

Liminal Criminal: Abject, Absence and Environment in *Junky* and *The Outsider*

Molly Hoey

James Cook University, Australia

Abstract

Liminality represents a transient and in-between space in which the subject, mid-ritual, is rendered absent and abject. This space is generated and inhabited by both the victims and perpetrators of social transgressions; a space in which each party is caught in a state of abjection until the fulfilment of punishment. Located within this sphere the reader finds the worlds of William Burroughs' *Junky* (2002 [1953]) and Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (2013 [1967]). *Junky* outlines the daily journeys of its narrator, Bill, through the lens of his opiate addiction as he travels from the chill of New York to the sub-tropics of New Orleans and the heat of Mexico; constantly haunted by the 'junk vibe' until the lure of new highs takes him to the tropics of Columbia and beyond the reader's reach. *The Outsider* follows the narrator, Meursault, as he travels under the burden of the Algerian sun from the day of his mother's death through to his conviction of murder for shooting a man after a confrontation on a beach. The titles of both texts denote the protagonists as abject and liminal. The liminal is present within *Junky* and *The Outsider* in three distinct ways: the criminal element, the oppressive environment, and language.

Keywords: liminality, subjectivity, abject, Burroughs, Camus, liminal environments.

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veins and tissue. Tenderly I wiped the blood off my arm.

— Burroughs, *Junky*, 2002, p. 126

My whole body tensed as I gripped the gun more tightly. It set off the trigger. I could feel the smooth barrel in my hand and it was then, with that sharp, deafening sound, that it all began.

I shook off the sweat and the sun.

— Camus, *The Outsider*, 2013, p. 54

Acts of violence against the body form one of the earliest taboos within human culture. As Georges Bataille notes, "Violence is what the world of work excludes with its taboos" (Bataille, 1951, p. 42). Taboos solidify into laws and these laws are acted out in the ritualised space of the judicial system whose role is to attempt to return transgressive participants back into the realm of society. Readers of William Burroughs' *Junky* (2002 [1953])

and Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1967), however, remain suspended in this world of ritual-taboo. These texts are spaces in which the ideal of the sovereign subject as self-contained and self-knowing, is rendered voiceless and abject; a state from which the narrator, text, and reader never emerge. This abjection is created through the narrator's associations with blood and their actions project them into a state of liminality; a transient and in-between space in which the subject, mid ritual, is rendered absent and abject. Literary theorist, Julia Kristeva noted the link between criminality and the abject:

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. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour... Any crime, because it draws attention fragility of the law, is abject (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

By spilling blood both Bill and Meursault, the narrators of *Junky* and *The Outsider* become associated with the uncleanliness of the biological body:

The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its 'own and clean self' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 53).

Bill is a criminal for drawing his own blood beyond the border of his skin as the reader follows him on his daily exploits as an addict and 'pusher' of 'junk' – described by the texts glossary as "General terms for opium and all derivatives of opium: morphine, heroin, Dilaudid, pantopon, codeine, dionine" (Burroughs, 2002, p. 157). Bill is incarcerated numerous times throughout the text, and like Meursault, he passively agrees to all the demands that are made of him within his arrest periods. Throughout the multiple landscapes that Bill inhabits the 'junk vibe' follows him; from the chill of New York, settling in the sterile dirt and heat of the Rio Grande Valley, to the sub-tropical buzz and humidity of urban New Orleans and onwards to the temptations of the unknown in the steamy heat of Columbia. *The Outsider* is set within a different heat, that of a North African Mediterranean summer of Algiers and near by Marengo. Meursault, the narrator of *The Outsider*, moves through the text with passive disinterest. After the awkward and sun-drenched burial of his mother, Meursault moves through the daily events of his life seemingly unaware of the violence that his actions, such as luring back his neighbour's wayward mistress so that the neighbour may beat her, have social consequences. His distractedness culminates one fateful day at the beach when Meursault, after a small altercation and staggering under the sun's heavy presence, kills a man who is of little threat to him. The text then follows Meursault's captivity and his eventual sentencing as he demonstrates his inability to conform to social milieux.

The position of both narrators as transgressors leaves them suspended in a sphere that is simultaneously within and outside the functioning of ritual in mundane society. Issues of ritual and taboo retain an inescapable presence within culture that is felt most keenly when the individual is projected into a suspended state through acts of violence.

