

❖ **Inheritance and Compulsion in Augusten Burroughs Memoirs**

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Running with Scissors - © Sony Pictures Digital Inc.

*The production and solicitation of repetitive, serial desire is a central goal of consumer society, and*

*opportunities for consumption surround and bombard us. As loyal customers, we are encouraged to repeat the same or similar act of consumption many times in a short period, but we are also enticed to follow the pattern of the browser, ranging across a wide range of random acts of consumption. However, attached to the wrong activity or object, both these patterns can be diagnosed as disorder.*

Helen Keane, "Disorders of Desire"

In his April 2008 profile of contemporary memoirist Augusten Burroughs for *New York Magazine* titled "The Memory Addict," Sam Anderson writes that even though

Burroughs no longer drinks, he collects lesser compulsions like little girls collect seashells, and he has been drawn to this spot [a café in Greenwich Village] by the lure of two converging addictions, one minor, one major.

The minor addiction is Red Bull; they didn't have it, so he settled for a Diet Coke. The major addiction is, as usual, Burroughs's Big One, the master dependency

around which all his minor dependencies (M & Ms, the Internet, French bulldogs, nicotine) seem to rotate in twitchy, continuous orbit – the source of pretty much all his wealth and fame and controversy: namely, his allegedly vivid, restless, overstuffed memory.

Anderson's introduction underscores an important shift in how contemporary Americans use and understand the concept of addiction, as the possibility for what constitutes an addictive substance expands. Moreover, addiction is a useful frame through which to begin an examination of Burroughs' representations of subjectivity in contemporary culture because both compulsion and collecting are rooted in the seriality of repetition. Many forms of compulsive repetition appear in Burroughs' serial memoir: consumerism, the desire for celebrity, and behaviors – like his self-described "frequent[t]" twitches, compulsive hand-washing, and the need to "constantly" adjust his eye-glasses (*Magical Thinking* 257) – which Burroughs points to as part of his obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Three of Burroughs' memoirs place the seriality of addiction, compulsion, and inheritance at the fore: *Dry* (2003) which centers on his alcohol addiction, his recovery, and his relapse; *Magical Thinking: True Stories* (2004), a collection of personal essays throughout which runs the trope of the serial killer, a figure that looms large in the popular understandings of addiction and compulsion; and *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father* (2008). Serial behavior is often as terrifying because of its intimate and embodied excess: when the subject is murder or alcoholism, the potential for compulsive and serial behavior is particularly troubling and inextricable from inheritance.

Throughout these texts, Burroughs struggles with what he thinks he may have inherited from his parents – and, in particular, from his father – including his alcoholism. I argue that Burroughs' use of the private tropes of addiction and compulsion illustrates the possibility of serial self-construction and repeated public self-performance. Further, the current debate between the traditional concept of addiction, which understands the experientiality of addiction to be substance-based (such as dependencies on alcohol, cocaine, or heroin), and the more recent emergence of behavioral addictions (like exercise, food, or gambling), haunts contemporary Burroughs' narratives as he interrogates what kinds of things are addictive and how those compulsions are recognized in American society. Thus Burroughs' narratives are implicated in the question around which much life writing circles: whose story is it? Clearly, serial self-representation challenges and exposes the seeming simplicity of that question, significantly placing memory, the constructed nature of selfhood, and the possibilities – or impossibilities – of articulation, at the center of the conversation. He posits his alcohol addiction and contemporary America's cultural fascination with phenomena like serial murder, as a distinct kind of serial behavior: not as more significant than other elements of serial culture, but as a more embodied form of seriality.

How contemporary Americans use and understand the concept of addiction plays a role in this shift, as the possibility of addictive substances has expanded (<sup>1</sup>). In her essay "Disorders of Desire", Helen Keane (2004) outlines the tension over the definition of addiction, explaining that research, personal narratives, and clinical accounts "focus on elucidating the specific mechanisms, manifestations and potential treatments of different addictions, producing vividly differentiated entities such as 'cocaine addiction,' 'alcoholism,' and 'sex addiction,'" although there is a simultaneous "desire to identify either an overarching structure or an underlying common process that would link different addictions, produce a robust notion of 'addictive disorder,' and bring a satisfying coherency to the field" (190). The discrepancies over the boundaries of addiction, and the ways in which the term is used in contemporary discourse, plays out clearly in Burroughs' memoirs. I argue that the shift in how 'addiction' is used in

postmodern parlance is aligned with the larger therapeutic cultural realm, which privileges life writing.

At the same time, much of the transition in Burroughs' engagement of addiction and compulsion is linked to the shift in the word 'serial' in contemporary culture: as Keane suggests in the epigraph to this essay, "serial desire is a central goal of consumer society" as long as the consumer is not attached to the "wrong activity or desire" (201). While 'serial' can mean nothing more than repetition, popular usage often suggests compulsive, even pathological, behavior –much like Anderson's claim that Burroughs is a "memory addict."

Burroughs' memoirs uncover the conflict between how addiction, serial self-representation, and performance are understood in the early 21st century. I argue that Burroughs' use of the private and stigmatized tropes of addiction and compulsion through the public lenses of repeated self-performance in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the role of inheritance in addiction, and the celebritization of serial killers, suggests more attention should be given to how authors narrate their experiences in relation to the larger contemporary serial culture. Burroughs' literary style is serial as he repeatedly publishes autobiographical texts and, as Anderson suggests, that repetition verges on the addictive (<sup>2</sup>). This serial style is especially important in contemporary memoir because it underscores the larger cultural importance of seriality: that is, Burroughs engages the shift in how 'seriality' is understood as it is more commonly about the episodic and repetitive, rather than the sequential.

