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(Sub)urbanites Under the Influence: High Crimes and Border Crossings in the Addiction  
Narratives of *Junky* and *Breaking Bad*

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## Introduction

The trope of the addict is a recurring fixture in literature, whether explicitly represented by a character using drugs<sup>1</sup> or a metaphorical addict represented by a monstrous character.<sup>2</sup> My thesis focuses on fictional representations of drug addicts using two contemporary North American texts: William S. Burroughs's *Junky* (1953) (sometimes called *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*) and AMC's series *Breaking Bad* (2009) created and produced by Vince Gilligan. *Junky* and *Breaking Bad* are texts with narratives centered on the manufacture, use, and distribution of narcotics, and various characters' addiction to drugs. The protagonist and narrator, Bill, of *Junky* is an addict character who rejects his white suburban upbringing and goes "slumming" through urban locales notoriously associated with drug abuse and criminal activity. *Breaking Bad* also represents addicts who cross socioeconomic lines, particularly Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul). Additionally, *Breaking Bad* reveals the consequences of white and Latinx addicts' attempts to occupy spaces that do not align with their so-called "rightful class." The representations of addicts in popular culture texts suggests that addicts are coded by race and socioeconomic status, specifically within suburban and urban spaces, and implies that within the subculture of addiction, white suburban addicts utilize their racial and economic privilege to "slum" within and between urban addict spaces, thus reinforcing racial, gendered, and classed stereotypes.

White suburban addict characters are often introduced in texts with a backdrop showcasing their simple yet comfortable lives before using drugs. *Junky*'s Bill is no exception; he is represented as a figure raised in the American Midwest by a family who provided all the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of my thesis, I use the term "drugs" to describe any mind or mood-altering substance, including prescription drugs.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the monstrous representation of addicts, see Susan Zieger's *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (2008).

comforts and amenities of a stable household. Boastful about a trust fund that allows him to find work out of mere boredom or curiosity as an adult drug addict, Bill maintains privileged access to resources other drug-addicted characters from urban spaces do not—or cannot—obtain. Bill has the luxury to willfully leave the midwestern suburban life, and chooses to instead immerse himself in the seedy underworld of drugs, crime, and promiscuity represented throughout the text as associated with urban spaces.

In a similar vein, Jesse, a white suburban addict character, is introduced in *Breaking Bad* while escaping a drug raid in a suburban neighborhood; he crawls out of a window while a topless woman tosses his clothes out of the window after him. The first scene quite literally shows Jesse running away from being arrested, which also represents Jesse as an addict in the middle of two literal and figurative spaces: one space is a house in which his friend and meth-cooking partner, Emilio Koyoma (John Koyoma), a non-white addict character is being arrested while manufacturing meth within a suburban home, and the other is the house next door inhabited by a white woman who is having a sexual affair with Jesse. Later in the series, Jesse's suburban origins are highlighted again by his current and childhood homes, which are clearly white and suburban, making Jesse a character who also willfully rejects his suburban roots and slums through urban spaces while using drugs. Additionally, Jesse adopts the customs, language, and lifestyle of urban people of color when it best suits him throughout the series. Jesse's narrative creates conflict and tension both for himself and audiences as he cannot fully commit to the urban or suburban settings throughout the show, yet his privilege allows him to navigate among and between the socioeconomic borders of *Breaking Bad's* New Mexico setting.

Although *Junky* and *Breaking Bad* are texts produced over sixty years apart from one another, I am able to make connections and highlight similarities between the televised addicts

and addict narratives that appear in print, regardless of the rapidly changing public perceptions of drug addiction. Additionally, addict representations continue to evolve based on the historical contexts in which they are produced. In order to show the variance of public opinion toward drug addicts and the eventual representations of white middleclass addicts like Bill and Jesse, tracing the history of drug narratives and the real-life shifting perspectives of addicts, specifically along lines of race, is crucial. While researching narratives about drug addiction, I discovered two major common themes: perceptions and opinions about drugs and drug addicts are first constructed through political agendas often directly correlated to judicial policies (or lack thereof) for its time, and rapidly shifting policies in turn create vacillating societal perspectives and stigmatizations of drugs and drug users. Such wavering public opinions are eventually channeled through news media and popular culture, and eventually filtered through large media outlets such as television shows. However, earlier perceptions and biographical accounts of drug use emerged in print narratives several years prior to the popularity of addicts in primetime television.

Around the nineteenth century, narratives about drug use became a niche within elite, white male literary discourses. True accounts of drug use could be found in early memoirs and autobiographies, such as Fitz Hugh Ludlow's *The Hasheesh Eater* (1804) and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Susan Zieger's "Drug Autobiography and Manifest Destiny" claims "autobiographers' intoxication paradoxically proclaims universal mastery from a countercultural standpoint. Ultimately, although the extensive literature of drug-induced hallucination may superficially appear to be a counterculture of Enlightenment modernity, it actually neatly reinscribes its gendered and racial antinomies" (36). Zieger closely examines the influence of Ludlow and De Quincey's drug-use narratives on later, similar

narratives while identifying an underlying rhetoric of racism and Orientalism; Zieger notes how the narrators recount drug-induced hallucinations that transport the user into exotic, primarily Asian, realms, or villainizes Asian cultures for “polluting” others with their substances, thus reinforcing the rhetoric of manifest destiny. Additionally, Zieger asserts:

In these drug autobiographies, intoxication operates as a metaphor for mediated knowledge, constructing a preserve of white masculine authority that is rarely read in conjunction with more populist discourses of addicted compulsion. As a result, the drug experiences of writers such as De Quincey . . . are typically discussed in terms of philosophy and aesthetics, receiving the elite mark . . . of ‘high culture,’ unlike raced and gendered subjects’ experiences of addicted abjection. (36)

Overall, themes of early drug narratives either glorifying or villainizing people of color through an elite, white male lens is still evident in contemporary non-fiction and fiction texts.

While race is a prominent theme in addict narratives, socioeconomic status also affects the ways addicts are represented. Several scholars examine the concept of “slumming” across social classes within the United States, particularly in early 1900s New York, which is closely connected to drug and alcohol use within poor communities. Chloë Rae Edmonson’s “The Aristocrat of Harlem Slumming, Immersion and Intoxication in Prohibition-era New York” examines “how white slummers’ physical experiences of intoxication colluded with their intoxicating fantasy of blackness to create the frenzied crescendo of cultural practice that was Harlem’s zenith of slumming” (3). Edmonson’s article focuses on racially segregated venues in Harlem during Prohibition, particularly the Cotton Club,<sup>3</sup> and states “The 1920s and 30s were

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<sup>3</sup> The original Cotton Club opened in 1920s Harlem was a segregated entertainment establishment, meaning the club only allowed white patrons but the service and entertainment was exclusively Black people. The “entertainment” often included music and black face parodies for the white patronage. See James Haskin’s *The Cotton Club*.

Harlem's heyday of 'slumming' – the practice of white thrill seekers trekking uptown to experience boozy speakeasies and top-notch variety entertainment” and also notes how slumming became “all the rage” previously in the late 1800s:

Early slumming expeditions in New York penetrated the crowded tenements of the city's Lower East Side, Chinatown and Bowery regions . . . Chinatown was a particularly popular destination, renowned for its chop suey diners and opium dens (*The New York Times* 1907). In Harlem, slummers also sought to consume excesses of food, drugs and alcohol in their uptown excursions. (3-4)

Since the late 1800s, New York's urban settings have been a site for white people to exploit and indulge in alcohol and drug use then return to their “normal lives” after they consumed their fill. The slumming practice in New York can be identified in literature published shortly after Edmonson's examination of post-Prohibition Harlem, specifically the opening setting of *Junky*.

While elements of slumming are present in the two United States texts of *Junky* and *Breaking Bad*, the practice has been widely discussed in scholarship about Victorian London. Since the confluence of industrialization, acts of empire and imperialism, and immigration in 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. and Great Britain have shared histories regarding the rise of “slums,” a cursory look at slumming scholarship more generally is instructive for my interest in *Junky* and *Breaking Bad*. Seth Koven's “Slumming: Eros and Altruism in Victorian London” examines the slumming trend in East London in the 1800s and 1900s and analyzes *why* slumming became so fashionable for both male and female London elites. Koven attempts to hinge “the altogether messier mingling good intentions and blinkered prejudices that informed their vision of the poor and of themselves” (3). Within this context, Koven highlights religious figures, such as James Granville Adderly, who willfully deserted their comfortable London homes to not only live among the

poor but emulate their practices in an attempt to gain the full slum “experience.” While clerics like Adderly had good yet complicated intentions to bring awareness to the brutalities of London slums, the practice became a trend and resulted in the poor being exploited for various reasons—closely resembling those Edmondson examines in her work about Harlem slumming. Koven’s examination of Victorian slums highlights how some London elites didn’t stop at “touring” through poor, often sick populations, but renounced their possessions in order to live in the slums to gain a fuller experience of impoverished lifestyles.

*Breaking Bad* is a series that stereotypes addicts of color and is distinctly coded by class, even within addict populations, which is most notably highlighted in Jesse’s narrative as he also practices slumming by using drugs in poor, addict spaces, and lives within these spaces when it suits his addict interests. The setting of *Breaking Bad* is the border state of New Mexico and the poor, addict communities represented there are not exclusive to addicts of color—white addict characters, including Jesse, also occupy these settings. However, many of the white addict characters in *Breaking Bad* can be quickly distinguished from Jesse because they have a noticeably more grotesque aesthetic, especially pale, scabbed, skin that allows audiences to immediately identify and correlate these addict types to poor, urban areas while Jesse’s suburban “boy next door” aesthetic remains (mostly) intact throughout the show.