As literary theorist Georges Bataille noted in his work on transgression, society rejects violence because of its disruption of production, but the human mind is never far from violence:

The world of work and reason is the basis of human life but work does not absorb us completely and if reason gives the orders our obedience is never unlimited. Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but that of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel (Bataille, 1951, p. 40).

Bataille asserts that transgression and violence are innate elements of humans, and this desire for violence – which must be rejected by ordered society – is the basis for abjection of the criminal. In committing a criminal act both Bill and Meursault take on the role of what folklorist and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep termed ‘the stranger’:

[...] such a person is weak, because he is outside a given group or society, but he is also strong, since he is in the sacred realm with respect to the group's members, for whom their society constitutes the secular world. In consequence, some people kill, strip, and mistreat a stranger without ceremony, while others fear him, take great care of him, treat him as a powerful being, or take magico-religious protective measures against him (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 26).

Van Gennep’s term denotes the position of subjects, such as Bill and Meursault, that are both within and outside of society. He outlines this rejection and then return to society as a rite of passage which involves three stages: separation, liminality, and re-assimilation. The cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, extended upon Van Gennep’s ideas to emphasise the processes involved in rites of passage, with a special analysis of the liminal phase. Turner places particular emphasis on the experience of the participant, which he terms the neophyte, in the liminal stage, especially with respect to their isolation and ‘strangeness’. The term criminal, like Turner’s neophyte, designates the participant in the liminal stage and reflects their ‘in-betweenness’. The process of separation, liminality, and re-assimilation can, in turn, be compared to the movement of the criminal through the justice system. As Turner noted “rites de passage are not confined to culturally defined life-crises but may accompany any change from one state to another, as when a whole tribe goes to war” (Turner, 1967, p. 95). Before the transgression, the man is considered a citizen, during his punishment he is referred to as criminal and only once he ‘has served his debt’ to society can he once again wear the label of citizen. While in the liminal phase, the criminal, is suspended outside the world of everyday mundane society.

In the initial stage of rituals, the participant is stripped of the identity and social function that they held before the ceremony. Once this social guise has been removed the participant is rendered ‘liminal’. Turner expanded upon Van Gennep’s work to further outline the isolated nature of what he described as the ‘liminal persona’ (Turner, 1967, p. 95) “the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’ (Turner, 1967, p. 95). Within this space of the in-between the participant is separated from themselves and pushed outside of society. This is the space which the narrators of *Junky* and *The Outsider* occupy once they enter the liminal sphere of criminality.

Liminality functions within these texts in three distinct ways. Initially it marks the way in which the protagonists, as criminals, are suspended from normal society and rendered as abject. This abjectification is then emphasized by the way in which bodies and subjectivity give way under the presence of the environment. Both *Junky* and *The Outsider* are set in locations of extreme heat and sun, with numerous locations within *Junky* fitting within the tropical latitude, such as New Orleans, Mexico, Columbia and *The Outsider* being set in a sundrenched, mirage-like, Algiers. Finally, the novels themselves are rendered liminal through a lack of conclusion because to leave the world of the liminal the participant must be reassimilated back into society. This essential return never occurs in either of these texts, leaving the narrative in suspension.

The abject criminal

The title of each text indicates the completeness with which Meursault and Bill are stripped of their subjectivity. The titles, *The Outsider* and *Junky*, indicate that the crime of each man has come to stand for them as individuals. Even the first-person narrative, with their removed and despondent voices, cannot break through the completeness of their objectivity. Meursault occupies this liminal space because he does not recognise the liminal element in social ritual. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than the text's very first line, "Mother died today, or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I received a telegram from the old people's home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Very sincerely yours.' That doesn't mean anything. It might have been yesterday" (Camus, 2013, p. 3). Throughout the text the death of his mother is treated in a matter of fact manner which is seen in his trial as evidence of his inhumanity; whereas it shows that Meursault does not understand normal mourning rituals. For the other mourners, and the funeral director, Madame Meursault herself is in the liminal stage and needs the ritual of a religious burial to move her from physical death to social death. As Timothy Taylor noted:

The interval between the two is marked by ritual. Immediately after physical death the body becomes 'liminal' – dangerously in-between; the person no longer breathes, but their physical form exists. For their body and belongings to move on, funeral rites must be held (Taylor, 1996, p. 110).