Burroughs' memoirs repeatedly suggest that our culture, more largely, is a serial one and that questions about addiction, compulsion, and inheritance are rooted in the seriality of those experiences. In his examination of seriality in serial killing, "Catch Me Before I Kill More: Seriality as Modern Monstrosity", Philip Jenkins (2002) writes that he wants "to describe how and why the seemingly harmless mathematical term 'serial' so vastly (and suddenly) expanded its rhetorical significance, to imply monstrous violence with a near spiritual dimension" (1).

Reminding readers that, from the mid-20th century on, the " 'compulsive' notion of deviancy" was sustained by the related concept of addiction, Jenkins observes that while the Latin root of addiction alludes to enslavement, the term 'addiction' means that a person cannot resist a particular behavior (7). Since the nineteenth century, 'addiction' has been used in terms of substance abuse, which has since allowed the definition to expand (Jenkins, 2002, 7).

The evolution of the term is also evident in the way the American Psychiatric Association's manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition (DSM-IV), explains addiction.<sup>3</sup> This handbook includes all recognized mental health disorders, for children and for adults, at a given historical moment.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, it provides known causes for these disorders, statistics based on a wide variety of criteria (including age and gender), as well as current research for treatment. The DSM-IV works as a foundation for doctors and researchers, and it provides a useful guide for examining how the field of mental health has evolved since its initial publication in the 1950s.

### **The seriality of addiction and compulsive performances**

*It is a play and we are in our roles. I am performing from a script – Augusten  
Burroughs, Dry*

In *Dry*, Burroughs uses the discourse of *Alcoholics Anonymous* and advertising in order to more forcefully argue for the seriality of daily American life. *Dry* begins with a short rumination on the field of advertising, and the power of words and spin which can make a product seem "fantastic, something that is essential to the continued quality of life" (1).

Unlike *Running with Scissors*, *Dry* is written in the present tense which both increases the suspense of the memoir as it also imitates the rhetoric of twelve-step recovery programs: each time A.A. members gather they perform the ritual of self-naming and acknowledgment of their continued addiction. Presented to the other members of the group in the present tense and repeated frequently, the oral autobiographical act, as Robyn R. Warhol and Helena Michie (1996) describe it in their essay on the teleology of twelve-step programs, is foundational for each of the twelve-steps in the program.

"The structure of individual stories relies on oral-formulaic practices within the group", they write, "providing individual storytellers with formulas that aid in the composition and recall of their stories of recovery" (328). In A.A., selfhood is unfinished and always in process, and it gets developed through social interaction: the addict's continuous self-narration, is constantly performed as a "critique of one's actions in relation to other people" and in front of others (Warhol & Michie, 1996, 333). This serial retelling of self-reflexive stories thus helps to form the addict's sense of subjectivity.

Warhol and Michie point to the concept of a collective protagonist in twelve-step narratives, as they write that, because of the "narrative structure of the steps", the people who continue in A.A. model their life stories on those stories they have heard throughout their participation with the program (334). The emphasis of A.A. storytelling, they argue, "is a communal one, the story collective, rather than individualized; the 'self' in A.A. is conceived as resembling and relating to others, rather than existing in isolated uniqueness" (334).

While Warhol and Michie place this collective story in opposition to traditional Western autobiography because of the A.A. narrative's focus on the self in relation to others, they do not discuss its possible kinship with any other forms of life writing. Indeed, many of the narratives told in the program rely on the stories of others – and the self-representative strategies therein – as a foundation from which new stories and self-narratives are created. As in memoir, the stories of others and cultural narratives are integrated into the presentation of self; as with A.A. oral self-performances, relationality in memoir is foundationally important. In *Dry*, as Burroughs relates the story of his time in the rehabilitation center, he does so always in relation to others. One of the other patients, Marion, is asked to tell Augusten the "rules of Group," which include putting "everything into 'I' statements" (49). Marion gives an example: "So, like, if somebody says something and you want to share, you would say 'Well, I can relate to that because I ...' or whatever" (49). The focus on the "I" statements, particularly as they work in response to others, complicates Warhol and Michie's argument that the collective and the individual strategies for self-representation are mutually exclusive.

Moreover, the possibilities for multiple strategies with which to frame a life narrative often come from the stories of others, as Burroughs models for his readers. In the group sessions, Burroughs frequently incorporates parts of the stories of others alongside his own self-representation. Talking about consequences of their drinking, Burroughs writes:

The others bring out their greatest hits. The WASP talks about the car accident and his mother's paralysis. Low-Esteem Marion talks about her failed relationship with her girlfriend of six years. Big Bobby talks about not being able to hold a job and hating himself because he's thirty-two and still lives with his parents. It's all very Ringling Brothers. And as freakish as these people may be, it's not exactly like I can't relate to what they're saying. It's more like I can sort of relate. Sort of completely. (73)

Contextualizing the narratives as the group's 'greatest hits' points to the repetition inherent in therapeutic storytelling: although this is the first time Augusten (and, by extension, the

reader), hears these stories, he can tell that they have been told and re-told in a very similar setting. The serial self-narration on which A.A., and therapeutic culture more generally, rely shifts how both listeners and storytellers understand their own strategies for narrative self-representation. Moreover, Augusten recognizes himself in the stories of 'the others', even though he has not experienced the same situations as the other members in his session: he has not driven while drunk, causing his mother's paralysis, nor does he still live with his parents.