The relationship between class and addiction within televised addict narrative makes Jesse a more complex figure because he maintains his moral compass connected to his wholesome suburban upbringing, which makes him a character who elicits audience sympathy. In his article “Trusting the Author: On Narrative Tension and the Puzzle of Audience Anxiety” Scott W. Clifton analyzes the characters of *Breaking Bad* and claims both Jesse and Walter White (Bryan Cranston) are unreliable narrators, which creates a degree of narrative tension that

appeal to audiences. This narrative tension can also be applied to the dynamics of Jesse as an addict character, specifically because he embodies what viewers have grown to accept and embrace with the most current trend of addiction narratives on television, such as the addict figure having a family, home, or profession to be restored to (i.e. Jackie Peyton of *Nurse Jackie*) and the conflict that ensues when the white, suburban body performs the criminal acts that are typically associated with urban people of color. Still, there is constant tension because audiences are repeatedly reminded of Jesse's disapproval of violence and bouts of grief and remorse throughout the first two seasons.

While Jesse is a representation of an addict character who has become more dynamic and sympathetic with audiences, it is also important to highlight some of the real-life perspectives of drug addiction and how these rapidly changing views influence the ways addicts are represented. The evolution and dynamics of addict narratives are often connected to the contexts and politically charged beliefs of its time. Shifting drug policies within the U.S. beginning mid-1900s, and the criminalization of non-white addicts demonstrate how such wavering and malleable perspectives influence addict representations in popular culture. In their work, *The Social Value of Drug Addicts: Uses of the Useless*, Merrill Singer and J. Bryan Page claim, "The United States has possibly the most convoluted, racially biased, and historically fragile policies regarding drug use and drug users of any national polity that assumes the rule of law" (153). According to Singer and Page, U.S. drug policies perpetually construct, deconstruct, and eventually reconstruct what constitutes addiction, which directly affects underlying narratives of how addicts are perceived as either victims of an epidemic or dehumanized criminals. The fragile state of these policies are expounded and analyzed by Singer and Page to demonstrate the extent to which drug users are criminalized, which is wholly reliant upon political and judicial agendas

of its time. There is, however, a common theme Singer and Page identify: addicts of color are met with harsher punitive consequences within the context of the United States judicial system than their white counterparts.

In some cases, public officials working for government agencies have explicitly admitted to wrongfully criminalizing and villainizing drug users for political gain. The national and international tension in 1970s United States surrounding the Vietnam War and the rise of “hippie culture” coupled with the criminalization of drug offenses manifested specific bodies being associated with drugs; drug addicts were blatantly given a skin color and political affiliation throughout the media. Dan Baum, a journalist for *Harper's* magazine, published the article “Legalize it All: How to Win the War on Drugs” (2016) featuring an interview with John Ehrlichman, the impeached president Richard Nixon’s former advisor, who spent time in prison for his involvement with the Watergate scandal. Baum quoted Ehrlichman:

We understood that drugs were not the health problem we were making them out to be, but it was such a perfect issue . . . that we couldn't resist it. . . . You want to know what this was really all about? . . . The Nixon campaign in 1968 and the Nixon White House . . . had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. . . . We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities . . . and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did. (22)

Along with print, news media, and television, the film medium also has recurring themes of demonizing addicts along lines of race and class. Film scholar Maurizio Viano's states in his essay, “An Intoxicated Screen: Reflections of Film and Drugs” that, in addition to certain styles of

film, political, noir, etc., there exists a “Cinema of Intoxication and Addiction” or C.I.A. (136). Viano asserts “The representation of drugs was one of the first objectives that early filmmakers pursued with cinema in its prelinguistic infancy. Entitled *Chinese Opium Den* (1894), the first-known kinetograph was made in the mid-1890s. . . . The representation of drugs is thus coextensive with the history of cinema” (139). Viano also discusses several international films representing drugs and drug use, including over-the-top, fictional cautionary tales such as Louis J. Gasnier’s *Reefer Madness* (1936). The assessment of early to modern films’ representations of drugs is bluntly summed up by Viano:

It is as if the evil of drugs could not be accepted as American and thus had to be portrayed as foreign or black. Just as opium use was associated with the Chinese, cocaine became the subject of hysterical fears in the South because of the superhuman powers it allegedly bestowed on ‘negroes.’ . . . Finally, cannabis hemp was associated with ‘lazy’ Mexicans laborers (and, of course, with black musicians, as happened with heroin). (143)

While Viano’s research and focus is the medium of film, there are clear and undeniable parallels between early cinematic representations of drug addicts and those in contemporary television. While the film representations may not have prominent geographic lines separating addicts of color, it is apparent Chinese, Black, and Latinx addicts on screen have been demonized and believed to be “poisoning” white Americans with drugs.

While Viano assesses people of color “polluting” white Americans with drugs in films, Timothy Melley’s essay, “A Terminal Case: William Burroughs and the Logic of Addiction” examines how Burroughs’s addict characters are represented as figures who are unable to exercise their own free-will due to addiction. Melley describes Burroughs’s recurring addict protagonists (mainly white addict characters such as Bill in *Junky*) as figures who are “the

subjects of sadistic forms of mass control. . . . In short, their existence represents a terminal case of agency-in-crisis” (41). Additionally, Melley draws on Burroughs’s real-life discussions about addiction as a “virus,” (42) which implies he is absolving Burroughs’s addict figures from taking responsibility for their addiction.

While Viano and Melley have very different assessments of addict characters with regard to *why* they are using drugs, both authors suggest addict representations, particularly white American addicts, are often portrayed as victims—or, at the very least, do not have the willpower to overcome the allure of drugs. I argue Bill in *Junky* and the white suburban addicts of *Breaking Bad* are also being represented in a way that reflects both Viano and Melley’s arguments; these characters desert their suburban homes, but there is not a sign of trauma or explanation of why they would choose to leave—it is only the allure of drug use and slumming.

As Zieger states, gender, specifically masculinity, is often a characteristic of white addict character types and this element is present in both *Junky* and *Breaking Bad*. The irony of the narrator Bill in *Junky* being queer and displaying homophobic characteristics reinforces the heteronormative behavior associated with middleclass white America. The characters of *Breaking Bad*, including the non-addict characters,<sup>4</sup> also reinforce heteronormativity and hypermasculinity throughout the series, making these addict types similar to their addict predecessors: white, male, and have some indications of financial well-being.

In my first chapter, I argue the narrator Bill of *Junky* reinforces addict stereotypes along lines of race, class, and gender; Bill is a queer addict who utilizes his white, middleclass privilege to reject his suburban upbringing and go slumming in search of the next high. Bill degrades and dehumanizes other addict and queer characters by identifying them with racial,

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<sup>4</sup> Other characters viewed as hypermasculine are Hank Schraeder (Dean Norris) and Walter White (Bryan Cranston).

homophobic, and religious slurs while he crosses socioeconomic and geographic borders throughout the novel—a practice only made possible as a result of his middleclass roots which allows him the funding to support such maneuvers. *Junky* suggests that white, suburban male addicts extend their privilege among urban addict spaces to indulge in self-gratification associated with drug addiction, criminality, and sexual exploration.

In my second chapter, I argue *Breaking Bad* also reinforces stereotypes between white suburban addicts and their urban counterparts; *Breaking Bad* negatively stereotypes urban addicts of color and white urban addicts as abject criminals and/or dispensable. The series highlights the tragedy of white suburban figures rejecting their comfortable lifestyles to use drugs in spaces of squalor which implies a need of rescue, lest their middleclass privilege is wasted.

The white, suburban addict characters of *Junky* and *Breaking Bad* use their economic and racial privileges as a means to navigate through urban spaces and exploit other races and cultures of lower socioeconomic status. Drug addicts are often an already-marginalized group in real-life and in literature, but the white addicts in *Junky* and *Breaking Bad* “other others” from a position of economic privilege established immediately in both texts. *Junky* and *Breaking Bad* center white economic privilege—even among seemingly marginalized addict communities.

## Chapter One: *Junky*

“*The American uppermiddle-class citizen is a composite of negatives. He is largely delineated by what he is not*” –Bill, *Junky*

Discussions about addiction narratives and their relationship with urban spaces would be incomplete without including literary works from the Beat Generation. The Beat literary movement emerged in the post-war United States around the 1940s and 50s introducing a new generation of writers and brand of literature that overtly rebelled against mainstream consumer culture while embracing radical individualism, literary experimentation, and illicit drug use. As Matthew Theado states in his article, “Beat Generation Literary Criticism” (2004), “Their popular (and therefore derided) explorations of live poetry readings, and poetry with jazz accompaniment announced a fresh kind of writing for a new unsophisticated audience” (4). Additionally, Theado notes how the Beats’ purpose was to “take poetry out of the classrooms and bring it back into the streets,” (3) which is precisely what they accomplished both in practice and sometimes, particularly in William S. Burroughs’s case, within published texts as readers follow the main character(s) through the streets in pursuit of the next high. Akin to addict narratives that would appear on television over half-a-century after the Beats’ heyday, detailed accounts about drug use are a common thread in the fabric of Beat writing. Among the most infamous Beat writers, Burroughs would be recognized among the “basic triangular friendship [that] would be at the heart of [the Beat Generation] movement” between him, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, (Morgan 1988, 81). Burroughs, who was referred to as “father” by Ginsberg<sup>5</sup> and greatly influenced several other Beat writers like Neal Cassady, made his fictional debut with the publication of *Junky* in 1953 (sometimes called *Junkie*).

