) who patronized cocaine dealers and participated in activities considered selfish or immoral in order to get away from assuming "normal family obligations." He further notes that the yuppies were thought to be a group who were "disdainful of the Rust Belt and blue-collar workers, [and] liberal on cultural and social issues" (G. Cross 220). Baudrillard remarks, in a less sympathetic characterization, that although the yuppies hail from the sixties and seventies, they hold no nostalgia, fear, or heavy conscience for the wildness that accompanies these decades in American culture. Instead, the yuppies, are "neither fired by ambition nor fuelled by the energy of repression." They are self-centered and "in love with business not so much for profit or prestige as for its being a sort of performance." In short, Baudrillard finds the yuppies to be "a new race, assured, amnestied, exculpated, moving with ease in the world of performance, mentally indifferent to any objective other than that of change and advertising" (A 110), an image that fits Ellis, and his narrator, perfectly.

Cocaine became the miracle drug of this new race of people, and as David Forbes in *False Fixes* says, the cocaine boom of the 1980s corresponded with the high rollers on Wall Street, particularly since the drug instills within the user feelings of confidence, power, and control (95-96). Cocaine also provides feelings of well-being, euphoria, and

excitement,<sup>18</sup> and the cocaine boom, furthered by cartel kingpins like Pablo Escobar and John DeLorean,<sup>19</sup> assured that there would be plenty of the sniffable (or injectable) white powder available—so long as one had the cash to pay for the expensive drug. Clay has the cash to pay, and cocaine allows him to let down his guard and attempt to "merge" with the people around him.

The spectacle featured in Ellis's novel lends itself to what Jameson refers to as "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" that displays itself in the form of photography (9). Images are denoted in the form of their negatives; that is, the "deathly black-and-white substratum" stands in the place where colored pictures once reigned. While Jameson refers to the work of artist Andy Warhol in this passage, I believe that the same can be said of Ellis and his writing: the words on the page, black words on a white page, act in the same way as a photographic negative does and becomes "a set of texts or simulacra" (Jameson 9) for telling Clay's story. Ellis's L.A. is one big neutral space, and Clay's use of cocaine allows him to navigate this empty place. He needs the drug to get through his day-to-day life in Los Angeles because cocaine allows Clay the ability to become a social

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<sup>18</sup> In 1981, P.J. O'Rourke implied that cocaine also creates intelligence, quickness, wit, and alertness in a user. The drug, said O'Rourke, promotes a charming attitude of a well-dressed, good-looking, and sexually attractive user. O'Rourke concluded his thoughts on cocaine by saying, "[I]t would be unthinkable to be rude under its influence" (qtd. in Jonnes *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams* 324). In 1982, Timothy Leary rhapsodized, "Obviously, cocaine is the drug of the day. Isn't it the seventh-largest business in the country? It's the drug of the 80's because this decade is facing the facts. We're in an age of realism and toughness. . . . [Cocaine] is well-adapted to our times." Leary noted that cocaine sparkles like champagne, and a user "feel[s] powerful, as if you controlled the world—and intelligent, much more than you actually are" (qtd. in Jonnes, *Hep* 325-236).

<sup>19</sup> Yes, *that* DeLorean, as in the one who made the car for the 1984 cult classic *Back to the Future*. He was a cocaine kingpin, which probably accounts for why there are no more DeLoreans (the car, that is) driving around on the freeways, the fictional and oft-broken *flux capacitor* notwithstanding.



creature in a world of communication breakdown. In fact, Ellis mimics the use of cocaine in his writing: the black words on the white page tells Clay's story in a rapid burst of empty images—what Young refers to as "soundbites or Polaroids" (27). Near the end of the novel, when Clay stops heavily using the drug (he only stops because he finds himself suffering from nosebleeds and general paranoia), the prose is more fluid. Ellis uses cocaine not just as a mechanism for Clay to deal with the emptiness inside him, but also as a way to explain the world around him.

These rapid-fire images fueled by Clay's cocaine use reflect not just the narrator's state of mind, but the city of Los Angeles as well. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis suggests that moving to L.A. is to "sever connection with national reality, to lose historical and experiential footing, to surrender critical distance, and to submerge oneself in spectacle and fraud" because the city is one of "seduction and defeat, the antipode to critical intelligence" (18).<sup>20</sup> This certainly rings true in *Less than Zero*, a novel whose title, taken from an Elvis Costello song of the same name (Young 21-22), seems to represent that the spectacle of L.A. is all flash, no substance. The implication that there is "less than nothing" to be found in L.A. resonates in Clay, and as Young notes, the teenagers in the book "feel themselves to be at the *end* of things" (emphasis original, 22). Every person Clay encounters during his month-long vacation appears as a generically empty shell: everyone possesses thin tan bodies, short blond hair (the boys, anyway), empty and toneless voices and blank expressions in their blue eyes, prompting Clay to

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<sup>20</sup> Davis also notes that Joan Didion (*The White Album*), on the edge of a nervous breakdown, felt that L.A., the city of the Manson murders, was already a world of demeaned ambition and random violence. Davis adds that Didion's "visceral revulsion was recalled years later by Bret Easton Ellis, L.A. 'bratpack' writer of the 1980s" and refers to *Less than Zero* as a "Cainian novel of gilded Westside youth" (45).

wonder if he "look[s] exactly like them" (Ellis 152). Clay's best friend-cum-junkie-whore Julian has the same look, and during one of his business transactions (Clay attends because he "want[s] to see the worst" [Ellis 172]), a client tells him, "'You're a very nice young man . . . . Yes, you're a very beautiful boy . . . and here, that's all that matters'" (Ellis 175). The enjoyment of beauty can bring about happiness, though this aesthetic attitude offers little protection against suffering. Beauty can compensate, however, for a great deal, as the enjoyment of it can have a peculiar and mildly intoxicating effect. In short, beauty has no obvious use, but civilization cannot do without aesthetic pleasure (Freud 33). Of course, beauty on the outside does not always indicate emptiness on the inside, but in the case of Ellis's narrative, the body becomes just another example of the empty spectacle, a commodity that has lost its exchange value.