His ability to "sort of completely" identify also points to how these narratives can be simultaneously individual and collective: the seriality of the group, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's construction of seriality, suggests that the individual is always an individual, even when placed in the context of others. Sartre posits the series as a group with a common interest, made up of individuals who remain separate from one another, and who are interpolated by an exterior force. "Above all," Sartre writes, "these individuals form a group to the extent that they have a common interest, so that, though separated as organic individuals, they share a structure of their practico-inert being, and it unites them from outside" (258-59).

The common interest of the members in Group is sobriety, and each member of Group, while having experienced their addiction in a particular way, still relates to the stories of others because of the cultural repercussions addiction has for their lives. These individuals are also presented as interchangeable because "each of them is effectively produced by the social ensemble as united with his neighbours, in so far as he is strictly identical with them" (259). Even though Augusten has not had the same experiences as the other people in the rehabilitation facility, they are all institutionalized at the same time and they all suffer from some sort of substance-based addiction. In those ways, Burroughs presents himself as being "united" with the other patients, as part of the larger series within the walls of the Proud Institute, but also as part of the larger system of addicts. It is also important to note that the Proud Institute is a rehabilitation facility specifically for GLBTQ patients.<sup>5</sup> In this context, Burroughs also presents himself – and understands himself – as part of a different but no less relevant series of individuals.

As presented in *Dry*, addicts who have undertaken a twelve-step program go through certain rituals together, including group therapy, individual therapy, morning and evening affirmations, and chemical dependency history meetings. While each person in the rehabilitation center has an individually structured therapy schedule, most of these sessions are with others. In one session of Group, the topic of conversation is on the consequences they've suffered because of their drinking. The counselor, Rae, lists several potential consequences they may have experienced because of their addiction, and Augusten recognizes himself in what she says.

My apartment is my secret. It's filled with empty liquor bottles. Not five or six. More like three hundred. Three hundred one-litre bottles of scotch, occupying all floor space not already occupied by a bed or a chair. Sometimes I myself am stunned by the visual presentation. And the truly odd part is that I really don't know how they got there. You'd think I'd have taken each bottle down to the trash room when it was empty. But I let two collect. And because two is nothing, I let three collect. And on it went. The ironic thing is that I'm not the kind of person who saves things. I don't have boxes filled with old postcards from friends, cherished mementos from childhood. [...] Every time I've removed the bottles from my apartment, promised myself it would never happen again, it always happens again. And when I used to drink beer instead of scotch, the beer bottles would collect. I counted the beer bottles once: one thousand, four hundred and fifty-two. You have not felt anxiety until you have carried a plastic trash bag

stuffed with a few hundred beer bottles down the stairs in the middle of the night, trying not to make a sound (70-71).

Following this passage, Augusten mentions that, by sharing the story of his apartment with the group – and, by extension, with the reader – he feels like he’s “saying something [he] shouldn’t” (71). Rae tells him that he’s “telling on [his] addict,” the part of him that compels him to drink (71). This passage physically illustrates many of Augusten’s anxieties through his collection of bottles and the general state of his living space: it places the physical act of consumption at the center of his existence, dictating his behavior; the collection stands in for Augusten’s lack of traditionally collected items like photographs or mementos: and when he attempts to remove the items from his apartment, his fears about waking up the neighbors are clearly stated. He saves this embarrassment for “the middle of the night,” hoping to keep it a secret, even as he dissolves the boundary between the private space of his apartment and the public space of the apartment building’s hallways and trash room.<sup>6</sup>

Addictions, compulsions, and waste products are things that are culturally unspeakable: relegated to secrecy, Burroughs examines how he understands himself as an alcoholic. Jenkins suggests that, at its core, seriality is linked with “uncontrollable repetition,” an idea that “has proven deeply frightening to many cultures because it denies the ability to choose that is essential to free will, and thus to full ‘human-ness’. It is also a common feature of insanity and psychiatric disease, and ‘obsessive-compulsive disorder’ has been recognized for centuries” (8). The inability to choose one’s behavior, or to regulate those actions, is central to Burroughs’ self-representation as he suggests in describing his apartment, but he also links that lack of free will to the role of commodity culture, television, and inheritance. In so doing, Burroughs connects the seriality of compulsion and addiction to other cultural understandings of the series – the repetitive acts which are daily events in American lives.

Just before Augusten leaves for the rehabilitation center, he tries to figure out how he became an alcoholic. He remembers purchasing a faux crystal decanter and glass set as a boy, placing it on a silver serving tray, and filling the decanter with cream soda so that it “looked right” (29). Modeling the decanter set after what he has seen in advertisements and in visual media, he writes that it was “the most beautiful thing, like something on *The Price is Right*” (30). He also thinks that his alcoholism “could all be the result of *Bewitched*” (30), a show to which he was ‘addicted’ as a child: “I worshipped Darren Stevens the First. When he’d come home from work, Samantha would say, ‘Darren, would you like me to fix you a drink?’” and Darren would reply, “Better make it a double” (30). Burroughs also, however, pointedly exposes his father’s alcoholism for readers, even as he places this reference in between other cultural forms of presenting the ‘right’ activity or object for attachment. Situating the question of inheritance between references to popular culture works initially to minimize the reference to his father’s drinking habits, as if readers could decide the ‘cause’ of his drinking through multiple choice. The notion that his affection for Darren Stevens’ lifestyle or the aesthetics of a decanter set could cause his alcoholism is far less plausible than the revelation of his own father’s drinking, which has the unlikely effect of making the section slightly humorous because readers are able to engage in the kind of pop-psychology made famous by those very same cultural mores. The remainder of the chapter however, works to dismantle the comedy and the reader’s confidence in their cultural knowledge as he presents his readers with a frightening, short portrait of his father.