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<sup>5</sup> See *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact* (2005) by William T. Lawlor

As the titular epithet *Junky* implies, the novel is a first-person narrative about an opiate addict, or “junkie,” named Bill. Loosely based on Burroughs’s own life and experience with heroin addiction, *Junky* divulges the raw and unapologetic realities of an individual experiencing addiction living in New York’s notorious urban setting—the Lower East Side—and how addiction eventually takes him across geographical, socioeconomic, and mind/body borders. Resembling characteristics and behaviors to those exhibited by Bill in *Junky*, the most notorious Beat writers are primarily white males who also reject a culture associated with affluent suburban spaces and extend their privilege as a means to maneuver between geographic borders to create a so-called counterculture that consists primarily of white men.

Addict narratives in print can be traced back to the seventeenth century and range from Thomas de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) to Alexander Trocchi’s *Cain’s Book* (1960) to more recent novels like Edward Bloor’s *A Plague Year* (2011)—a novel about post-apocalyptic Pennsylvania where meth-zombies are destroying the human race. Suffice to say addict narratives have been written, discussed, analyzed, and rewritten since people have had access to addictive drugs (primarily opium in earlier years), and scientific and medical definitions of the terms “addict” and “addiction” were established in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> While these narratives can resemble similar themes across texts, such as the physical and psychological effects of drug use, the same narratives also differ dependent on their historical contexts.

The end of World War Two marked significant changes in United States’ economy and culture. The prior Industrial Revolution and the failed attempt of Prohibition influenced Beat

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the scientific approach on the history of literature about addiction, see Institute of Medicine, Committee on Opportunities in Drug Abuse Research’s *Pathways of Addiction: Opportunities in Drug Abuse Research* (1996).

writers' discontent, defiance, and contempt toward the American middle-class. Allan Johnston discusses Beat political and social perspectives present in the literature of Beat writers.

Johnston's article, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation" analyzes the Beats' candidly rebellious attitudes toward the vicissitudes in American post-war culture; Beats perceived the consumerist agendas permeating American middle-class society as a direct threat to individuality. Johnston further discusses how the Beats' perceptions of such a threat transcended the middle-class and became an ominous monster manifesting everywhere: media, the workplace, politics, and public opinions about drug addiction. In an attempt to maintain identity and agency, Beat writers began experimenting with sexuality, unconventional literary styles, and promoting drug use.

Negative perceptions of drug users as criminals were growing in intensity in the 1930s and 1940s and met with melodramatic propaganda films like *Reefer Madness* (Gasnier 1936), which attempts to "scare straight" young people who smoke marijuana by portraying the drug as a substance likely to cause the user to inadvertently commit heinous crimes such as murder, suicide, and rape. After writing *Junky* and maintaining a drug-free life, Burroughs rejected these ideals, and, as a person with firsthand experience about the realities of addiction, spoke out in favor of treatment for addicts, which was also tantamount for the decriminalization of addicts. David Ayers's article, "The Long Last Goodbye: Control and Resistance in the Work of William Burroughs" overviews Burroughs's stance on a substance called apomorphine, which Burroughs believed to be an ideal treatment for heroin addicts: "These arguments, taking as their first step that addicts should not be criminalized, have by the 1990s gathered increasing force, although they were made during a period of post-prohibition when criminalization of drug-users was the norm" (224). Ayers situates Burroughs's claims for better treatment options for addicts as "part

of a wider set of arguments about the social construction of the ‘dope fiend’ in the late 1950s” (224). The term “dope fiend” is problematic in describing people with addiction, and although Burroughs spoke in favor of decriminalizing and destigmatizing drug addiction, the term and title of *Junky* further adds to the problem.<sup>7</sup>

Burroughs’s recurring narrator and protagonist William (Bill) Lee (Inspector Lee, Agent Lee, and Willie the Rat) are often personae of Burroughs himself, and therefore a testimony of his own addiction. However, as Jimmy Fazzino states in the text, *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature*, “Very little of what Burroughs says, however, especially about his own writing, can be taken at face value” (144). More specifically, Burroughs’s views about addicts as people worthy of treatment and being decriminalized seem to be difficult to unpack in his stories about addiction where fairly one-dimensional characters, such as Bill in *Junky*, only purpose is to search for more drugs.

While Burroughs hoped for the decriminalization of addicts, he (and other Beat writers) landed in front of the Supreme Court for obscenity charges for his novel *Naked Lunch*, first published 1959 in France and initially banned in Europe and the United States. In his article, “Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness” Johnathon Paul Eburne discusses the pitfalls and contradictions found in Beat texts: “Writers like Burroughs and Kerouac were little more than incoherent, and therefore obscene in the sense that they merely channeled the confusion of the society that distressed them” (53). Additionally, Eburne claims the Beats essentially had to seek out the “other” within marginalized communities (as they were predominantly educated white males), which implies they were defying their own mainstream culture while simultaneously exploiting marginalized communities to create literary

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<sup>7</sup> Burroughs originally wanted to title the book *Junk* referring to the substance used by addicts.

content: “The Beats, however, scoured city streets in order to find alterity and conflict in the form of a racial, cultural, and ethnic minority, an anthropomorphized strategy of dissent by means of which incorporation and control became a calamitous impossibility” (55).

Beat writers exploited marginalized groups and capitalized on the customs and lifestyles of othered cultures within their writing, including colloquial language. Burroughs includes a “Glossary” at the end of *Junky* to give readers clear definitions of words and phrases used by drug users and occupants of urban settings throughout the novel (153-158). Burroughs prefaces his “Glossary” by defining “jive talk” as an umbrella phrase for a vernacular used by street addicts: “‘Jive talk’ is used more in connection with marijuana than with junk. . . . however, the use of junk has spread into ‘hip,’ or ‘jive talking’ circles and junk lingo has, to some extent, merged with ‘jive talk’” (153). Bill uses jive throughout his narrative which emphasizes his slumming practices and exploitation of people of color while decontextualizing the language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), one of the definitions of “jive” is “A variety of American English associated with the Harlem area of New York; slang used by black Americans, or by jazz musicians and their followers. Also *attributive*, as *jive talk*.” Burroughs exploits the term “jive talk” to describe slang throughout Bill’s narrative, which implies his audience is predominantly white middle/upper-class and essentially “tourists” within urban drug addict spaces because it is necessary to have specific words and phrases translated.

Other Beat scholars like Manuel Luis Martinez discuss how the Beats’ defiance of mainstream culture is problematic. In his text about Beat writers, *Countering the Counterculture* (2003), Martinez furthers Eburne’s arguments by claiming the “counterculture” the Beats sought is simply just another space for white males. Martinez claims:

When confronted with an encroaching conformism in both the home and the workplace

in the early 1950s, the Beats popularized a defensive individualist strategy for claiming an alternative space for individual, masculine, white power. . . . It is not enough to suggest that the counterculture, as exemplified by the Beats, rejected bourgeois vacuity, hegemonic suburbanization, or even Cold War conformism. (27)

Ultimately, the Beat maxim of defying mainstream society meant inserting themselves into marginalized spaces to establish an alternate position of white patriarchy.

Burroughs's *Junky* is both Beat literature and addict narrative; in the text, the narrator Bill takes readers on a drug-induced journey through the streets of New York, New Orleans, across the border to Mexico, and eventually to the jungles of Colombia in search of the ultimate high, or "kick" (156). Throughout the novel, other addict figures are introduced in tandem with "croakers" (corrupt doctors willing to write opiate prescriptions for undeserving addicts) as Bill navigates his addict experience and reports the comings and goings of life as a junky. Bill is a character who is acutely aware of his surroundings and of his own addiction; he does not deny he is mentally and physically addicted to heroin and is willing to go anywhere to get it. Throughout *Junky*, Bill creates a binary between himself and other junk users by overtly identifying race, sex, and religious stereotypes, which places Bill in a position of superiority—even among other addicts.

The research on *Junky* is not as substantial as the research on Burroughs as a Beat writer or his other, more controversial works such as *Naked Lunch*. However, there are scholarly discussions about the book's narrative techniques<sup>8</sup> and boldness of detail surrounding drug addiction<sup>9</sup> for its time. My reading differs from other scholars because I examine Bill through the

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<sup>8</sup> For narrative technique on *Junky* see Rona Cran's "'Everything is permitted': William Burroughs' Cut-up Novels and European Art" (2013).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the book's drug content see Richard English's "Theories of Opiate Addiction in the Early Works of Burroughs and Trocchi" (2016).

lens of addiction, racial coding, and a continued process of othering through geographic space. Moreover, Bill embodies both privilege and addiction which allows him to maneuver through geographic spaces of othered addicts, making his narrative questionable and contradictory.

The Penguin Books 1977 edition of *Junky* contains an introduction by Allen Ginsberg which contextualizes the complicated history of the text's publication which correlates to Burroughs's own life experiences. Ginsberg describes 1950s United States as being "in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown" (vii). Ginsberg also discusses the anxiety publishers had when requested to publish *Junky*, which led to Ginsberg convincing Burroughs to write the prologue—a (supposedly) expository section meant to enlighten readers and attempt to explain how an ivy-league educated (though Bill does not identify a university by name; he references his college as one of the "Big Three universities") (xiii) white man became a heroin addict. Additionally, the prologue is meant to, as Ginsberg phrases it, "soften the blow" before readers embark on Bill's addict narrative (vi). Bill claims addicts become addicted because they "do not have strong motivation in any other direction. Junk wins by default" (xv), which essentially does not explain much about addiction, but offers insight into Bill's failed attempts to stay off of drugs despite legal, and potentially fatal, consequences.