In the spectacle, empty images of popular culture replace formerly meaningful relationships and connections with others. The spectacle abounds with commodities, offering a false choice of reality in various forms (Debord 42, 40). For Ellis, this comes through the use of cultural mediums to tell Clay's story. Cities such as Ellis's L.A. and Selby's New York create an environment where there is nothing to do except "buy and sell goods and images, which amounts to the same thing, since they are both dull, shallow symbols" (*NM* 27). The city is full of people who are steeped in empty images, finding themselves reflected in the glass and steel buildings around them (Kristeva, *NM* 27). This amalgamation of glass and steel results in what Jameson refers to as "pastiche," where the "linguistic fragmentation of society itself" has been "reduced to a

neutral and reified media speech," resulting in "the random cannibalization" of various styles (Jameson 17-18). This cannibalization results in mass-produced illusions and images (Lasch 87), and Ellis presents Clay as having no representational power to the point where he merely reflects the images of those around him. Clay's world is full of indifferent and illusory combinations, and Ellis shows Clay as one who does not care that he is mediated through the world around him. This emptiness, and the lack of desire to change it, is symptomatic of the yuppie culture and the beginning of the 1980s; Christopher Lasch refers to this state as one of "narcissism" in the sense that people desire an audience so that they have something to reflect against (10). However, I would add that the world Ellis paints is one where the human becomes the commodity, made up of shallow images and symbols. Clay is a perfect example of this, and the name Ellis gives to his narrator—something moldable—mirrors the world around him. Clay is merely a player in the spectacle, and he is not aware that he lacks a true identity.

Ellis uses Clay as a type of vessel, one that is perpetually empty and can only be filled through the spectacle around him. This is particularly evident in the clubs he visits with his friends. Before entering the club, and while there, Clay stays as high as he possibly can, sneaking off to the bathroom at random intervals to snort more cocaine. The effects of the cocaine are transient, like the names of those clubs: *The Wire*, *Nowhere Club*, *Land's End*, and *the Edge* (Ellis 106). Clay's monstrous cocaine consumption causes him to feel like he is walking on a wire but going nowhere, and Los Angeles is the "land's end," both geographically and metaphorically. Cocaine causes euphoria, omnipotence, hyper-vigilance, well being, and endless energy (Brick and

Erickson 80), and Clay's continual consumption helps him to cope with these insecure and uncertain feelings that accompany his ambiguous and empty identity.<sup>21</sup> Like his time at the clubs, the side effects of cocaine are short-lived; at its peak, for example, the effects occur anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, and the subjective effects of the high diminish rather quickly. The user loses the feeling of euphoria, which causes both depression and rebound sleep, among other unpleasant side effects (Brick and Erickson 80). Clay feels that he is always literally on the "edge" of something, and Ellis makes it clear through the clubs and cocaine that Clay will never be able to cross the edge. He can only hope for balance, because he has no idea what it is exactly that he wants to see if he ever manages to get to the other side.

The crux of the novel is that Clay actually has two addictions: the first is to cocaine, a drug he uses to remain sociable. The second is to the empty images surrounding him. He can no longer distinguish what is real and what is not, and this makes the second addiction more dangerous than the first. While it could be argued that this is an addiction to "nothingness," I suggest that Clay's lack of ability to recognize that he is empty, and his ambiguous feeling toward life in general, indicate that he is, in fact, addicted to the empty images the spectacle offers. Ellis presents Clay as someone who has everything except he "do[esn't] have anything to lose" (Ellis 189-190). In Clay's world, there really is nothing to lose, because he is an empty receptacle, merely absorbing the world around him in the hopes that he can find some meaning for his life.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Addiction Counselor's Desk Reference* notes that the side effects of cocaine include excessive anxiety, talkativeness, irritability, argumentativeness, nervousness, dilated pupils, long periods without sleeping or eating, and euphoria. Withdrawal symptoms include apathy, long periods of sleep, fatigue, disorientation, violence, and depression (Coombs and Howatt 20-21).

Clay wants to find a connection, but he cannot; he uses cocaine as a vehicle for these relationships, but really, he is addicted to the nothing that surrounds him. Clay needs the images in much the same way Sara needs to watch her television: it is only through the empty culture around him that he can have an identity and feel that sense of wholeness. Again, like the characters in Selby's novel, Clay mistakes the feeling of being full for that of being whole, because while he fills his bloodstream with cocaine, he is still experiencing a void in his life.

One of the more interesting ways Ellis details Clay's relationship is through his constant mention of the music he hears. This music is another example of the void in Clay's life; he cannot even articulate an original, authentic thought, and the music acts as a way for him to reflect his mental state. In *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*, James Annesley posits that, through the novel's relationship to mass culture, Ellis offers "a sophisticated sense of the popular's conflicting range of significations" (97). For example, when going to lunch, Clay muses that his father "puts the top of the 450 down and plays a Bob Seger tape, as if this was some sort of weird gesture of communication" (Ellis 42). Clay and his father are not able to effectively communicate without the aid of the popular, so the significance of this moment, found early in the narrative, reflects the superficial relationships surrounding the narrator. Furthermore, *Less than Zero* was published in 1985, a few years after the birth of MTV, a channel that, as Gary Cross notes, "introduced viewers to videos of music performers who, in effect, sold their songs 24 hours a day" (208). MTV perpetuates the spectacle in the sense that "[s]tardom is a diversification in the

semblance of life—the object of an identification with mere appearance which is intended to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity." This empty image results in an "individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things" (Debord 38-39). It is no wonder, then, that Ellis uses music as a vehicle to illuminate Clay's feelings. When Clay returns to L.A., he hears "New Kid in Town" by the Eagles; on his way to meet his father for another lunch date, Clay listens to "Earthquake Song" by The Little Girls, which includes the line "I fell in a crack/Now I'm part of the debris" (Ellis 12, 45-46). Clay loses his autonomy, and Ellis's use of various songs shows that the narrator can only be an object with a semblance of life, possessing absolutely no individuality in the face of the spectacle.