Initially, Burroughs writes three paragraphs about his father’s drinking, focusing in large part on the way his father’s bottles of alcohol looked: “They were beautiful and colorful, like jewels, especially in the late afternoon when sunlight entered the room from a low angle and made the bottles glow” (30). Continuing, he mentions that he used to pour a small bit of the liquor in his

hand, in an attempt to be closer to his father, whom he remembers as having “a glass attached to his hand” the way “some fathers had moustaches and some fathers had baseball caps” (30). Following this confession of his desire, Burroughs relates a phone conversation he had with his father just before checking into the Proud Institute. The exchange between Augusten and his father is significant because Augusten says that his alcoholism is his father’s fault. “I caught this from you,” Augusten tells his father (31). In response, his father tells Augusten that he needs to “get over [his] past” (31). Burroughs’ serial memoir provides readers with textual evidence that he is tied to his past as it also questions the possibility of “get[ting] over” one’s personal history in contemporary America’s therapeutic cultural realm.

In this conversation, Augusten confronts his father with the memory of being burned by his father’s cigarette between the eyes. At the dermatologist’s for a rash, Augusten is asked about the scar, of which he has no memory at the time. The dermatologist tells him that it is an old burn and when Augusten returns home, he got “very” drunk. “And that’s when I saw the burning tip of the cigarette,” he writes. “And I knew it wasn’t because I was drunk that I was imagining it, it was because I was drunk and my own head was out of the way and I could remember. This is maybe one of the best things to ever come of my drinking. Or maybe it’s one of the worst” (32). His father, when confronted by Augusten’s memory, says nothing in return and the conversation is stopped by his father’s wife. Giving his readers this exchange however, Augusten challenges his readers to understand his alcoholism differently: while cultural forces certainly play a role in compulsive activities, so does inheritance. Burroughs also, as Kate Douglas (2010) points out in her examination of *Running with Scissors* and its ethical implications, that the reader is drawn in by the “construction of an authorial hero rescuing the child who could not rescue himself during childhood” (139).

Representations of compulsive behavior and the seriality of those behaviors extend in *Magical Thinking* to cultural representations of serial murder. Burroughs’ repeated references to serial killers stand out as moments which simultaneously present who he could have become, if circumstances were different, but also who he fears he may be inside or what kinds of traits he may have inherited from his father in addition to his alcohol addiction. Contemporary cultural construction of, and fascination with, serial killers makes them a compelling node of interrogation for Burroughs. For example, in the essay “I’m Gonna Live Forever,” Burroughs writes that, because “America always loves a good serial killer” (*Magical Thinking*, 211), it is one possible route to fame. Because of this celebrity – something Burroughs notes his desire for from a very young age – and because of their serial behavior, Burroughs explores his own relationship with compulsion and impulse through the trope of the serial killer. In so doing, he must also confront and dissect the ramifications of generational inheritance beyond alcohol addiction to other embodied forms of compulsion.

A central episode in *Magical Thinking* is featured in the essay “The Rat/Thing,” when Augusten is confronted by a “rat/thing” in his bathtub in the pre-dawn hours one morning.<sup>7</sup> Recursively narrating episodes from his life, “The Rat/Thing” takes place chronologically before the action of *Dry*; Augusten has not left his job in advertising, nor has he gone through rehab. Indeed, he realizes that, if the rat/thing were to make it out of the tub and into the mess of his apartment, he would not be able to find it in the ...

mounds of foreign magazines, month-old newspapers, a thousand or more empty sixteen-ounce beer cans. [...] If the rat/thing made it into my debris field, it could easily make a nest for itself under the bed in an old aluminum beef vindaloo container or it could simply die beneath an old copy of Italian *Vogue* (64).

Augusten decides that he needs to kill the rat/thing, but, importantly, presents himself as constitutionally unable to kill something in an “intimate” act like strangulation or “flattening-

by-book" (65). Explaining his discomfort at these possibilities, he writes: "If I were a serial killer, I would not be the kind that stabs and then eats the victim. I would be the kind that hides in a tree and shoots at the aerobics class" (65). The specificity of his imagined scenario points to the construction of serial killers in popular culture as it simultaneously performs Burroughs' relationship to seriality: definitionally, serial killers claim multiple human victims, while Augusten attempts to dispose of a rodent.

These comments also though, suggest that Burroughs is worried about what he feels he has the capacity to do to others. As Paul Cefalu (2009) argues in his essay, "What's So Funny about Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?", people who are obsessive "typically worry, even in the face of countervailing evidence, that they either have or will hurt those around them" and that the "comic element in such cases is a conventional mix of the high and low, a tragic foreboding tied to what most would consider inconsequential behavior" (49, 48). In this scene, and in those that follow, Burroughs' anxiety about being a serial killer, or turning into a serial killer, are made humorous by the fact that the task he is faced with is decidedly unremarkable. The scene continues as Burroughs provides great detail about the circumstances surrounding his decidedly un-intimate attempts to kill the rat/thing: he sprays it with an entire can of Raid, which "emboldened the rodent" to dash from one end of the tub to the other, sliding up the sides of the tub (66); he fills the tub with hot water, but an hour later, the rat/thing was "still swimming" (67, emphasis original); and finally, "instinctively", Burroughs gets a flashlight "and made a dancing pattern on the water, disco tub" (67).