Similar to Burroughs's real-life experiences with addiction and travels across geographic, class, and cultural lines, the character Bill also seeks the culture of drug use, heroin pushers, and seedy dive bars across socioeconomic borders. Eve Kowalska discusses the connections between author and narrator, experience and representation in her article, "The First Person Book of Terminal Addiction: William Burroughs's *Junky*." Kowalska states:

In *Junky* a great deal of attention is paid to space, place, setting and structure, both literal and figurative. Burroughs sets this figurative journey within the context of the classed

and coded cityscape, and uses architectural as well as linguistic markers to illustrate the descent into the underworld of addicted New York, as well as the literary subculture of heroin writing. (43)

Kowalska further addresses the prologue to *Junky* in which the narrator Bill states how his parents sought a space in middle-class, middle-America when he was a child—which is the polarity of the urban spaces Bill would seek in adulthood (44). The prologue also establishes Bill's privilege in the first sentences: "I was born in 1914 in a solid, three-story, brick house in a large Midwest city. My parents were comfortable" (xi). Bill later narrates descriptions of the city landscape immediately in *Junky* which function as clear indicators and code signifying urban space: "I paid fifteen dollars a week for a dirty apartment that opened onto a companionway and never got any sunlight. . . . The place was full of roaches and occasionally I killed a bedbug" (2). Bill's description of his filthy living space distinguishes his otherness as a heroin addict while simultaneously establishing the space as an area of which he is *choosing* to inhabit; Bill is not born into squalor and drug addiction, he willfully inserts himself there.

Bill never explicitly discusses his race or ethnicity throughout the novel, but his identification of addicts of color strongly imply the narrator's own white male status which places Bill in a contradictory position as both "other" and "superior." Werner Sollors's "Beyond Ethnicity" examines the term ethnicity and its vacillating interpretations over the centuries. Sollors discusses authors and scholars who self-identify as "ethnic" and "give us their own ethnic insiders' lowdown as 'hip' people of the spirit" (31). Sollors furthers his argument by claiming "in America all writers can view themselves romantically as members of some out-group so that combining the strategy of outsiderism and self-exoticization can be quite contagious. In America, casting oneself as an outsider may in fact be considered a dominant cultural trait" (31). Sollors's

argument connects to the duplicitous nature of *Junky* and reveals how Burroughs's own self-identification as privileged, white male "outsider" manifests throughout Bill's narrative. While describing an addict associate named Bill Gains who hails from a "good family," Bill states "The American uppermiddle-class citizen is a composite of negatives. He is largely delineated by what he is not" (41). With blatant racial identifiers such as "the Negro" or "Joe the Mex" which Bill uses to describe characters of color, he implicitly reinforces his whiteness by "delineating what he is not"—which is a person of color.

Bill is a transgressive character who never negotiates an identity outside of the title *Junky* and embraces the criminal elements of the world of addiction. Armed with a laissez-faire attitude about his arrests and subsequent incarcerations, Bill remains in a liminal space throughout the entirety of the novel, never finding redemption (nor caring to) and never re-establishing himself as a productive member of society. Moreover, Bill's nonchalance toward his legal ramifications is a result of his racial and economic privilege because he is able to retain lawyers and move out of state, and eventually out of the country, while financially supporting his drug habit and purchasing large quantities of drugs for the purpose of sales. Molly Hoey addresses the liminality and criminality of Bill in her article, "Liminal Criminal: Abject, Absence and Environment in *Junky* and *The Outsider*":

Initially [liminality] marks the way in which the protagonists, as criminals, are suspended from normal society and rendered as abject. . . . 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. (4)

While Bill is an addict criminal and the reader is also left to wander in a liminal space at the end of the novel, it is not only the criminal element of Bill's narrative that makes his character liminal for both the text and reader. Bill also creates a dichotomy between himself and the geographic addict spaces in which he occupies, which is apparent in his use of language, ambivalent sexuality, and descriptions of the landscape as he ventures further south, eventually wandering into the jungles of Colombia.

Bill's language describing himself and essentially anyone else who crosses his path lacks a sense of humanity. While this void of human decency and empathy becomes quite normalized for drug addicts, Bill introduces other characters by inserting racial, sexual, and often derogatory terms before identifying these individuals by name—if he addresses them by name at all—which is also implicit in the title, *Junky*. While still living in New York, Bill assesses his drug addict counterparts and claims “They were of various nationalities and physical types, but they all looked alike somehow. They all looked like junk. There was Irish, George the Greek, Pantopon Rose, Louie the Bellhop, Eric the Fag, the Beagle, the Sailor, and Joe the Mex” (30). Dr. Lauren M. Boyels, et al. discuss the negative and problematic results of using slang and idioms when addressing people with mental and substance-abuse disorders in their article, “Confronting Inadvertent Stigma and Pejorative Language in Addiction Scholarship: A Recognition and Response.” Boyels proposes a “people-first language” model when addressing individuals with addictions. Boyels claims “a variety of common terms such as ‘abuser,’ ‘junkie,’ and ‘habit’ perpetuate stigmatizing notions that addiction is a failure of morals, personality, or willpower” (4). Bill's use of language not only dehumanizes other addicts in *Junky* but his racial and sexual epithets endorses the stigmatization and dehumanization of addicts, which further adds to the problematic addict stereotypes Burroughs hoped to eradicate.

Bill projects his own dehumanized self-loathing onto everyone he meets by stripping them of an identity outside of what is racially and aesthetically apparent, or their function within the narrative and the world of drug addiction. Although Bill is in a facility where patients share a common thread of addiction, his racial overtones are indicative of what separates him from other addicts, thus reinforcing his own privilege. When Bill decides to enter the Lexington treatment program, he encounters several people he would never address by name which creates a racial binary between himself and the other addicts. After medication is administered to the addicts within the facility, Bill describes everyone as becoming more conversational after they experience the relief of junk withdrawal. He begins a conversation with a “thuggish-looking young Italian” and later a “Negro from Ohio” (62). The Italian patient inquired if Bill had much of a criminal record, to which Bill replied “no” (62). The young, “thuggish” Italian declared that Bill is a prime candidate for the “Do-Right” wing of the Lexington facility (a space designated for patients who are considered “good prospects for a permanent cure” with more spacious rooms and longer-lasting detox medication) (62), which suggests Bill’s whiteness is not only being exercised for his own advantage, but he is perceived as privileged by other addicts of color.

Bill’s sexuality is unclear through the first half of the novel. Unlike his apathy toward being a drug addict and engaging in criminal activity, his perception of who he identifies as “queers” and “fags” is disturbing and negatively expressed during his time in New Orleans:

In the French Quarter there are several queer bars so full every night the fags spill out on to the sidewalk. A room full of fags gives me the horrors. 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 tenant moved out. Fags are ventriloquists' dummies who have moved in and taken over the ventriloquist. (72)

Bill not only dehumanizes patrons of a queer bar but reduces them to ventriloquist dummies; they are animated figures yet lack the dimension of an actual human being. In the quote, Bill others these figures yet makes another contradictory and perplexing narrative move when he meets a young man who “didn’t come on faggish” which subsequently led Bill to accept the man’s proposal: “Do you want to go to bed with me?” (72). Bill’s encounter with the young man does not go as planned and he is left robbed of ten dollars.

Bill embraces and performs heteronormative behavior throughout the novel despite his own queerness. Bill’s simultaneous contempt of and patronage in a queer bar further illustrate the character’s contradictory attitude about his sexual orientation: he is both homophobic but indulges in queer desire albeit with a man he perceives not as “faggish” as the other patrons of the bar. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Epistemology of the Closet” examines the dynamic concepts of “the closet” and “coming out” and claims “for many gay people [the closet] is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people . . . however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68). Bill indulges in the advances made by another seemingly closeted man—or at least the man who has the social appearance of being more straight than queer—which suggests Bill extends his privilege to seek sexual interests with men who mirror his own closeted identity while drinking and using drugs.

Bill’s mere presence within a queer bar and his “common law” marriage (90) to his “wife” (a woman rarely worthy of being identified by name) also create an air of superiority when referencing a community whose sexuality is indicative of Bill’s own sexual otherness. The

article, “How Queer is *Queer*? Burroughs’ Novella Through Rose-Tinted Glasses” by Guillermo Badens addresses the issues of recurring themes in Burroughs’ novel *Queer* (1985). According to Badens, “William Burroughs used literature to expunge his guilt in the tumultuous fifties. Some thirty years later, the publication of *Queer* somehow foreshadows the birth of Queer Theory” (103). Badens also discusses the catalyst for the Kinsey Report,<sup>10</sup> specifically how the report redefines the term “homosexual” and defined LGBT+ identities as pathological, setting the mores of normality in mainstream America” (99). The first published Kinsey Report, based on empirical research (including incarcerated populations), created a title for LGBTQ+ communities of its time and identified how they are on the outskirts of society during the time Burroughs wrote *Junky* and *Queer*. Badens claims Burroughs was hesitant to write about being openly queer (although other controversial narrative elements like robbing people who died of an overdose in *Junky* and indications of pedophilia and rape would appear later in *Naked Lunch*), which could be explanatory for Bill’s reticence about being queer versus his candor about being an addict, and catalyzed Burroughs decision to not submit *Queer* for publication until thirty years after it was written.