This loss of individuality, and the inability to articulate these feelings, is the main focus of the novel. At one point, Clay drives aimlessly around and spies a billboard: "All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little" (Ellis 39). This phrase, along with another he hears that day in reference to Julian—"I wonder if he's for sale" (Ellis 23)—haunts Clay throughout his narrative. Clay has no real sense of self and finds himself lost in the spectacle. He muses, "You can disappear here without knowing it" (Ellis 176), and indeed, Clay seems to. He is just like everyone else in the novel, empty and alone, and after he makes this

comment, he realizes that he must examine his own addiction to cocaine and leave L.A. so that he does not continue to get lost in the spectacle surrounding him.

Clay acts as the ultimate consumer of the world around him, a perpetually dissatisfied, restless, anxious and bored automaton who uses cocaine to sate his unappeasable appetite for new experiences and personal fulfillment. He turns his alienation into a commodity, and Ellis uses Clay's cocaine consumption as a way to express these feelings. In doing so, Clay himself becomes a commodity, one who is defined by empty slogans and images:

Disappear Here.

The syringe fills with blood.

*You're a beautiful boy and that's all that matters.*

Wonder if he's for sale.

People are afraid to merge. To merge. (Ellis 183)

In order to have a meaningful and whole life, Clay must escape the empty relationships and images around him. If not, he will stay in a state of depression, one that stems from his relation to his old life. If he stays in L.A., he will remain in an unamenable and deadly union with emptiness (Kristeva, *NM* 41), which will only serve to destroy him until he is just like all of the other "beautiful" and generic boys in the city.

Clay seeks redemption for these feelings, however, and the rise of televangelism in the 1980s corresponds with *Less than Zero's* publication date. Clay seeks to rid himself of his emptiness through trying to find a connection with televised religious programs. Gary Cross notes that, in 1960, a ruling allowed paid religious broadcasts to

act as public programming for local stations. In the 1980s, "televangelists identified niche markets and designed programs meeting the distinct moral, aesthetic, and religious sensibilities of their diverse audiences" (G. Cross 208). When Clay flips through the television stations, going between MTV—where song lyrics are put in accordance with equally arbitrary images—and religious programs, he feels lonely and disaffected.

Religion, in Ellis's world, becomes another form of spectacular consumption, one that is "seamlessly combined with the rhetorical advocacy of pleasure *in this life*" (Debord, emphasis original 38). Clay seeks some sort of gratification through these programs, much the same way Carroll searches for redemption and purity through heroin. The televangelist featured by Ellis wears pink-tinted sunglasses (viewing the world through "rose colored glasses," as it were) who attempts to offer peace in an imperfect world. The man stands in front of a forlorn neon Christ, a spectacle in and of itself, telling the audiences that their confusion, frustration, hopelessness and helplessness results from the fact that they feel they are in a situation they cannot leave. He promises, however, that Jesus will come and "set the captive free," and that it will be a night of "Deliverance" (Ellis 140). Clay, taken in by the message, waits, but when nothing happens, he can only recall the televangelist's earnest words: "Let this be a night of Deliverance" (Ellis 141). Clay's helpless feelings and the desire to figure out exactly what it is that he has lost cause him to wish for deliverance from his own situation. The inability to connect with others around him without the use of a chemical crutch causes him to seek solace in something as obtuse as pink-tinted-sunglass-wearing televangelists. Ellis shows, however, that neither Jesus nor anyone else can deliver Clay from this



empty place. Like the earlier addiction narratives of Burroughs through Yablonsky, there is no hope for redemption in Ellis's world, particularly since there is no actual meaning behind the lost and hopeless feelings Clay has. Religion is merely another commodity in the spectacle.

In the end, Clay stops doing drugs and pulls away from his friends. He never manages to connect his sense of self to the world of Los Angeles, simply because both are shallow and empty spaces filled with images. In a conversation with an ex-girlfriend, he asks if she ever loved him. Blair muses that yes, she did, but Clay never seemed like he was "there." She adds that others she dated felt the same way to her, but at least they made an effort. It was "'just beyond [Clay]," and though she wants to feel pity for him, "[i]t's hard to feel sorry for someone who doesn't care," adding, "You're a beautiful boy, Clay, but that's about it" (Ellis 204). Blair's deconstruction of her relationship with Clay, and her suggestion that he is only a beautiful boy, indicates that, like his name, he is a person lacking in substance. Clay can only respond to her by telling her that nothing makes him happy because he does not "want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care" (Ellis 205). Separating himself from others permits Clay to keep a safe distance and not get involved on an intimate level with anyone. Cocaine helps to fuel this dissociation, because through the use of the drug, he can connect for short bursts of time. As his ennui grows, however, so does his addiction, to the point where, even if he did want to care, he could not.