Turning the light on and off while moving the light across the water, the rat/thing "began to seize" and, after it continued for a few minutes, the rat/thing died. Burroughs moves from "mesmerized" to "mortified by [his] inhumanity", wondering how he knew how to kill the rat/thing. "I was filled with sickness," he writes, echoing Cefalu's note about the "tragic foreboding," "as though I'd just killed somebody and had their body in my tub, limbs waiting to be removed with my mother's good carving knife. I truly was Jeffrey Dahmer's long lost brother" (68). For the rest of the essay, Burroughs shows himself thoroughly cleaning his apartment, even scouring the bathtub enough to remove some of the porcelain.

In closing *The Rat/Thing*, he makes two more comments about the prominence of serial killers in contemporary American culture and our "pop-psychologization" of them. First, Burroughs writes: "I knew that one of the identifying traits of serial killers is that many of them tortured animals as children. The difference, I needed to believe, was that I was no longer a child. This had to count for something" (71). Second, the essay ends as Burroughs leaves his apartment in an attempt to distract himself. Immediately following his ruminations about the fact that he was no longer a child, he tells us that he went to see a "sweet and stupid and harmless" movie of which he knew nothing (71), he had only heard the title: *The Silence of the Lambs*.<sup>8</sup> The section thus ends humorously as he tells readers what he went to see, knowing that his audience will understand the reference and will likewise make the connection between the film's serial killer, Hannibal Lecter, and Burroughs himself as a potential serial killer. While the term 'serial killer' was coined by an FBI agent in the mid-1970s,<sup>9</sup> Jenkins notes that, "between 1983 and 1985, serial murder became one of the most intensely debated issues in the media, both in serious news outlets and popular culture, to the extent that the nation experienced [...] a general panic" (2). American culture's collective anxiety of about and fascination with serial murder in the 1980s and 1990s is refracted in Burroughs' memoirs as he presents himself as fully engaged with seriality in ways that he does not see as purely evil.

The potential for harboring an inner serial killer is explored throughout *Magical Thinking*, as Burroughs presents himself in a variety of positions in which he is either a possible candidate for becoming a serial killer or in which he becomes the serial killer's target. For example, in *Life*

*Cycle of the North American Opossum*, Burroughs relays a home remedy he received for killing small animals (186); *I Dated an Undertaker* shows Augusten on a first date, testing the waters to see whether or not the name "Pogo" meant anything because Pogo the Killer Clown was also known as John Wayne Gacy, and cultural knowledge has informed him that "Serial killers often admired each other's work" (45);<sup>10</sup> and in *Beating Raoul* as he goes into some woods on a date with a man named Raoul, even though he is "wary of Nature" because "where do most manhunts for escaped killers begin? Exactly ... in the "woods" (112). Burroughs himself, however, is also characterized as having a large store of knowledge about serial killers, and he fashions himself as having serial killer potential, as was evident in *The Rat/Thing*. Additionally, his "inner serial killer" gets "activated" in the essay *Magical Thinking* because of an impossible boss (236); *Roid Rage* centers on Augusten's steroid shots and he describes his mood two days after the shots to his partner, Dennis, as a person "'capable of committing a triple homicide, then going to a Ben Stiller movie'" (228): and his friend Suzanne tells him that he's "'exactly like a serial killer'" because he "'live[s] in exactly the sort of apartment that ends up in a photograph of the cover of the *Post* with a big fat headline over it: Psycho's Den of Squalor'" (265, capitals in original). Such cultural knowledge about serial murder is disseminated to the public through media outlets like newspapers and films where it frequently gets sensationalized, and Burroughs' memoirs expose that mediated knowledge as such.

The serial structure of this memoir as a collection of essays underscores the possibilities for serial self-construction and public self-performance because the essays are recursive and do not fit any chronology. Self-reflexively, they thus point to the act of writing and the potential 'addiction' to memory Anderson (2009) suggests. Mark Seltzer (1998) points out that scenes of writing and scenes of corporeal violence are frequently compared, quoting Alessandra Stanley's lead story in *The New York Times* as an example. Stanley begins her article: "In the annals of crime, there are serial murderers, and then there are the serial authors," which explicitly links the position of the serial author and the serial murderer.<sup>11</sup> "The commutability of the scene of writing and the scene of the crime operates on several levels," Seltzer argues. "It operates, most obviously, in the 'fit' between criminality and bureaucracies of information processing: in the ways in which crime and information processing have solicited and ratified each other" (39). For Burroughs, the 'fit' between serial self-representative texts and other serial structures of performance buttress one another, particularly in the popular imagination.

As postmodern practices of life writing permeate the contemporary American consciousness, so too does the concept of serial killing and the personas of serial killers. Serial murder, Jenkins (2002) argues,

has involved some of the characteristics [...] of the mythology of seriality itself. As we see the constant creation and recycling of media accounts, the proliferation of texts and images, and above all the endless repetition of claims, it is difficult not to describe this process as compulsive, irresistible, obsessive, lacking any natural ending (15).

Seriality, here, is mythologized to be terrifying because of its excess: when the subject is murder, the potential for compulsive and serial behavior is frightening. Yet, when the subject is self-construction, I suggest more encouraging possibilities. Placing himself as part of the same systems which discuss serial killers, among many other subjects, finally allows Burroughs more freedom to illustrate his own self-performance.