However, for Meursault, there is no difference between physical and social death. He remarks that, "For now, it's still a little as if Mama hadn't died. After the funeral, however, it will be over and done with, a matter that is officially closed" (Camus, 2013, p. 3). Meursault acknowledges the social ritual of the funeral, but does not recognise the liminal realm which his mother has entered. This is similarly evidenced in his inability to show remorse for murder. Once Meursault has killed the Algerian he does not understand the need to show remorse. The Algerian, like mother, is already physically and socially dead. It is this inability to comprehend the social performance of ritual, rather than his actual actions of killing, that condemns Meursault. Had he feigned some remorse during his hearing he may have escaped the death penalty. Meursault is made abject not simply through the act of shooting the victim but also by refusing to justify his actions; embodying Kristeva's 'criminal with a good conscience' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

Bill, on the other hand, is rendered abject due to his addiction. The use of heroin and morphine means that Bill is no longer a human subject. In drawing his blood into the syringe Bill defiles himself by drawing blood outside the body, and in pushing the plunger, floods his body with the junk parasites that will eventually take over his entire being, inching himself closer to the ultimate abject figure; the corpse.

The first line of the text reveals the novel's complete fixation with junk: "my first experience with junk was during the War, about 1944 or 1945" (Burroughs, 1953, p. 1). This line replaces the traditional introduction of character, scene or feel; The first line, and every line that follows, are about junk. His need to travel towards the equator and the people he meets along the way are small and irrelevant in comparison to the need to score. And while the junk ritual is sacred, the judicial rituals which intersect Bill's travels are depicted as a mundane and insignificant dance that must be moved through before the next kick:

A junky [sic] runs on junk time. When his junk is cut off, the clock runs down and stops. All he can do is hang on and wait for non-junk time to start. A sick junkie has no escape from external time, no place to go. He can only wait. (Burroughs, 2002, p. 87)

Bill and Meursault, however, are not the only abject bodies that appear in these texts. Within *Junky* and *The Outsider* there is a distinct lack of humanity. The other occupants of these texts are equally as abject, described in metonym and metaphor.

Within *Junky* bodies are textually, metaphorically and chemically absent. Physicality is only ever noted in relation to either a junk kick or junk sickness, as is epitomised by the phrase "Are you anywhere?" translating to "do you have any junk or weed on you?" (Burroughs, 1953, p. 153). Within *Junky* the biological body is only relevant in the distribution of junk and blood is only significant for junk's absorption. Bill describes the occupants of one bar as giving him "[...] the horrors" because of their seeming emptiness:

They jerk around like puppets on invisible strings, galvanized into hideous activity that is the negation of everything living and spontaneous. The live human being has moved out of these bodies long ago. But something moved in when the original tenants moved out. [...] ventriloquists' dummies who have moved in and taken over the ventriloquist. The dummy sits in a queer bar nursing his beer, and uncontrollably yapping out of a ridged doll face (Burroughs, 1953, p. 72).

When they are not being described as empty the other occupants of Bill's world are described using inhuman terms, as lizards (Burroughs, 1953, p. 100) or plants (Burroughs, 1953, p. 40). Bill's own body is mentioned even less than those of other characters, and only in a single brief passage do the realities of his own body strike him, filling him with pity:

I went into the bathroom to take a shot. I was a long time hitting a vein. The needle clogged twice. Blood ran down my arm. The junk spread through my body, an injection of death. The dream was gone. I looked down at the blood that ran from elbow to wrist. I felt a sudden pity for the violated veins and tissue. Tenderly I wiped the blood off my arm (Burroughs, 1953, p. 126).

Meursault's body is equally absent and the detached nature of his narrative means that figures within *The Outsider* are barely described. The reader is normally given a single feature of each

person, whether that be the funeral director's eyes or Marie's belly. An example is the description of the mourners from Mother's funeral where despite outlining their appearance the mourners themselves remain indistinct:

I looked at them as I had never looked at anyone before, taking in every detail of their faces and clothing. But I couldn't hear them, so I found it difficult to believe they were real. Almost all the women wore aprons tied tightly around their waists, which made their stomachs look even rounder. I had never noticed how old women could have such big stomachs. The men were almost all very thin and walked with a cane. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn't see their eyes, just a faint, dull light in a nest of wrinkles (Camus, 1942, p. 9).

This quotation is typical of descriptions within *The Outsider*. Meursault seems to describe people, but he does so without giving any indication of character or personality – they remain two-dimensional and leave no lasting impression.