Similar to Bill’s descriptions of addicts throughout *Junky*, his assessments of the geographical spaces are also inherently pessimistic and reflect Bill’s continuous use of language to degrade both people and their land alike. Bill finds himself in a desert town called the Valley along the Rio Grande in the United States after his stint in a treatment facility. The Rio Grande separates the United States from Mexico and is fitting within this particular landscape that Bill tends to a ranch and is (seemingly) attempting a drug-free life (though indulges heavily in drinking alcohol) while out of jail on bond awaiting trial for drug charges. This border area is a

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<sup>10</sup> See “Diversity of sexual orientation” at [kinseyinstitute.org](http://kinseyinstitute.org) for a summary of findings by Alfred Kinsey in 1948 and 1953 United States.

region that includes the southernmost part of Texas and northern Tamaulipas, Mexico and symbolizes the intangible border between Bill remaining clean before he crosses the tangible borders into Mexico, and back into the streets in search for drugs. Bill describes the landscape with “a premonition of doom” hovering over the land, and claims “You have to make it now before something happens . . . before the flood, the hurricane . . . before the Border Patrol shuts off your wetbacks” (106). Bill is referencing making a living in the desert that hinges the U.S. and Mexico and exploits Mexican farmworkers to help tend the land. The impending doom Bill describes is also indicative of his upcoming court hearing back in New Orleans, for which he has maxed out his continuances and left with two options: attend trial and face possible jail time or travel south across the border and further away from facing his crimes. Bill’s description of the region’s complexity as a temporary safe haven also prone to natural disaster, and referring to part of the population as “wetbacks,” demonstrates he is still capable of exercising his privilege and othering people of color, despite being a drug-addicted criminal contemplating his next move.

Bill chooses to cross the border into Mexico City where he would exploit the land for its cheap cost of living and junk, and discovers a skewed sense of junky sanctuary—a trend that would later gain momentum for other addicts. Describing Mexico as a refuge for current and next-generation drug addicts, and a place for Bill to indulge in selfish, darker whims, creates a distorted, yet strong echo of colonization as white addicts retreat south to avoid punitive consequences for drug use. Bill’s descent south also reflects his inner, darker transgression into addiction that would lead to a bar altercation resulting in his gun being taken by police, tormenting and beating a cat, and causing belligerent scenes in drug and alcohol induced frenzies throughout the city.

Bill's experience in Mexico quickly becomes a junky free-for-all as he uses whomever and whatever he can to protect and serve his self-interests. Jeffrey T. Nealon's article, "'Junk' and the Other: Burroughs and Levinas on Drugs" describes Bill's void of human decency: "Burroughs's junkie is inexorably and completely for-himself; even the death of the other would not disrupt the interiority of the same. In fact, the death of the other would have meaning only insofar as it could feed the privilege of sameness — as long as the other had some cash in his or her pockets to feed the junkie's habit" (par 12). Bill exerts the unrelenting selfishness of the addict experience not only onto other addicts, but to the geographical spaces in which he inhabits; the further Bill ventures from the United States the more erratic his behavior becomes, which further complicates the novel *Junky* as American counterculture because its narrator extends junky culture outside the borders of the U.S. Bill's former associates from the U.S. also find themselves in Mexico City, buying cheap drugs, and making heroin deals with corrupt politicians. Bill also reveals how a younger generation of addicts also made their way to Mexico to find sanctuary after complaining about the amounts of jail time for drug-related charges in the U.S.: "six months for needle-marks . . . in California"; "Eight years for a dropper in Washington"; "Two to ten for selling in New York" (143).

Bill's privilege allows him to travel further south, across another international border and into Colombia in search of the ultimate kick, reshaping his purpose and function as a person slumming in poor communities to an addict colonizer of sorts. Serge Gruzinski's "The Shock of Conquest" chronicles the mestizo phenomenon and the ramifications of Western expansion on the Americas, including the process of decontextualizing indigenous ceremonies, beliefs, and idols: "Objects that transited from one world to another wound up amputated from the collective memory they incarnated; by circulating between different groups, they forfeited the tradition and

sometimes the power they held. The same was true of all kinds of beliefs and practices and how indigenous idols and practices were destroyed” (45-46). Bill makes a choice to embark on a quest for a substance called yage “used by Indians in the headwaters of the Amazon” and is “supposed to increase telepathic sensitivity” (151). Prior to Bill’s declaration to search for yage in the jungles of South America, he begins using peyote in lieu of junk, a substance used by Indians for a multitude of healing and ceremonial traditions, including rites of passage.<sup>11</sup> Luis Eduardo Luna’s article, “Ayahuasca: Shamanism Shared Across Cultures” of the *Cultural Survival Quarterly* magazine states ayahuasca (a.k.a. yage) is “a sacred brew that has a long history of ritual use among the indigenous groups of the Upper Amazon.” Additionally, Luna states ayahuasca is used by shamans for ceremonial and healing practices. Although Bill asserts he has found a renewed purpose to seek new drugs he believes will expand his mind versus the physical relief and dependence he experienced with junk, his quest is similar to those of early colonizers; he seeks to “decontextualize” sacred indigenous substances (specifically yage) for a renewed sense of addict gratification while stripping these sacred substances from their ceremonial and healing contexts within indigenous communities.

Like Hoey describes, Bill finds no resolution or earnestness to stop using drugs which renders both him, and the conclusion of the text, liminal. The liminality of the narrative goes further because scoring yage entails travelling further south into Colombia. Bill expresses the fundamental purpose for seeking yage: “I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk” (152). Bill’s junk addiction begins in the United States: an addiction he continuously describes as the breaking down and rebuilding of the physical body’s cells because they need junk to properly function. Bill’s new border crossing is

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the history and current uses of peyote by Indian populations across the United States and Mexico see Lizzy Parker’s article, “Peyote in Native American Traditions” on the Colorado College webpage.

using drugs for the mind, not the body: “Kick is a momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix” (152). Bill’s descriptions of the “frightened flesh” implies he is taking control back over his body, however such “agency” will only be achieved through further exploitation of people of color and taking advantage of their sacred customs for Bill to gain this sense of newfound control over his body. The conclusion of the text suggests that for addicts like Bill, agency is a futile concept and, although Bill claims yage will set his mind free, the fact is his purpose remains unchanged: the search for more and better drugs.

*Junky* and Burroughs continue to be the topics of discussion both in and out of academia. Bill is an addict character who extends and exercises his suburban white privilege throughout addict spaces and “others the other.” While Bill tells his story about being an addict and losing agency resulting from continued heroin use, it is problematic and contradictory because there is no closure and Bill wanders further south in search of newer drugs. Bill does not show interest in being rehabilitated and restored to society and the ending offers no closure. Later addict characters would also show little to no interest in jettisoning drug use and are tethered to a life of criminal behavior, but the latter characters have also become more dimensional and complex—albeit still predominantly white males—such as Jesse of *Breaking Bad* and Frank Gallagher (William H. Macy) of Showtime’s *Shameless* (2011). Drug policies, including the decriminalization of minor drug offenses in the United States, and the introduction of newer, powerful, synthetic opiates like Oxycontin in the 1990s have reshaped perceptions and attitudes toward drug addiction since the Beat Generation and affect how addicts are represented in literature, but *Junky* remains a dynamic text that gives a queer addict a voice while reinforcing

white male privilege. While later, fictional addict narratives would include addicts of color alongside white addicts, their representations still reinforce race and class stereotypes while simultaneously highlighting the complex, and often sympathetic, representations of white suburban addicts.

## Chapter Two: *Breaking Bad*

“No! We’re not gonna cook here! Okay . . . this is my house! I don’t shit where I eat!” -Jesse, *Breaking Bad*

The character type of the addict is common and perpetually evolving in United States literature. Addict narratives appear in both literary print texts and on-screen with the latter having found renewed focus in a range of American television series genres at the turn of the twentieth century; Fox’s debut of *House, M.D.* (2004) punctuated one of the groundbreaking moments for the addict narrative in modern television, bringing a new dimension and complexity to the drama series by situating drug addiction as the central conflict in a show genre that is not a police procedural or other series interested in “law and order” themes. At the same time “true” addict stories<sup>12</sup> were documented and premiered on A&E’s reality show/docuseries *Intervention* (2005), which chronicles two addicts per episode and the desperate attempt of the addicts’ families to persuade the drug users to accept treatment. Drug-addicted characters on cable television continued to gain momentum in 2008 with AMC’s *Breaking Bad* and VH1’s *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, and again in 2009 with Showtime’s *Nurse Jackie*. With increase in addict representation on television, drug-addicted characters have become more three-dimensional, complex, fully-developed figures since addiction has become more associated with (and accepted as) a disease opposed to criminality and moral deficiencies (see Introduction). However, stereotypes along lines of race, class, and gender are still present in the addict characters seen on television, particularly in the meth-fueled narrative arc of *Breaking Bad* where white and Latinx addict characters continue to reinforce such stereotypes.

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<sup>12</sup> *Intervention* manipulates the addict into believing they are on a documentary about drug addiction while friends and family of the addict secretly plan and execute an intervention. See “Everybody Hurts: Addiction, Drama, and the Family in the Reality Television Show *Intervention*” by Jason R. Kosovski and Douglas C. Smith for further analysis, specifically the questionable and unethical motivations of the show

Although modern television has incorporated the addict narrative into its mainstream primetime slots, it is noteworthy that many of the drug addicts represented in this format are suburban white addicts, while some shows failed at featuring addicts of color. ABC's *Recovery Road* (2015) starred Jessica Sula—a British actress with Afro-Hispanic and Chinese ancestry—as a teenager, Maddie, who comes to terms with her addiction and reputation as a party girl and enters treatment; *Recovery Road* lasted only one season. Similarly, A&E's *The Cleaner* (2008) starred Benjamin Bratt, a well-known Hollywood actor whose mother is an indigenous Quechua Peruvian from Lima, lasted two seasons. *The Cleaner* highlights Bratt's role as William Banks, a recovering heroin addict who dedicates his life to seeking out actively using drug addicts and, if necessary, physically forces the addict to jettison drug use. The characters played by Sula and Bratt are visibly addicts of color who are neither victimized nor criminalized, and both accepted treatment which is implicit that there is not a need for rescue. *Breaking Bad* represents both white addicts and addicts of color which elicits a range of scholarship discussing how race and socioeconomic stereotypes are exemplified throughout the series.