### **"I wasn't anything at all": the seriality of inheritance**

*Unfortunately, a wide streak of mental illness, alcoholism, and irresponsibility runs through my family tree like a sort of gypsy-moth rot. So while I may, indeed, be a*

*blue-blooded, purebred American with roots in the Great South, I no longer have my papers. Augusten Burroughs, Magical Thinking*

Interpreting himself and his life story through the contemporary systems of media, addiction, and compulsion, Burroughs also traces his genealogical line, confronting the seriality of inheritance. *Running with Scissors* works as a kind of family memoir which centers on Burroughs' relationship with his mother and the Finches: in it he figures his father most often as an absence, particularly as he is not understood as having contested the transfer of guardianship to Dr. Finch.

In *Magical Thinking*, his father is a vague presence even in the few sections which directly deal with their relationship, as in "Vanderbilt Genes."<sup>12</sup> While in *Dry* Burroughs makes the connection between his own alcoholism and his father's, it is not until his recent memoir, *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father*, that Burroughs explicitly confronts their complicated and difficult relationship through the seriality of inheritance. Burroughs' signature use of humor is not present in this text, and the first scene, a scant page, sets the stage. Preceding the memoir's numbered chapters, readers are placed in the narrative action as Augusten runs through the woods, chased by his father. "If my father caught me he would cut my neck," the memoir begins, "so I just kept going" (1). Presenting a shift in self-representation, Burroughs links the discourse of seriality and serial murder with his childhood relationship to his father.

The title of the memoir, *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father*, indicates that readers will be confronted by a shift – it is not immediately amusing or satirical like the titles of Burroughs' other memoirs. Instead, the use of the wolf as a trope from fairy tales indicates that the "big bad wolf" is already inside the house, eating dinner with the family. Burroughs also draws a parallel between the figure of his father and the "big bad wolf": as Jenkins reminds us,

... serial killers are viewed as predators, metaphorically as wolves, preying on weaker human beings who are represented in the historically familiar imagery of victims. [...] Hunting metaphors abounded in the congressional hearings and news stories that proliferated through the 1980s (3).

His reference to *The Silence of the Lambs*, then, supports this construction between peaceful animals and wolves.

The reviews for this memoir do not make this connection, however, and are generally unforgiving. Janet Maslin (2008), at *The New York Times*, for example, writes that it is "[d]eterminedly unfunny, awkwardly histrionic and sometimes anything but credible, it repudiates everything that put Mr. Burroughs on the map," and she argues that the book's cover – a frightening image of a red fork, the tines of which curl toward the reader – is more powerful than the substance of the memoir itself. Jennifer Reese (2008) of *Entertainment Weekly*, describes it as an "overwrought, unconvincing prequel," none of which "rings true"; the *St. Louis Dispatch's* Holly Silva (2008) writes that readers might be disappointed that Burroughs provides "yet another rehashing of his childhood"; and Joshua Henkin (2008), with the *Boston Globe*, writes that ultimately, the memoir declines "into a series of nostrums and talk-show pieties," although the "problem with it [...] has to do with a failure of imagination."<sup>13</sup> Questioning the possibilities of self-representation over an extended period of time or collection of texts, these reviewers frequently point to the shift in style between, most frequently, *Running with Scissors* and *A Wolf at the Table*. Both family memoirs, they certainly share some elements and the time period overlaps on occasion. *A Wolf at the Table*, however, provides readers with a powerful alternative narrative performance – a counter-memory to the absence of the father which pervades much of *Running with Scissors*.

In one of the most scathing reviews, Hugo Lindgren (2008) points directly to the serial memoir/ist as a site of contestation.

More than 200 pages into [*A Wolf at the Table*],” he writes, “we reach the point where the story collides with the start of *Running with Scissors*, a period that Burroughs describes here as ‘the defining years of my life.’ Oh yeah? So what have we just read then? The third most defining period of his life? The fourth? The fifth? Such is *the problem with serial memoirists*. If all this material is so important and personally illuminating, how come we never caught a whiff of it before?” (author’s emphasis).

Lindgren laments the fact that *A Wolf at the Table* is “rarely entertaining”, without the comic language or situations for which Burroughs is so well-known; in many ways, this comment supports Cefalu’s (2009) suggestion that “[p]erhaps OCD behavior prompts nervous laughter in others as caricature, as an exaggerated, distorted version of an ideal of inviolability, as if normal subjects peer into a funhouse mirror or face off with a perseverative mime when they gape at the curiously familiar ritual distortions of obsessives and compulsives” (53). Unlike *Running with Scissors*, which allowed readers to engage with the Finches’ distorted “funhouse,” *A Wolf at the Table* does not drape itself in caricature and thereby prohibits comedy.<sup>14</sup>

*A Wolf at the Table* is a clear departure from Burroughs’ other memoirs, particularly in the ways his previous texts use humor as a way to deflect the pain of the situations he narrates, scenes of sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, loss, abandonment, and psychological trauma. Frequently, the more harrowing moments in *Running with Scissors* and *Dry* use comic language as a way to articulate the serious messages inherent in the memoirs. In *A Wolf at the Table*, however, there are innumerable moments at which Burroughs presents himself as knowing a word enough to “spell it,” but not enough to “define it” (93). The text of *A Wolf at the Table* performs this linguistic impasse: Burroughs knows enough about his life with his father to spell out their time together for the reader, but he is unable at this moment, still, to define it in adequate terms for himself or his audience. This is not a fault of the memoir, rather it presents and performs the in-process nature of self construction in relation to others, even when physically separate from them.