Environments over bodies

The absence of humanity within these texts emphasises the liminal and abject nature of the text's occupants who are seemingly no-where. This absence, however, is completely overshadowed by the extreme presence of the environments. The sun is treated in these texts as a dominate feature of the landscape, becoming so intense that it becomes more present than the characters themselves. While the pale and skinny addicts who make up the cast of *Junky* move through their tightly scheduled rituals, the cities which they occupy mass about them, defined and steady in all the ways that the characters are not. It is within their bounds that the junk vibe emanates:

As the geologist looking for oil is guided by certain outcroppings of rock, so certain signs indicate the near presence of junk. Junk is often found adjacent to ambiguous or transitional districts: East Fourteenth near Third in New York; Poydras and St. Charles in New Orleans; San Juan Létran in Mexico City. Stores selling artificial limbs, wig-makers, dental mechanics, loft manufacturers of perfumes, pomades, novelties, essential oils. A point where dubious business enterprise touches Skid Row (Burroughs, 1953, p. 111).

Bill describes New Orléans, where he attempts to get 'the cure', not as a city:

But a complex pattern of tensions, like the electrical mazes devised by psychologists to unhinge the nervous systems of white rats and guinea pigs, keeps the unhappy pleasure-seekers in a condition of unconsummated alertness. For one thing, New Orleans is inordinately noisy. The drivers orient themselves largely by the use of their horns, like bats. The residents are surly. The transient population is completely miscellaneous and unrelated, so that you never know what sort of behaviour to expect from anybody (Burroughs, 1953, p. 69).

While New Orléans is an unsettling and transient noise, the Rio Grande Valley is a sterile harbinger waiting to return to its natural state:

The whole Valley has the impermeant look of a camp, or carnival. Soon the suckers will all be dead and the pitchmen will go somewhere else.... A premonition of doom

hangs over the Valley. You have to make it now before something happens, before the black fly ruins the citrus, before support prices are taken off the cotton, before the flood, the hurricane, the freeze, the long dry spell when there is no water to irrigate, before the Border Patrol shuts off your wetbacks. The threat of disaster is always there, persistent and disquieting as the afternoon wind. The Valley was desert, and it will be desert again. Meanwhile you try and make yours while there is still time.... Death hangs over the Valley like an invisible smog. The place exerts a curious magnetism on the moribund. The dying cell gravitates to the valley (Burroughs, 1953, p. 106).

The heat and glare of the sun dominate both texts, but, in the case of *The Outsider*, it seems to actually drive Meursault towards the acts that render him criminal. The Algerian sun is present from his Mother's funeral through to the shooting and the trial. Like Meursault, the sun does not acknowledge death rituals, forcing the funeral to be held so soon after death, interrupting established mourning rituals and rendering the funeral a farce:

The sun had burned and blistered the tar. Our feet sank down into it, exposing its shimmering soft mass to the sun. Just visible above the hearse, the driver's hardened leather hat looked as if it had been moulded from the same black slime. I felt a bit lost standing between the blue and white of the sky and the relentless darkness of these other colours: the sticky black of the blistering tar, the dull black of the mourning clothes, the shiny black of the hearse. The sun, the smell of leather and dung clinging on to the wheels of the hearse, the smell of polish and incense, the exhaustion from not having slept all night – all these things stung my eyes and blurred my thoughts. I turned around again: Pérez looked very far away, fading in a cloudy haze of heat until I lost sight of him (Camus, 1942, p. 15).

Later in the novel as Meursault is walking down the beach, moments before he kills the Algerian, Meursault comments that "It was the same sun as the day I'd buried Mama" (Camus, 1942, p. 53). The shooting itself is preceded with several pages of glaring and headache inducing descriptions until, finally:

The sky seemed to split apart from end to end to pour its fire down upon me. My whole body tensed as I gripped the gun more tightly. *It set off the trigger.* I could feel the smooth barrel in my hand and it was then, with that sharp, deafening sound, that it all began. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I had destroyed the natural balance of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had once been happy. Then I fired four more times into the lifeless body, where the bullets sank without leaving a trace (Camus, 1942, p. 54, my emphasis)

Meursault later attempts to explain in the court room the sun's roll in his actions (Camus, 1942, p. 95), but the solar presence is already in the court room, making the occupants irritable and disinterested before they find him guilty.