*Breaking Bad* creates a nuanced dynamic in the drug war narrative by inserting white suburban bodies into the pinnacle of the meth trade. In her article “Narcocorridos and Newbie Drug Dealers: the Changing Image of the Mexican Narco on US Television” Deborah L. Jaramillo discusses the clash of suburbanite figures assuming the position of the *narco* (drug dealer), roles typically reserved for Latinx figures, and how *Breaking Bad*'s Walt eventually “steps on toes” as he attempts to gain control of the New Mexico meth market already controlled by the Mexican cartel. Set in New Mexico (mainly the city of Albuquerque)—a state bordering the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Sonora—*Breaking Bad* portrays the borderlands along the southwest region of the United States as sites for not only cultural exchange but the movement of

drugs into the United States. The borderlands backdrop for “narco dramas” and reality television programming runs the risk of blending of fictional narratives with racial stereotypes that can parade as “real-life” documentary fact, especially when considering the wide range of show types that center on this setting including Netflix’s drama series *Narcos: Mexico* (2018) and National Geographic’s docuseries *Border Wars* (2010).

In a similar vein, Latin Studies scholar Jason Ruiz argues shows featuring the “suburban crime drama” have also become a popular genre in cable television. Ruiz’s essay “Dark Matters: Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad*, Suburban Crime Dramas, and Latinidad in the Golden Age of Cable Television” studies Latinx and white characters in *Breaking Bad* and argues they are “threats to the white body politic of the United States” (2). Additionally, Ruiz examines two characters, Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) and Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz). Ruiz situates these Latinx characters in a broader argument claiming “white encounters with Latinos drive much of the action” and despite the critical acclaim *Breaking Bad* received, it “seriously lacked originality in its treatment of Latina/o characters and themes; instead it tends to replay old tropes and stereotypes, such as Latinos’ supposedly inherent criminality, their eccentric (sometimes excessive) performances of masculinity, their nearly abject lust for revenge, and their prowess as killers” (4). Overall, Ruiz argues more Latin studies scholars should be examining *Breaking Bad* and how its Latinx figures function as the primary threat to white suburban America.

Conversely, some scholars claim a range of diversity in Latinx characters representations exist in *Breaking Bad*. In the essay “Not Your Average Mexican: *Breaking Bad* and the Destruction of Latino Stereotypes,” Andrew Howe argues that Latinx representations in *Breaking Bad* break the established, stereotypical Latinx in films and television shows about

drug use. Figure such as Tony Montana (Al Pacino) of Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1983), Cheech & Chong (Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong), and Gold Hat (Alfonso Bedoya) in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) by John Huston function as representations of Latinx machismo or the comical drunk and/or stoned comic-relief characters. Howe's argument relies primarily on the representation of Steve Gomez (Steven Michael Quezada), a Latinx character who is not typecast as an addict, gang member, or *narco*, but a DEA agent. Howe's argument centers on a Latinx character who does indeed break with stereotypical Latinx representation; however, I still see aspects of Steve's portrayal as problematic within the series. While Steve is a Latinx character represented as a member of a government agency, the space he occupies is still exclusively by his white partner Hank's (Dean Norris) side. Additionally, Steve is often portrayed as Hank's subordinate as he is the second choice after Hank rejects a major DEA promotion, and more importantly, details of Steve's personal life are unknown except he is Hank's partner and friend. Hank's identity eclipses Steve's and only shown in domestic spaces when inside the White and Schrader suburban homes, making Steve a character without an urban or suburban origin and therefore a character whose function is to aid his white suburban counterpart.

The mainstream popularity of *Breaking Bad* has fueled a range of scholarly studies that focus on a range of themes including masculinity,<sup>13</sup> disability,<sup>14</sup> and the devolution of Walter White into Heisenberg.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have been less attentive to the key roles played by Jesse Pinkman and other drug-addicted characters, including at the intersections of race, class, and

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<sup>13</sup> See Brian Faucette's, "Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*" (2014).

<sup>14</sup> See Jami L. Anderson's, "A Life Not Worth Living" (2016).

<sup>15</sup> See Patrick Osborne's, "Becoming the One Who Knocks: Innovations as a Response to Social Strains in AMC's *Breaking Bad*" (2014).

gender between these drug addicts. Moreover, the representations of literary addict characters are directly correlated to, and often defined by the spaces in which they occupy, which directly influence the addicts' physical appearances, motivations, and their (sometimes fatal) ends. My analysis addresses these gaps within the existing scholarship while revealing the show's stereotypes surrounding addiction with special attention to the representation of white and Latinx addicts among and between socioeconomic lines. In order to situate my close reading analysis of addicts in *Breaking Bad*, I first will gloss the ideas of racial coding in media coverage of addicts, the tenets of humanistic geography, and historical contexts for the changing landscapes of addicts in reality and how this informs their fictional representation.

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse webpage, the term “drug addiction” is defined as “a chronic disease characterized by drug seeking and use that is compulsive, or difficult to control, despite harmful consequences” (2018). For the purposes of analysis here, I focus exclusively and explicitly on the drug-addicted characters<sup>16</sup> in *Breaking Bad*. Although many characters in *Breaking Bad* are arguably addicts—for example, Walt can be classified as addicted to gaining and exercising power—the manufacturing, distribution, and of course, addiction to illicit drugs, primarily crystal-methamphetamine, makes the series possible.

Racial binaries involving white and non-white addicts are a recurring theme in United States culture and notably manifested and highlighted in news media outlets. In their article “The War on Drugs That Wasn’t: Wasted Whiteness, ‘Dirty Doctors’, and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse,” Julie Netherland and Helena B. Hansen discuss news media narratives at the turn of the twenty-first century warning the public about the new epidemic in the

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<sup>16</sup> The term “drug addict” in this context means illicit drugs, excluding legal and/or prescription substances such as alcohol or synthetic pill-form narcotics.

United States: opioid abuse.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Netherland and Hansen utilize empirical evidence and research from various news mediums to demonstrate how news reports began coding specific races in correspondence with drug users. The purpose of this coding in news media, according to Netherland and Hansen, is to avoid identifications of race to shirk flagrant racism within the narrative. Furthermore, the coding became associated with geography in lieu of race resulting in the code for white addicts being identified as “suburban” while code for Latinx and/or Black addicts as “urban” (13). Netherland and Hansen also coined the phrase “wasted whiteness” to underscore media discourses about the urgency of suburban addicts’ need to be rescued and restored to their so-called rightful place in society, lest their “whiteness” is consequently wasted. Netherland and Hansen underpin their argument by concluding that news media narratives about drug addicts create a cautionary tale of a drug epidemic that must be contained for suburban addicts while simply “reporting” news stories about urban addicts. The identification of racial geographic coding in news media as it pertains to real-life addicts can also be identified in fictional addict narratives in *Breaking Bad*.

Representations of drug addicted characters in popular culture have also evolved over the years and directly affect the ways in which addict characters are represented in a drama series such as *Breaking Bad*; the representations of drug addicts in popular culture are reliant on the social, cultural, and political perspectives on drugs and drug users of its time. In his text *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972 –79* (2015), Stuart Hall asserts all popular culture is worthy of analysis and the production of pop-culture artifacts, the way they are presented, and our reaction to such artifacts mirror our sociopolitical beliefs, or “shared

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), opioid use (both prescription and illicit forms) in the United States resulted in over 399,000 deaths from overdose between 1999 – 2017.

conceptual maps” (SCM) (43). The SCM directly influence viewers’ interpretations of drug addict representations, and eventually affect future representations.

Hall’s text establishes a methodology for interpreting and analyzing cultural artifacts and it is this process of representation, specifically the “encoding and decoding” (17) model I utilize as the lens for interpreting addict narratives in *Breaking Bad*. Additionally, humanistic geography theory asserts that close examination and interpretation of a person’s relationship with their surrounding physical space creates meaning and profound understanding of human existence. Combining cultural studies and humanistic geography theoretical approaches not only creates an understanding of the dichotomy between suburban and urban spaces addicts occupy throughout the entirety of *Braking Bad* but allows for a deeper understanding of the consequences of crossing boundaries of class, race, and culture.

The concepts of space and place are significant throughout *Breaking Bad*, specifically how each character occupies and interacts with each space and the exchange of meaning between the person and the space. Humanistic geography is a theory associated with the humanities and social sciences, and not confined to the physical sciences as the title may imply. The theory developed in the late 1970s and attempts to draw conclusions about human behavior by studying the relationship between human beings and their physical surroundings (Yuan 8). Earlier humanist geography scholars, such as Yi-fu Tuan and Edward Relph, claim it is the subjective human experience that creates meaning of a particular space. Relph’s text *Place and Placelessness* (1976) discusses the concept of home: “home is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling place of being. . . . Home is . . . an irreplaceable center [*sic*] of significance” (39). When the humanistic geography theory is applied to the addict experience, it can be concluded that the addicts’ childhood home is stamped onto

the psyche and, whatever the circumstances of their upbringing, the same notion of home is projected onto the physical spaces the addict occupies into adulthood. Therefore, it is often typecast for on-screen, white suburban addicts to face conflict and chaos once they pursue their addiction and attempt to settle in urban settings among people of color, resulting in the original concept of home to never be fully restored. Conversely, urban addicts of color and more abject, aesthetically grotesque white addicts are often represented either without a physical space to call home or a home of squalor, which suggests there is no other space for either addict type except the urban settings of drugs, crime, impending doom, and often times throughout *Breaking Bad*, death.