By the end of this memoir, for example, Burroughs’ father has died, and Augusten receives his inheritance: a box containing an old Bible, a watch Augusten had given his father as a present, some old family photographs, and four journals. Burroughs transcribes an entry of these journals, “written during the worst years of [his father’s] life with [his] mother” (235), and readers are given a textual example of the figure about whom the entire narrative centers. “Page after page”, Burroughs writes, “as his life fell apart all around him, my father wrote down the prices of corn, gasoline, and long-distance telephone calls. A stranger reading the diaries would think: *What an ordinary life*” (236). Placing this scene at the end of the memoir, Burroughs is able to show the reader the power of textual self-construction, as his father never mentions the substance of his daily life, or what readers might take to be more significant than the price of corn. In the last line of the chapter, Burroughs provides his readers with the single moment he is able to recognize his father’s “true nature”: “On a page all by itself, he wrote, ‘Augusten very distant tonight. Probably because of my games’” (236).

Reviewers often fault Burroughs, and by extension other memoirists (serial memoirists in particular), for what they read as excessive self-presentation, yet the ways in which these narratives illustrate the facets of Burroughs’ relationships to others is significant to the hyper-mediated ways in which contemporary Americans understand and present selfhood. “However uncomfortable, the truth of human relations resides in the fact of relationship,” argues Nancy K. Miller (2004), “and to say *relation is to say relative*. Add memory and we can begin to see

how delicate our notions about describing a relationship have to be" (*The Ethics of Betrayal*, 2004, 152-53 [emphasis mine]). Self-representation and self-narration, at their origin, are grounded in a person's self-understanding in relation to their family. The notion of understanding oneself in relation to others is significant when a person to whom one relates or is related dies because it raises the question of one's own mortality. Mortality is all the more important when it is the death of a parent, as Miller (2000) argues, whether the death is "dreaded or wished for – is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent's death which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent. But the closure produced by the end of their plot does not signal the end of ours" (*Bequest & Betrayal* x). Many of the early acts of memory presented in *A Wolf at the Table* are ridiculed by reviewers because Burroughs presents himself as a toddler: moving between his memories of early childhood and his adult perspective, Burroughs attempts to provide his readers with a more complicated portrait of the myriad ways in which he and his father are bound together.<sup>15</sup>

While *A Wolf at the Table* and *Dry* present a version of Burroughs who is frequently terrified of becoming his father, *Running with Scissors* and chapters in *Possible Side Effects* present Burroughs' fears of becoming his mother, thereby placing the issues of genealogy and inheritance at the center of his serial memoir.<sup>16</sup> Burroughs writes:

I remembered being twelve and worrying constantly that I would suffer psychotic episodes just like my mother. That when I turned thirty, my mind would split, just like hers. I would become two people – psychotic in the fall and winter, my old self the rest of the year. But it never happened (*Possible Side Effects* 64).

These fears are significant in relation to Burroughs' representation of seriality and, in particular, how he presents addiction, compulsion, and the serial killer as tropes of embodied extremism. Characterizing his parents as writers, his father as a man who journals and his mother as a confessional poet, provides another link to what Augusten refers to as one of the central fears of his childhood: the horror that he might grow up to be his parents. Thus questions about inheritance, which permeate Burroughs' serial memoir, are posed explicitly in *A Wolf at the Table* in reference to his father. "What was it about him that made me wary even when he wasn't drunk?" Augusten asks himself. "And whatever it was, did I have it within me, too?" (80).

The questions Burroughs poses about what he may or may not have inherited from his family are ones that memoirists often confront. Constructing selves and stories, memoirists also necessarily think about how their relations influence the ways in which they know and understand themselves. As a child, Augusten's father tells him that he's like his mother, and Augusten realizes that his father thought of him as one of her "creation[s]" (47).

Initially relieved that he might not grow up to be his father, Burroughs writes that "a wiser, more knowing part of me understood this to be false. That the ways of genetics were fickle and I could, indeed, wake up one day to find my father looking back at me from the mirror" (47). Augusten's repeated mirror-looking in the essay *Model Behavior* is now complicated by what readers now imagine the possibilities are for his father's presence, and so, too, is Anderson's claim that Burroughs is a "memory addict." Or, as Miller succinctly explains: "Haunted by our pasts, we are forged in relations of likeness and difference. [...] Writing about oneself entails dealing with the ghostly face in the mirror that is and isn't one's own" (*Bequest & Betrayal* x). The seriality of the everyday, of routine, is nowhere more prominent than in our relationships with others. In attempting to find out 'who we are' and how we can represent ourselves to one

another, the serial memoir allows a space which privileges repetition and process, allowing individuals to expose the ways in which selves are repeatedly constructed and reconstituted through various systems, be they cultural, familial, or national.

Burroughs' 'memory addiction' may be more accurately described as his confrontation with postindustrial American serial culture, a culture in which people are aware of "culturally endorsed stigma associated with mental illness" (Ben-Zeev, et al., 2010, 319), in which serial killers are celebrities because of their particular patterns of repetition, in which instances of self-representation are in the process of becoming hyper-serial through online social networking websites like Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter.<sup>17</sup> In his serial memoir though, Burroughs performs an important shift in the way we present versions of ourselves to one another – medically, narratively, and relationally. Engaging such resonant themes as addiction, compulsion, and inheritance, Burroughs' serial project points out the ways in which normative constructions of subjectivity restrict self-representational possibilities as he embodies seriality differently.