The failure of language

Meursault's failed attempts to explain himself epitomise the final liminal element of these texts; that of language. Turner noted in his analysis of liminality that neophytes are often associated with silence, or a highly-coded form of communication. Likewise, the language within both

novels reflects the coded nature of liminal participants. Within *Junky* Bill portrays language as both problematic and arbitrary. As Robin Lydenberg notes in his examination of Burroughs' work, language raises, "...the question of the relationship between mind and body, and the role of language in that relationship; the arbitrary violence of language as a system of naming and representation; and the possibility of an ontology and an aesthetics based on negativity and absence" (Lydenberg, 1985, p. 55). For Bill, language acts as a series of arbitrary and interchangeable signs; so transient that he felt it necessary to include a glossary at the texts end, emphasising his awareness of language's changing nature. The only consistent communication is that of junk itself, the 'junk gesture', an un-described hand gesture which haunts every addict: "The junkies were grouped together, talking and passing the junk gesture back and forth" (Burroughs, 1953, p. 122). Communication within *The Outsider* is of particular interest because it demonstrates the critical role that language plays within ritual. During Meursault's interrogation and trial, language is shown to be the key to sealing Meursault's fate as the persecutor manipulates the testimonies of Marie, Raymond and Céleste. Multiple times during the narrative Meursault contemplates explaining his behaviour, but each time he curbs this instinct, preferring to let his actions speak for themselves. During an initial interview with his lawyer Meursault wants to explain the nature of his relationship with language, but his epiphany is interpreted as a lack of empathy:

He asked me if I'd been upset that day. I found the question quite surprising and thought how embarrassed I would have been if I'd had to ask it. Nevertheless, I replied that I'd rather lost the habit of analysing my emotions and so it was difficult to explain. I undoubtedly loved Mama very much, but that didn't mean anything. Every normal person sometimes wishes the people they love would die. When I said that, the lawyer cut in and seemed really disturbed. He made me promise not to say that in court or to the judge handling my interrogation. Then I explained that one of the characteristics of my personality was that physical sensations often got in the way of my emotions (Camus, 1942, p. 58).

Several times throughout the text Meursault expresses regret and frustration to the reader, repeating phrases such as, "Then I thought I shouldn't have said that" (Camus, 1942, p. 3) and "I wanted to tell her that it wasn't my fault, but I stopped myself because I remembered I'd already said that to my boss. That doesn't mean anything. Although actually, everyone is always a little guilty" (Camus, 1942, p. 18). These thoughts are never communicated to other characters within the text, and their omission leaves Meursault seemingly misanthropic and un-relatable. This awkwardness with language passes into other forms of human expression such as body language and other coded forms of communication. This is demonstrated in Meursault's inability to understand the behaviour of the funeral director, nurses, and mourners at his Mother's funeral:

The nurse stood up and headed for the exit. At that moment, the caretaker said: 'She has leprosy.' I didn't understand, so I looked up at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage around her head just below her eyes. It sat flat where her nose had been eaten away by the disease. All you could see was the whiteness of the bandage against her face. After she left, the caretaker said: 'I'll leave you alone.' I don't know what gesture I made but he stood at the back of my chair and didn't move. His presence behind me made me feel uncomfortable (Camus, 1942, p. 6).

Within *Junky* Bill understands that language can be used to manipulate and knows what needs to be said to shorten his stay within the judicial system. Meursault, however, does not know how to play such language games. For Bill and Meursault language is a tool of miscommunication rather than understanding.

Finally, the texts leave the protagonists, and therefore the readers, in a suspended state, without conclusion. To be reassimilated back into the social body the criminal must endure punishment and finally be reclassified as a citizen. Within *Junky* and *The Outsider*, this reassimilation never occurs. The reader must leave Meursault in his cell awaiting his execution and Bill takes leave of the reader to follow promises of new highs in tropical Columbia. This forces the reader into a state in which the text's structures leave them without closure and in their own liminal in-between.

Junky and *The Outsider* are textual worlds in which rituals and language define and demarcate the liminal and abject. The narrators mark themselves as abject not only through their association with blood and corpses but in their inability to show remorse for their actions. Bill and Meursault exist in worlds in which the criminal is suspended beyond and outside normal social mores while the sundrenched environments – those of the tropics and those of north Africa – of these texts loom large over the contrastingly small and insignificant characters. Even the medium with which they communicate with the reader is revealed as farcical and meaningless. Their actions jettison them beyond the mundane world into a sphere of Van Gennep's stranger who is both revered and rejected, and within this liminality they remain, suspended in textuality.

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