Ellis ends the novel with Clay departing L.A. for New Hampshire. Ellis uses music as a way for Clay to identify what he is feeling. While listening to a song entitled "Los Angeles," Clay reflects that the harsh and bitter words of the song resonate with him for days. Clay remarks that the images stay with him even after he leaves L.A. and include pictures "of people being driven mad by living in the city," "parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children," and of teenagers "looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun" (Ellis 207-208). Ellis iterates Clay's emptiness in this description; the images stay with Clay because they are what he is constructed both by and of. When he leaves the city, Clay understands the concept of being "less than zero," because in reality, if he stays in L.A., this is what he will become. His addiction to cocaine, as well as to apathy, will devour him until he really is nothing but an empty shell. In order to fulfill his psychic space and attempt a feeling of wholeness, Clay must leave all that he knows behind. Instead of going West to achieve his dream, he must return to the conservative ideals of the East. Ellis, however, leaves us with the feeling that, no matter where Clay goes, he will remain a commodity, devoured by the spectacle, because he can never achieve the feeling of wholeness he desires. In his constant consumption of cocaine and images, Clay, like the Goldfarbs, Tyrone, and Marion, becomes of a victim of his own desires.

In *Less than Zero*, Ellis paints a portrait of an America devoured by consumption. In the postwar world of America, consumerism was, and continues to be, rampant. Along with this increased consumption came the need for convenience. Cohen remarks that in the act of shopping, consumers ultimately choose convenience over

quaintness; that is, instead of shopping in downtown stores and "Mom-and-Pop" joints, consumers desired the convenience of malls. She adds that shopping centers held "the ability to drive and park easily, more night hours, improved store layouts, increased self-service, and simplified credit with the charge plate" (Cohen 268). This convenience made it easier for Americans to shop and thus to fill their lives with meaningless things in an effort to feel satisfied. After World War II, Americans began to purchase products that they did not "need," but instead "wanted." The luxury of having a shopping center that catered to these desires made it easier to fulfill this dream. Eventually, malls responded to the tendency for couples to shop together, and specifically designed stores that spoke to both men and women. Shopping ceased to be an annoying chore and became a leisurely activity that friends, couples, and families would engage in together (Cohen 281). The rise of consumerism in the postwar years made it possible for shopping to be leisure, and allowed Americans to change space, sex, clothes and habits according to fashion rather than morality (Baudrillard, A 96). In short, America became the landscape for the spectacle, and the author who captures this best is John Updike with the character of Rabbit Angstrom in *Rabbit at Rest*.<sup>22</sup>

Updike uses Rabbit as a way to view the impending end of the millennium. In the final *Rabbit* novel, the title character spends much of his time looking to the past in an effort to make sense of the present. Rabbit's favorite pastimes, including basketball and sex, are activities he can no longer engage in, thanks to his bad heart. These

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<sup>22</sup> In *Rabbit at Rest*, Rabbit's son Nelson is a cocaine addict. However, I prefer to focus on Rabbit's addiction and the ways Updike showcases the world of 1980s America instead. I find that Ellis's *Less than Zero* gives a clearer response to the question of cocaine in the 1980s.

physical activities have been replaced by the act of consumption; Rabbit eats in order to feel a sense of wholeness, and like Selby and Ellis, Updike shows that feeling full is not concomitant with being whole. Rabbit's addiction to food harms his ability to play ball or have sex, and he is no longer the strapping hero of the earlier novels. Instead, Rabbit and his wife Janice have a retirement condo in Florida, aptly called Valhalla Village.<sup>23</sup> It is only fitting, then, that at the end of the novel, Rabbit runs away from his family after sleeping with his son's wife and heads to the condo in Florida. While out for a walk, he spies some boys playing basketball, and when he joins them, his unhealthy heart gives out. He has a heart attack on the court and later dies in a hospital. Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* details the ever-changing and unstable world of the spectacle in the 1980s through the character of Rabbit. In fact, I assert that Rabbit *becomes* the spectacle through his increasing consumption of images and food.

At one point in the novel, Rabbit muses, "You don't know what you don't know. A void inside, a void outside" (Updike 84). This simple statement reflects the American mindset near the turn of the century. The void outside reflects the one found inside; that is, there is nothing there, and we have become amalgamations of different types of "junk" in the effort to feel there is something meaningful and substantial in our lives. In fact, the "void" outside Rabbit notes is quickly filled with different modes of consumption, so much so that the empty spaces—the desert of America, as Baudrillard notes—are being "developed to death" (Updike 25-26). I find that this statement reflects one of the preoccupations of junkie lit as a whole: the thought of being alone, and

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<sup>23</sup> Valhalla is a dwelling in Asgard, the Norse heaven, and is reserved for the souls of those who have died heroic deaths (Hirsch, Jr. et al 45).

feeling lonely, is so horrifying and appalling that we must find something to fill the void. We are unable to stand our own company, so we turn to different types of junk, whether in the form of heroin, cocaine, television, or images, in order to feel something. Empty land in America is not even tolerable, and Updike's use of the increasingly developed landscape indicates the desire we have to fill these empty spaces, both inside and outside. Not only are these empty spaces being filled with mass-manufactured houses, but they also cater to our consumerist need for convenience. The spectacle promises convenience, and delivers, but the cost of this is the loss of identity and the addiction to junk in order to feel.

The landscape Updike paints is one of convenience. That is, along the highways Rabbit travels are stores. The landscape around Rabbit mirrors the increased anxiety Americans have concerning empty spaces, and the older Rabbit gets, the more cluttered this landscape becomes. It is as if the empty spaces where forests and fields are must be filled with technology and convenience. In Florida, the roadside is filled with "repeating franchises selling gasoline and groceries and liquor and drugs," as well as "building[s] [that] cater especially to illness and age." Updike also notes, "Alongside 41, between the banks and stores and pet suppliers and sprinkler installers, miles of low homes are roofed with fat white cooling tile" (Updike 25). These specialized shopping stores, such as Winn-Dixie, Eckerd Drugs and various chiropractic centers, held open for extended hours, reflect the idea that convenience and immediate gratification (G. Cross 231) are the only ways to fill up one's life. Instead of having to work for anything, see anything natural, and garner the satisfaction earned from a job well done, the immediate

gratification offered by such stores provides a way to feel fulfilled briefly, but not totally. The shopping centers and chain stores overtaking the highways of America have become, in Updike's world, ways to separate us from others so that any actual connection to another human being is fleeting. It mistakes the *feeling* of being whole for that of being full, offering only an empty and meaningless world glossed over with the guise of convenience.