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## Notes

- 1 Eve Sedgwick points out that once exercise becomes addictive, we can assume that everything has the potential to be addictive (qtd in Keane, "Disorders," 189).
- 2 Burroughs' autobiographical texts debuted in 2002 with *Running with Scissors: A Memoir*. Since that time, he has published *Dry: A Memoir*, *Magical Thinking: True Stories, Possible Side Effects* (2006), *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father*, and *You Better Not Cry: Stories for Christmas* (2009).
- 3 The current edition was published in 2000. The next edition, *DSM-V* (currently under review) has an anticipated publication date of 2013, and its revision has allowed an important conversation about diagnosing and defining medical conditions. As Dror Ben-Zeev, Michael A Young, and Patrick W. Corrigan note, "[t]his is the first time that [the American Psychiatric Association] opens its doors to broad public review of the process and considerations that go into revisions of their most widely used diagnostic system, and giving mental health professionals, researchers, and persons/family members affected by mental illness the opportunity to provide feedback and input" (322). There are two especially important discussions relating to the *DSM-V* for Burroughs: the discussion about whether or not the *DSM-V* will drop Asperger Syndrome "now classified as a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by autistic social deficits and restricted patterns of behavior or interests, occurring without clinically significant language impairment or cognitive delay" (Ghaziuddin 1146). The designation of Asperger Syndrome is especially relevant for Burroughs because his brother, John Elder Robison, was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome as an adult. This is chronicled in his memoir *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's* (2007).
- 4 Keane points out that, "while the *DSM-IV* states that withdrawal and tolerance are often present, these signs of physiological change are not necessary to make a diagnosis of dependence and are not found with some substances. This minimization or de-emphasis on

biological elements (withdrawal and tolerance) in the definition of addiction goes against widely held views that it is the presence of 'physical' as well as 'psychological' dependence that marks a true addiction. In fact, it represents a significant broadening of the criteria from the 3rd edition of the *DSM*, published in 1980, which required the presence of either tolerance or withdrawal in order to make a diagnosis of dependence" ("Disorders," 192).

5 The facility is, in fact, named the PRIDE Institute.

6 Descriptions of his messy apartment recur throughout Burroughs' serial memoir, especially in *Magical Thinking* and in other parts of *Dry*. He returns to this moment repeatedly in order to continually perform that serial autobiographical act of "tell[ing] on [his] addict."

7 In Anderson's essay for *New York Magazine*, he includes an image featuring each of the five memoirs' covers with the caption: "2002: The one he got sued over.; 2003: The one about sobering up.; 2004: The one where he kills a rat.; 2006: The one where he tries to be Julia Child.; 2008: The new one, about his not-so-nice father." These ultra-brief summaries illustrate the significance of the chapter "The Rat/Thing" to *Magical Thinking*.

8 *The Silence of the Lambs* premiered in February, 1991, to critical acclaim. At the Academy Awards, for example, the film earned trophies for Best Actor (Anthony Hopkins), Best Actress (Jodie Foster), Best Director (Jonathan Demme), Best Adapted Screenplay (from Thomas Harris' well-received book), and Best Picture.

9 For more about this naming event, see Seltzer.

10 A discussion of John Wayne Gacy also shows up in Burroughs' first publication, a novel titled *Sellelevision* (2001), as one of the characters, Max, stumbles upon an auction of Gacy's art.

11 Stanley's article, "For Joe McGinniss, Another Grisly Killing Means Another Book," centers on an author who writes nonfiction/true crime accounts of murders, although none up to this point centered on serial murder. His books, *Fatal Vision* (1983), about an Army doctor who killed his pregnant wife and two daughters, *Blind Faith* (1989), also about a wife-killer, and *Cruel Doubt* (1991), which sparked the story in the *Times*, about a college student who stabbed his stepfather to death and attempted to kill his own mother.

12 In this essay, young Augusten imagines that he was kidnapped by his parents from the Vanderbilt mansion and chronicles the silent drive home after his parents argue.

13 Additionally, most of the reviews cited trepidation about the genre writ large, mentioning concerns about the veracity of this book in particular, but about memoir more generally. Many reviewers note the lawsuit Burroughs faced after the publication of *Running with Scissors*; for an extended examination of that situation, see Kate Douglas' *Contesting Childhood* (2010).

14 Lindgren's disappointment with the entertainment value of *A Wolf at the Table*, though, is rooted more firmly in his suspicion of memoir. Using the second-person, he writes: "You feel like a sucker these days for even picking [a memoir] up." Lindgren faults the memoir and Burroughs for what he reads as its solipsism and its inability to fully examine the character of the father in the text. Memoir, as a narrative of the self in relation to others, still concerns the memoirist's life. Moreover, genres of life writing are rooted in questions about veracity and embellishment and have been, from slave narratives to celebrity tell-alls. Serial self-representation challenges and exposes the seeming simplicity of trying to discern whose story is whose, instead placing memory, the constructed nature of selfhood, and the possibilities—or impossibilities—of such articulation at the center of the conversation.

15 The in-between and in-process nature of the Burroughs' memoir, then, performs what Sean O'Sullivan argues is a central serial moment in narrative, the synthesis of the old, the new, and

the in-between. "We are always close to the beginning or end of something in a serial narrative," he explains, "so the space between has its own special import, whether between one installment and another or in the space within an installment, when old and new are both temporarily at bay" (121). These three terms of seriality also mark significant spaces in self-presentation, as the memoirist negotiates multiple perspectives and memories; in family memoirs, this is especially important as the "space between" is often a stand-in for the narrator because the narrator represents the genealogical figure of "between." Between generations, and in Burroughs' case, positioned within the family dynamic as between conflicting parents, the serial memoir literalizes liminality.

16 The title alone of *Possible Side Effects* acknowledges both the potentialities of fame but also the potential "side effects" of being his parents' child; he is a possible side effect from their union.

17 Burroughs regularly uses all three of these online interfaces in addition to his website.

### **About the author**

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