Racial stereotypes are not only present between white and Latinx addicts but also between the characters supplying the drugs in *Breaking Bad*. In his essay “Breaking Neoliberal? Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Policies in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*” David P. Pierson claims “neoliberalism is one of the central discourses in *Breaking Bad*” (29).<sup>18</sup> Pierson’s arguments primarily address Walt and Gus’s individual meth distribution networks they created and further asserts:

In Albuquerque, [the primary setting of *Breaking Bad*] the criminal drug market is dominated by undereducated, poor Latino Americans and white males who are lured by the quick cash and flashy lifestyle over low-wage employment. The white males usually serve a supporting role to the drug operations and/or act as consumers. Both of these groups are socially marginalized by a mainstream neoliberal global economy that only offers them low-wage jobs with little opportunities for social advancement. (25)

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<sup>18</sup> Pierson uses the “Introduction” by Robert McChesney of the text edited by Noam Chomsky and McChesney, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999) to inform his definitions and applications of the term “neoliberalism.” Neoliberalism is generally characterized as, “free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative” (McChesney 7).

In an economic setting that marginalizes people of color and white people who do not inhabit wealth, both Walt and Gus are essentially free-market agents with a common enemy: the Mexican cartel across the U.S. border. The cartel is, as Pierson argues, also an entrepreneur—but a foreign threat that Walt and Gus must fight to reclaim their “rightful” market in the United States.

Paul Elliott Johnston’s article “Walter White(ness) Lashes Out: *Breaking Bad* and Male Victimhood” also references neoliberalism and its inherently racial politics in *Breaking Bad*. Johnston reads *Breaking Bad* as an allegory to the threat of white masculinity and relates the threat to the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama. The threat to white masculinity also applies to Jesse, an addict character with hypermasculine characteristics. Johnston claims, “Cultural texts—and their reception—often figure a certain kind of wounded masculinity as a central agent to offer a narrative of masculinity in crisis” (10). Johnston’s article also draws on Sally Robinson’s feminist text *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (2000) and states Robinson “reads popular literature and cinema in the second half of the 20th century to detail how these objects [critical texts] depict men as frustrated geniuses and pained authors wracked by existential crises, threatened by the petty demands of raced and gendered Others” (109, 10). As an entrepreneur crystal meth cook with his signature “chili-p” (Jesse adds a dash of chili powder to his own meth cook before Walter’s recipe), Jesse often asserts his hypermasculinity to bodies of color throughout the series; the episode “Salud” (4.10) shows a reformed, sober Jesse: he accompanies Gus and Mike (Jonathon Banks) to Mexico and essentially puts the cartel meth-cooks “in line” as he raises his voice and barks orders. Jesse’s wardrobe also changes to more fitted attire and instead of using drugs, Jesse exercises power with a gun during the shootout with the Mexican cartel at the end of the episode.

Brian Faucette's "Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*" also discusses neoliberalism and its influence on these characters and claims "The gun in films and television often signifies masculinity and male potency. The gun can be read as both a fetish and an object" (76). While the gun is an object directly associated with the men and masculinity in *Breaking Bad*, for an addict like Jesse, I argue the phallic object also becomes the marijuana and crystal pipes, especially the hypodermic needles used for heroin, which complicates the representations of Jesse's masculinity.

In the episode "Phoenix" (2.12), Jane Margolis (Krysten Ritter) injects Jesse with a combination of heroin and meth, causing Jesse to miss an important phone call to conduct drug sales with Walt. After Jane learns Walt is withholding Jesse's money because of drug use, she calls Walt and blackmails him by threatening to "out" his criminal dealings. When Walt gives in to her demands, he delivers a bag of cash to Jesse and snidely remarks, "Nice job wearing the pants," which is a callback to the season one episode "The Cat's in the Bag . . ." (1.2) when Jesse utters the same phrase to Walt after Skyler (Anna Gunn) threatens Jesse on Walt's behalf. Jesse hangs his head in shame after the remark, indicating a rough blow to his ego. Jane quite literally penetrates Jesse with a needle which symbolizes the antithesis of the heteronormative and hypermasculine undercurrents of the show and exemplifies Jesse's degradation when the phallic object is something other than a gun.

*Breaking Bad* discriminates when portraying addicts along lines of race, including addicted mothers like Andrea Cantillo (Emily Rios) and Wendy (Julia Minesci). The mother-addict characters are also represented with racial binaries that confounds their common parental characteristics. I will begin with Jesse's relationship with Andrea, a Latina addict and single mother who meets Jesse in a 12-step meeting. Their relationship quickly progresses and soon

Jesse is shown in Andrea's bed. In the episode "Abiquiu" (3.11), the couple engage in pillow talk and Andrea casually asks if Jesse is "holding" (crystal meth). Jesse's comfortable countenance quickly takes a turn as he shows disgust at Andrea's request: "What kind of a mother are you? What kind of mother gets wasted with a little kid to take care of?" Jesse's knee-jerk reaction is to shame her as a mother for using drugs; it is also convenient his harsh indictments happens *after* his initial plan to turn Andrea—a Latina in a meeting attempting to stay off drugs—into one of his meth "clients" failed and instead engaged her in a sexual relationship.

The following episode, "Half Measures" (3.12) begins with a montage of Wendy's sexual exploits. Portrayed as the white addict prostitute residing at a motel the local addicts and law enforcement refer to as "The Crystal Palace," she is also revealed as a mother, but Jesse does not shame her for drug use or her type of "employment." Jesse's plot to seek revenge on the men responsible for murdering his friend, Christian Ortega, a.k.a. "Combo" (Rodney Rush) involves using Wendy to deliver food laced with poison to the men. Jesse essentially manipulates her maternal role when asking the name of her son then inquires, "wouldn't you do anything to protect him?" referring to the men using children as drug dealers and triggermen. Wendy lives in a hotel as a drug-addicted prostitute with no evidence of her son being present but is not shamed by Jesse, a man who also pays her in exchange for sex, because their interactions are business related as opposed to accepting money as a form of charity the way Andrea is represented.

An interesting connection between the mothers here and Pierson's discussions about neoliberalism is that Wendy, in her own right, is also an entrepreneur; she lives on her own, is self-employed, and does not need a man (or woman) to care for her, which demonstrates she is endowed with more neoliberal masculine qualities. Alternatively, Andrea lives with her son in her grandmother's home and is eventually financially supported by Jesse. The show implies that

she is a Latina who must rely on handouts from Jesse—a white entrepreneur—to survive and cross the socioeconomic border from urban to suburban. It is also a symbolic gesture that Andrea’s disturbing execution takes place in front of her suburban home in the episode “Granite State” (5.15) gunned down by Todd Alquist (Jesse Plemons), a criminal partner of his uncle Jack’s neo-Nazi crew. A Latina recovering addict residing in a suburban space and accepting Jesse’s money is gunned down by the extremity of white racism as a consequence to Andrea and a lesson for Jesse.

Jesse’s internal struggle with addiction and embracing urban culture can be interpreted and reflected by the various spaces he occupies throughout the series. While Jesse does cross geographic borders, he also crosses a cultural border vis-à-vis his clothing, use of language, and tattoos. Ensley F. Guffey’s essay “Buying the House: Place in *Breaking Bad*” draws on humanistic geography theory to highlight how *Breaking Bad* “uses experiences of place and space to create a more fully realized diegetic world” (155). Furthermore, Guffey claims the spaces within the series, primarily Walt and Jesse’s individual homes, the meth labs, and the desert (referred to in the series as a reservation) are personified and therefore also considered characters. The first of Jesse’s homes, 9809 Margot Street, is visible in the “Pilot” (1.1) episode and situated in a visibly suburban setting. Jesse inherited the home from his late aunt Jenny who passed from cancer. Jesse speaks of Jenny endearingly and Jenny’s presence is symbolic throughout the home, as Guffey describes: “The décor is dark, feminine, and floral; there are delicate knick-knack on the shelves and doilies on the furniture” (156). Jesse’s first home in the “Pilot” episode is a manifestation of Jesse’s suburban roots because he does not alter the appearance of it until his descent into addiction begins to spiral at a pace that leaves Jesse bewildered and isolated.

While Guffey's reading of Jesse primarily focuses on his mental state and how he projects his internal struggles onto his home, I assert that Jesse quite literally wears his suburban rejections "on his sleeve" with oversized clothing most commonly associated with hip-hop culture, and on his back with a tattoo of a *calavera* or sugar skull—an image often associated with the traditional Mexican holiday, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). As the series progresses, however, particularly after Jesse becomes directly employed by Mike and Gus and takes a break from using crystal meth in season four, Jesse's attire and living space also reveal significant changes: his clothes become more fitted and he cleans and paints over graffitied walls in his home. As Jesse takes a brief hiatus from using meth, he embraces the aesthetics associated with his white suburban roots within his space and on his person, signifying his street persona is reserved explicitly for drug use.

Jesse's childhood home is anchored in white suburbia, which is most accurately revealed in the fourth episode of season one "Cancer Man" (1.4). Viewers are catapulted into a new setting which exhibits Jesse's comfortable upbringing after he experiences meth-induced, paranoid delusions that lead him literally crawling into the backyard of the home, which is indicative of Jesse seeking shelter and refuge in the space which he "belongs." The Pinkman suburban home also functions as a safe place and a restorative touchstone when Jesse peruses his childhood room; photos of Jesse as a happy child and a trunk full of drawings reveal Jesse's nostalgia for a seemingly normal upbringing in suburban America, creating a more dynamic and perplexing narrative because there is no evidence of trauma or explanation of *why* Jesse chooses to reject his home.