Updike shows that Rabbit's remembered world, the one of with the simplicity of corner stores and homegrown diners, has given way to one that is slick and empty. Jameson remarks that this is a part of the condition of capitalism; the new space gives way to "the suppression of distance . . . and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places" to the point where the individual "is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed" (412-413). This new space suppresses distance in a literal the sense: we can go to a mall and find everything we want in one place, from shoes to clothes to entertainment. However, the distance between two people—Rabbit and his wife, Rabbit and his son—is elongated in this new space such that the relationships Rabbit has with those around him become something that he cannot understand. Most of the people he grew up with are dying or already dead. The world he knew as a child in his hometown of Brewer, Pennsylvania shows that "his past [has] grown awesomely deep, so that things he remembers personally . . . are history now" (Updike 166). The distance between his past and his present has also grown, and the increasingly developed landscape Updike remarks about shows that the void being filled

is spatial but not personal. There is convenience in the suppression of space, but engaging in such monstrous consumption only serves to create emptiness on the part of the shoppers. Rabbit cannot articulate this; instead, Updike writes, "Then as now, waking from twilit daydreams, [Rabbit] discovered himself nearer a shining presence than he thought, near enough for it to cast a golden shadow ahead of his steps across the yard; then it was his future, now it is his past" (173). Rabbit's world, the prewar world, is fading into the cluttered one he lives in now, and while his past represents the dreams for the future, the present indicates that these dreams are only empty memories of things that cannot be found again. The old has been replaced with the new; in spite of the promise to fulfill every dream the advertisements and stores promote, the act of consumption cannot replace the void that not having any real connection to anything, and in particular anyone, causes.

Updike articulates this loss of connection Rabbit feels through the use of television. In Selby, television acts as a way for Sara to feel connected to a family. In Rabbit's life, television becomes the only way he can attempt to communicate with his nine-year-old granddaughter Judy. Rabbit realizes that she does not understand the shows of his childhood, and feels that something—again, he cannot articulate this "thing"—has been lost. Baudrillard notes that the laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy; television is "unrelenting" in its portrayal of the American family (A 49). The mass media, and in particular television, shows this lack of connection the best, because the appliance has become another form of cultural consumption (Riesman 84). Television sitcoms provide a way to view families as they

should be rather than what they are; any problem can be solved in the thirty minutes it takes to watch the program. To Rabbit, all the shows are pretty much the same:

families, laugh tracks, zany drop-ins, those three-sided living-room sets with the stairs coming down in the background like in *Cosby*, and front doors on the right through which the comical good-natured grandparents appear, bearing presents and presenting problems. . . . TV families and your own are hard to tell apart, except yours isn't interrupted every six minutes by commercials and theirs don't get bogged down into nothingness, a state where nothing happens, no skit, no zany visitors, no outburst on the laugh track, nothing at all but boredom and a lost feeling . . . (Updike 426)

As Baudrillard notes, the laugh tracks are omnipresent, and Updike points out that the shows are all the same. Rabbit observes that the televised families are not that different from his own; however, the fact of the matter is that sitcoms offer a picture of the ideal family, and this is certainly not the one Updike portrays. Although television networks attempt to provide shows that give an insight in to the "real" American family, the lack of connection—the nothingness Updike alludes to—creates a void. Updike makes a point to throw in different programs—*Lassie* from Rabbit's youth; *Cosby*, a show about an African American family; *Roseanne*, about a blue-collar family; various news programs; and *Unsolved Mysteries*, for example—in an effort to showcase the utter absurdity of television and the emptiness of the medium as a whole. The sitcoms are the utmost propaganda of the spectacle, showing how things ought to be compared to what



they really are, and the attempt at the egalitarian programming (one that says "All families are alike! It doesn't matter if the family is black or white trash—human problems are universal!") fails miserably when juxtaposed with the family Updike presents in *Rabbit at Rest*.

Updike also shows the differences in the generations through the programming. Not only is Rabbit dismayed that Judy skips right over *Lassie*, but the child continually surfs from program to program, never lingering on any particular channel. She is filled, as Updike notes, with "[a]n impatient rage . . . a gluttony for images" (126). The gluttony Updike proposes is not one for meaning, but one for images; the "pseudo-events," Debord suggests, are able to be quickly forgotten because of the "precipitating with which the spectacle's pulsing machinery replaces one with the next" (114). Judy, as a child, is the ultimate participator in this particular aspect of the spectacle (even Sara Goldfarb, pre-drug use, would sit and watch program after program from start to finish), and thus the ultimate consumer. Gary Cross indicates that the 1980s consumerism made it possible for childhood to become "locked in a vast interconnected industry that encompassed movies, TV shows, videos, and other media forms along with toys, clothing, and accessories, all in the business of selling fantasy," one that "children and the merchandisers alone understood and that was designed to stimulate unending desire for more" (210). The shows of Rabbit's past no longer speak to Judy's generation; children like Judy want the next best thing, and her constant channel surfing reveals her to be a conglomeration of all the images the TV sends out to her. In fact, when Rabbit has his first heart attack, the only songs she can come up with on her own are

commercials for McDonald's and toys, and as he suffers the pain in his chest, he feels that listening to her is "like switching channels back and forth" (Updike 126).