Jesse maintains his moral compass (at least more so than other characters who engage in violence, drug-manufacturing, and murder) throughout the series, which can be directly

connected to his suburban upbringing, making him a sympathetic character despite his horrible choices. The season finale episode “Full Measure” (3.13) reveals Jesse as distraught and traumatized over killing Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), an incident that would later relentlessly haunt and torture him and fuel his spiral into drug use. Jesse’s remorse makes him more sympathetic because he was (arguably) acting in self-defense and the guilt is too much for him to handle.

As Netherland and Hansen have argued in their reading of news media narratives, oftentimes white addicts need to be rescued; Jesse is directly involved with several rescues: first as the rescuer and others as the one being rescued. One of the most disturbing episodes of *Breaking Bad* is “Peekaboo” (2.6) when Jesse attempts to get revenge and literal payback from a white addict couple that stole from one of his dealers. Jesse, armed with a gun, enters the couple’s filthy, condemned house only to find their young, severely neglected, dirty son alone in the home. “Peekaboo” ends with Jesse calling authorities and wrapping the child in a blanket, whom he gives a quick embrace as he tells the child to “have a good life” before running away from the sirens. While the young boy in “Peekaboo” is not a drug addict, he is being rescued from a home tainted by drug addiction.

Later in the season, the episode “ABQ” (2.13) shows Jesse being rescued by Walt in a manner that closely resembles Jesse rescuing the young boy. Jesse descends further into drug use (he began using heroin, too) after Jane’s death and Walt tracks him down at a notorious drug house and carries him out to safety. The third, and probably the most notable of the series, is the final episode “Felina” (5.16) when Walt liberates Jesse from being held prisoner by Todd and the gang of white supremacists. All three episodes have a single, common theme: white people rescuing other white people.

The death toll in *Breaking Bad* begins in the first episode and rapidly increases throughout each season, the second being the murder of the character Domingo (Max Arciniega), a.k.a. Krazy-8 committed by Walt. Krazy-8 is an addict of color who attempts to cook crystal meth and reside in a suburban space, as seen in the “Pilot” episode. He is bound to a post and held captive in Jesse’s basement because Walt’s attempts to murder him and his cousin, Emilio, in an act of self-defense failed. Walt desperately tries to find a reason not to carry out the execution and explicitly requests Krazy-8 to convince him to spare his life. Krazy-8 divulges his real name, the details about the fraught relationship between him and his father, and how he obtained a business degree. Through the exchange, Krazy-8, becomes a more well-rounded character and the audience is given a reason to empathize with him: he is a person with an education, has potential for a career, and has several relatable, idiosyncratic qualities including meticulously tearing the crust off a sandwich Walt gives him. The revelation of Krazy-8’s more humanistic and redeeming qualities convince Walt to reverse his course of action and let him live until he learns Krazy-8 concealed a shard from a broken plate intended to harm Walt. Krazy-8 attempted to cross geographical and cultural borders (most of the educated characters in the series are white), yet the scene deems his death as necessary to protect Walt since it is later revealed he is also an informant for the DEA.

Conversely, the “Phoenix” episode (2.12) ends with the death of the character Jane, a notably white, fully developed character. Jane’s death is one of the most disturbing deaths of the show because she represents the final, tragic end for white suburban addicts succumbing to their addiction. Left to die by Walt while he idly stands by and witnesses her choke on her own vomit induced by heroin injection, the tattoo-artist, girlfriend, and landlord to Jesse is represented as the ultimate and final consequence of addiction, and what Netherland and Hansen would define

as “wasted [suburban] whiteness.” Jane and Jesse’s relationship rapidly spirals out of control after Jesse tempts her to use crystal meth, and consequently throw away eighteen months of sobriety. The couple eventually begins injecting heroin and meth, resulting in Jesse’s living space, once again, to become filthy and reflective of both Jane and Jesse’s psychological states. Jane’s death is the only casualty in *Breaking Bad* showcasing the suffering of grief experienced by family members.

The deaths of Krazy-8 and Jane are similar because viewers are given backstories and insight into each characters’ lives: it is apparent Jane is responsible as she is designated a landlord by her father, Donald Margolis (John de Lancie)—a man who undeniably loves his daughter and committed to supporting her in maintaining her sobriety. Posthumously, Jane becomes more of a dynamic character as her father enters her home and peruses her closet for appropriate burial attire; Jane’s home space is quaint, well-kept, and adorned with her own artwork—characteristics reminiscent of suburban homes previously represented throughout the show. There is an inherent sadness about Jane’s death which is illustrated in her father’s subsequent grieving<sup>19</sup> and Jesse’s irrevocable sadness later in the series. While Jane and Krazy-8 are both addicts who die directly and indirectly by Walt because they pose a threat, it is implicit that Krazy-8’s death is necessary and unworthy of mourning. Moreover, it is later revealed that Krazy-8 was an informant for the DEA signifying a disgrace in urban addict culture. In summation, Krazy-8 is a Latino addict of color whose death is imperative and posthumously degraded while Jane’s death is so anguishing for other characters that it becomes the catalyst for a series of calamitous events.

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<sup>19</sup> The character Donald is an air-traffic controller in the series and is so distraught over Jane’s death while performing his job that he causes the notorious plane crash over the White neighborhood in the episode, “Seven-Thirty-Seven” (2.1).

*Breaking Bad* is a series that challenges audiences to become invested in morally corrupt characters and the vulgar realities of drug use and the drug trade. As representation of drug addicts are delineated by the perpetually shifting cultural and geographical landscapes of the series, the more stereotypes between white and Latinx figures are reinforced. Although the realities of addiction have made strides since the days of cautionary tales like Gasnier's *Reefer Madness*, the rhetoric of the addict story remains dependent on race and space, even if discretely hidden between geographic lines and extremely likable addict characters like Jesse. The show also ends with the two main white men essentially winning: Walt gets his revenge, a method to get his money to his family, and frees Jesse from captivity. Jesse also gets his revenge in Gilligans' *El Camino* (2019) which continues Jesse narrative all the way to Alaska, the last frontier and a new space for the white hypermasculine figure to occupy.

## Conclusion

The main addict characters in William S. Burroughs's *Junky* and AMC's *Breaking Bad* reinforce suburban white privilege manifesting in addict communities. Bill's narrative exposes the realities of addiction while crossing various socioeconomic and geographic borders, creating racial, gender, and class tensions as Bill encounters other addicts. The addict characters of *Breaking Bad*, particularly Jesse, include white addict characters in urban spaces, yet still reinforces the privilege of white suburban addicts by representing them as more complex, fully-developed figures. While both texts demonstrate addiction and crime are not exclusive to poor people of color, they also reinforce stereotypes surrounding race and class and addiction.

The narrator, Bill, of *Junky* is a character who candidly uses his privileged resources to navigate his drug use across multiple borders. Bill creates a narrative in which his surroundings exist to serve his self-interests and asserts himself in a position where he exploits people of color and indigenous customs while simultaneously degrading and othering the figures within these environments. While *Junky* is a text written by a Beat Generation writer during a tumultuous time in the United States when intoxicating substances were wavering in legality, its gritty elements are still present in recent addict narratives.

The drug-addicted characters of *Breaking Bad* are also coded by class, and the show is often punitive when portraying socioeconomic border crossings by addicts of color, and tragedy for white suburban addicts, such as Jane's death. The show is also a suburban crime drama which further demonstrates the tragic and dangerous consequences of white men attempting to cross moral borders and embrace roles typically associated with organized crime featuring men of color. Regardless of the motivating factors of suburban white figures participating in criminal behavior, the enemy of these criminals is often other criminals—specifically those of color.

Examination and discussion about the addict character type, and the complex ways in which they have evolved *and* remain the same, is important in popular-culture and cultural studies because these figures represent how issues about drug addiction are perceived within a specific time period. Texts like *Junky* were received with criticism and backlash (and took convincing to become published) while addict characters like Jesse from *Breaking Bad* have become fan favorites. Because white suburban addict characters are more three-dimensional than their urban counterparts, they are misrepresented as characters to sympathize with or view as tragic if they are not rescued and restored to their “rightful place,” or in some cases, die from their drug addiction.

I do not think it is a coincidence that around the 2000s decriminalization of addicts in the United States (especially after drugs were declared “public enemy number one” by former president Ronald Regan in the 1980s) there was an influx of addict narratives appearing on television that went beyond the scope of documentary-type shows or the celebrity-recovery narrative; fictional accounts of drug addiction, sometimes the title characters like *House, M.D.* and *Nurse Jackie*, emerged and became a success. Around the same time, in the 2000 California election, Proposition 36, the Substance Abuse and Crime Prevention Act, passed and meant treatment for misdemeanor drug offenders in lieu of jail time. The real-life history and perspectives of drugs and drug addicts is a complicated, malleable topic, influencing a range of scholarship and fictional characters, particularly when criminal charges are associated with being an addict, and especially after marijuana became legal in some form across thirty-three states in the U.S., according to the *National Conference of State Legislature* webpage. It is a surreal experience to view cautionary tales like Gasnier’s *Reefer Madness* when juxtaposed to the current state of affairs and perceptions about marijuana. While I believe it is an important and

critical step to include more addict narratives reflecting the vacillating nature of drug-use perceptions, many of these character types reinforce wider problems of race, class, and gender stereotypes.

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