The constant switching Rabbit feels as Judy sings to save them both from capsizing at sea articulates more than just the child's saturation of images and the media. This quick switch also shows the difference between the past and the present. Rabbit finds that, while the world around him changes, he is not; he is stuck in the past, trying to navigate the void he feels both inside and out. Though the TV, for example, offers shows that cater towards anyone, the sense of satisfaction of finding something to watch and perhaps to connect to is not present. The same can be said for the shopping centers; in spite of the convenience offered by stores that supply everything from drugs to toys to power tools, the sense of satisfaction and feeling whole is never quite achieved.

While the world Updike portrays is one filled with convenience and images, the best example of the spectacle is actually the character of Rabbit. Rabbit's curious about this new world he finds himself in; his son Nelson is nothing like him and turns to cocaine; his wife suddenly wants to be a working woman; and his daughter-in-law Pru appears to be making advances towards him. In the middle of all this, Rabbit, befuddled at the world around him, cannot quite keep up, so he turns to the one thing that can always offer him pleasure: food. His heart attack in the first section of the book indicates that he should perhaps find something else to get involved with, but for Rabbit, food is the only comfort that can connect the past and the present for him and help him navigate the society of the spectacle he finds himself in at the end of the 1980s. As a

result of this gluttony, the spectacle of consumption is written on Rabbit's body in a way that it is not in Selby and Ellis.

Jameson notes that society celebrates the "heterogeneous fabric of the commercial strip and the motel and fast-food landscape of the postsuperhighway American city" (63), though Debord suggests that when society "eliminates geographical distance," it "reap[s] distance internally in the form of spectacular separation" (120). In the same way that the landscape in Updike's book becomes cluttered, so, too, does Rabbit's personal world. He eliminates geographical distance in his own way by becoming, and maintaining, an obese physique, and by doing so, turns into the spectacular commodity Debord defines in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing mode of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice" (Debord, emphasis original 13). The "superhighway" does, in fact, allow for a pre-made choice; the vast numbers of "convenient" stores along the road are something Updike notes throughout the text. In the case of Rabbit, the commodities to be consumed in this spectacular culture appear to him in the form of food. Rabbit begins to physically eliminate space by paradoxically taking up more; throughout the novel, Rabbit constantly consumes in an effort to feel more alive after his heart attack. Updike notes that Rabbit "finds that every time he thinks of his death it makes him want to eat" (198); food becomes a comfort to him while at the same time the thing that is also killing him. He chooses to eat, but this choice quickly develops into something he does in order to feel whole and keep death a bay; that is, food becomes necessary for Rabbit in the

same way that heroin is needed by addicts to maintain a certain feeling. However, by doing so, Rabbit invariably eats himself to death.

In *Fatal Strategies*, Jean Baudrillard states that obesity is an anomaly, particularly in the United States, and is a "kind of monstrous conformity to empty space, of deformity by excess of conformity that translates the hyperdimension of a sociality at once saturated and empty, where the scene of the social as well as that of the body are left behind" (47). In the last year of his life, Rabbit's inability to be an athletic star on the basketball courts, or a sex machine, causes him to turn to food for comfort. Rabbit's love of nibbling, though, causes him more problems than it soothes; his insatiable appetite for all the bad types of food clogs his arteries, causing him to have the aforementioned heart attack. In spite of this, though, Rabbit continues to enjoy food, and his gluttony eventually kills him in the end. Rabbit's expanding waistline, and his desire for food, manifests itself in a type of monstrous consumption and, as Baudrillard points out, a deformity that conforms because many Americans are obese.<sup>24</sup> Rabbit is aware that he is at an unhealthy weight, but he is, on the whole, unwilling to do anything about it. Janice points out to his doctor that Rabbit is "a real addict" (Updike 154), and indeed, Rabbit enjoys the feeling food gives him. Updike remarks, "In a way, gluttony is

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<sup>24</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 1985 and 2008, a dramatic increase in obesity has occurred in the United States. The CDC notes that "American society has become "obesogenic," which is "characterized by environments that promote increased food intake, nonhealthful foods, and physical inactivity" (CDC). Overweight and obesity are differentiated based on a person's Body Mass Index (BMI). An adult who has a BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight, and adult with a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese. Obesity has been shown to cause coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, various cancers, hypertension, sleep apnea and respiratory problems, as well as many other diseases that can lead to death (CDC).

an athletic feat, a stretching exercise" (75), and for Rabbit, it is the only exercise with which he can engage.

Rabbit's addiction to food, however, is symptomatic of the American preoccupation with the body as a whole. Debord notes, "The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (emphasis original, 24); in Rabbit's case, the image created is that of his obese body. As a rich man, he can afford to eat the foods that are bad for him. This gluttony manifests itself in his person—the accumulated capital physically shows on his body. Rabbit is not only addicted to food; he also desires the look of being wealthy, which is found in the form of fat on his body. The obese body is a characteristic of operational modernity, and indicates the obscenity of culture as a whole (Baudrillard 48-50). Rabbit's eating is a way for him to show that he has achieved a type of the American Dream Selby's characters were so intent on getting—he has wealth, and this shows on his obese body.

Updike uses Rabbit's increasing waistline to show how obesity becomes a spectral obscenity. Baudrillard suggests that American obesity is not heavy; rather "it floats in the good conscience of sociality" because "[i]t incarnates the formless form, the amorphous morphology of the currently social." The obese person is no longer an "individual paradigm of reconciliation," but a "specimen" that has become inorganic and unnatural through the largeness of the body (Baudrillard, *FS* 49). Rabbit Angstrom, as a white, upper-middle-class member of American society, is the embodiment of the spectacle through his own amorphous and expanding form; by continually eating, he attempts to achieve what the heroin addicts discussed in Chapter III desire—wholeness

and the ability to keep death away. The 1980s brought about more improved food (Jameson 299), and this shows on Rabbit's person; he becomes a specimen, symptomatic of the culture in which he resides. The overabundance available to him comforts him, but ultimately backfires.

The spectacle Updike paints is one of abundance and false choice. Debord notes that, in the places where "the consumption of abundance has established itself, there is one spectacular antagonism, which is always at the forefront of the range of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adulthood" (40). Instead of snacking on "adult" foods—fruits and vegetables, for example—Updike shows Rabbit invested in "junk" food. Nuts are among his favorite, and he can never feel full enough, no matter how much he eats. When faced with worry, fear, or even desire, Rabbit turns to junk food for comfort, relying on the texture created by candy bars, nuts, and chocolate, for example, to assuage his nervousness at Nelson's impending visit to Florida (Updike 5). When Nelson arrives, Rabbit prods and pokes the sticky food in his teeth with his tongue; he finds himself unable to fully articulate his feelings to his son, so he finds stimulation and fullness in another oral activity. This use of food for any meaningful relationship begins early in the novel, and Updike continues this substitution throughout. Rabbit remains wholly unsatisfied even when he is eating; the only resulting action is that this act of consumption puts more strain on his already taxed heart.

Updike shows Rabbit as a man consumed with the past who relies on food to feel that sense of wholeness and to keep death at bay. However, food is something that merely steers him closer to the end—the more he eats, the bigger he gets. While visiting

his mistress Thelma, Rabbit realizes that "[l]ove and death . . . can't be pried apart any more," an idea that frightens him so much that he "consume[s] without thinking both the little bowls of fatty, sodium-soaked nuts" and a glass of Coke (Updike 184). When Thelma attempts to initiate sex, something Rabbit used to enjoy doing, he tells her that, at 56, he is too old, and "'if you're the height I am and been overweight as long, the heart gets tired of lugging it all around"; however, in doing so, Rabbit feels as if he has "forfeited something" by not having sex, and that he has somehow "lost full rank" (Updike 184-185). Instead of consummating his desire, he turns to another task that is supposed to help fill him—he eats what she offers, consuming her food instead of her body. His desire has become his lack, and in order to fill that void, Rabbit eats. For Rabbit, food helps to keep him calm in the face of death; in Thelma's home, he is confronted with her impending death (she has lupus), and needs to eat to keep the fear from taking hold of him. Rabbit's addiction to food is directly related to his attempt to feel whole; while he never gets full—he is always eating—the food gives him a sort of life and the ability to go on. The logic is that, if he is performing a life-sustaining action, obsessively providing nourishment for his body, then, surely, he must be warding off mortality.

The obese body of Rabbit Angstrom is symptomatic of his culture. His obese body is unable to keep up with America; Updike remarks that the country is one that "changes styles and costumes and vocabulary, as it dances ahead ever young, ever younger" (254-255). Rabbit's addiction to eating in an effort to satiate his desire and feel whole causes him to adhere to what Baudrillard, in *Fatal Strategies*, calls "that kind of

monstrous conformity to empty space, of deformity by excess of conformity" (47). Instead of staying fit and retaining the heroic visage that used to grace the walls of Springer Motors, the car lot where Rabbit once worked, he has become obsolete and obese. Not only is his picture taken down from the auto center, but his body has become monstrous and unwieldy. Rabbit becomes the embodiment of bureaucratic property, something that is concentrated in the individual, and shows the abundance of commodities (Debord 41-42). This culminates with him attempting to regain his youth through having sex with a younger woman. His relationship with Pru, his son's wife, only serves to show that, while Rabbit feels good about being found attractive by this woman, he is still too old for the repercussions that follow. Instead of staying in Brewer and being confronted by his family, he flees to Valhalla Village, stopping at various places along the way to eat. In Florida, still separated from his family, Rabbit, once again trying to feel young, plays basketball with a group of urban youth. This is his final act of the novel: the weight he continues to put on as he grazes his way through *Rabbit at Rest* causes his heart too much stress, and in the end, his addiction to "junk" kills him.

The "junk" present in Selby, Ellis, and Updike is related to the more familiar concept used in American society—the idea of trash. Television, long considered by many to be a purveyor of waste, is threaded throughout contemporary American narratives of addiction to show the ways in which the family unit has become increasingly separated in the postwar world. The families featured in the sitcoms do not offer a real portrait of the American family. The families found in junkie lit, however, are real in spite of the presentation as fiction. The Goldfarbs, Clay's family, and the



Angstroms represent the loss of connection present in American society, and the simulacra offered by television, with the constant bombardment of advertisements and inane sitcoms, provides a type of thread that can allow the characters some form of communication. While prewar Americans felt the need to separate home, school, and church from television and other examples of consumerism, the latter half of the century promoted these same activities as a way for families to communicate (G. Cross 206-207). Of course, this communication is completely empty, and the families in the novels remain unfulfilled.

*Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby, Jr. (1978), Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* (1984), and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* (1989) each focus on a different facet of a new form of "junk" addiction, detailing the feelings of apathy and emptiness experienced in the spectacle that is post-World War II America. Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* links heroin addiction to other forms of monstrous consumption, including the watching of television and the abuse of prescription drugs. Ellis's *Less than Zero* shows the early world of the 1980s as one laced with the consumption of drugs, sex, and television. Finally, Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*, the last novel of his popular "Rabbit Angstrom" series, details both the end of Rabbit's life and the end of the 1980s, concerning itself with the ways in which spectacular consumption, in the form of the media and obesity, has infected American life. In his theoretical deconstruction of the United States entitled *America*, Jean Baudrillard indicates that emptiness is indicative of Americans as a whole. He notes that the perfect metaphor for American culture is that of the desert, an endless empty space. Baudrillard implies that America consists of "inordinate space,"

and that the deserts "denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum" (63). Baudrillard's assertion that American culture mirrors the desert landscape can be used as the overriding metaphor in contemporary junkie lit novels that deal outside heroin addiction. The apathy and emptiness expressed in Selby, Ellis, and Updike cause the characters to search for wholeness in this desert landscape of American culture.

The spectacle present in these novels appears as a place where commodities run rampant, and where there is no unification between the characters. The only way in which these characters are united is through their various addictions, and they rely on different forms of junk in order to feel what they believe to be a sense of wholeness. Instead, the characters of these novels mistake being full for being whole, spending a majority of the text searching for ways to fill the void inside. Instead of accomplishing this, however, they are lost in their own addictions, unable and unwilling to find a way out of the society of the spectacle. Television, food, surreal images, and empty relationships are what Selby, Ellis, and Updike detail in their novels. These authors, writing a different kind of "junkie literature," indicate that the absolute excess offered by consumer culture in postwar America signifies the ever-increasing turn towards emptiness, which in turn causes a new definition for the word "junk" when speaking of addiction in contemporary American literature.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION: A REQUIEM FOR THE DREAM

The American Dream once promised freedom, abundance, and equality for all. Postwar America promised to deliver on the Dream, offering a new consumerism that anyone could buy into. Items once only desired by ordinary middle-class citizens could now be purchased by everyone. In *America*, Jean Baudrillard remarks, "The fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on') and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power." However, the turmoil of the seventies, including the Vietnam War, caused power to become impotent so that America is "no longer the monopolistic centre of world power" because "there is no centre any more. It has, rather, become the orbit of an imaginary power to which everyone now refers. . . . America has retained power, both political and cultural, but it is now power as a special effect" (Baudrillard 107). The burgeoning reappearance of the American Dream quickly became what Baudrillard calls "a special effect," something that existed only in illusion. In reality, America has always been a country founded on illusion and the hope for a better life, and the American Dream has always been an empty, fleeting promise.

America in the 1950s, amidst the progress and rise of consumption, was a place where the government closely monitored the lives of citizens. Threats emanating from outside the country's borders, including nuclear attacks, the Cold War, Communism, and two unpopular wars (Korea and Vietnam), caused many Americans to turn to monstrous

consumption as a way to block out the world. Although citizens felt that they were the ones in control of their life, the fear and propaganda the government flooded the country with caused some to realize that this "control" was something they were under, rather than something they had power over. In *Naked Lunch*, written during the height of the Cold War, William S. Burroughs suggests, "Americans have a special horror of giving up control" (195). In an effort to regain control, the citizens of America turned to different substances. These substances, including heroin, food, and television, among others, merely became another controlling factor; in the end, it is the addiction that claims the power over the user.

The postwar years brought about what Gary Cross calls "a modern American understanding of addiction" where the individual "gave in" to "a powerful grasping force" (114). Society scrambled to define the difference between which desires were socially acceptable (G. Cross 115); as a result, addicts were blamed for various social ills. This scapegoat mentality allowed for an innovative literary revolution—junkie literature. William S. Burroughs's *Junky* and Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* offered the first true insight into the secret world of the junky, and the publication of the novel paved the way for other contemporary American addiction narratives, including, but not limited to: Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*, Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk: A Novel*, and Ann Marlowe's *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*. These narratives of heroin addiction show how, in spite of the belief that people can control almost anything in their lives, the power over American citizens is stronger.

A new identity for the addict emerged as a result of junkie lit. Instead of being seen as a person who was morally depraved and should be vilified, the junkie developed into an abject entity. As a creature without boundaries, the junkie featured in Burroughs, Trocchi, Carroll, Marlowe, and Yablonsky was shown to possess the ability to slip in and out of conventional society. Hegemonic society shuns these "junkies," and how these narratives feature an identity that pushes at these societal boundaries, questioning the idea of what is considered an acceptable form of control in American society. Addicts are represented as being a part of society without allowing themselves to be controlled by its morals and tenets. As a result, addicts become abject, and identity becomes a shifting space, a place where boundaries are no longer defined. The junkie was marked by his or her addiction, but usually, only other addicts could decipher this state of being. The junkie transgressed rules and laws, carving out a space for a new community to be formed. The narratives offered by these authors allow for a voyeuristic view into this secret world.

Literary representations of other types of addiction, including *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby, Jr., *Less than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis, and *Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike, create an allegory for a societal addiction to other forms of "junk." These texts demonstrate the way in which seemingly innocuous activities, such as watching television or eating, are just as dangerous as the world of illicit drugs. Identity, as presented in Selby, Ellis, and Updike, is one of shifting boundaries, developing into a different, but equally important, "junk" addict. The search for a psychic life becomes enmeshed in using artificial means for happiness and wholeness; however, these texts

represent the dangers inherent in relying on monstrous consumption, confusing the idea of feeling "full" and sated with being psychically whole.

Kurt Cobain described addiction to his sister, Kim, as "a little monster in your head that says, 'you know you'll feel better'" (C. Cross 221). In an effort to "feel better," Americans found themselves turning on, tuning in, and dropping out, to paraphrase Timothy Leary's famous quote, and as a result, a new nation of addicts was born. Instead of relying solely on illicit drugs like heroin and cocaine, though, Americans turned to outside substances to feel like they achieved some facet of the American Dream. Burroughs suggests that people are searching for "the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down," in an effort to gain "freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh" (*Junky* 128). As Selby notes, though, addiction is inherently selfish, and while junkies believe "that they would never get that bad, that they would never get strung out and live just for shit" (220), in the end, this is what happens to everyone who is an addict. Selby notes, "I suspect there never will be a requiem for *the* Dream, simply because it will destroy us before we have the opportunity to mourn its passing" ("Preface" vii). As long as Americans continue to seek happiness and wholeness through the use of substances, Selby's bleak prediction for a life lived as a junkie will prove to be, inevitably, true.

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