Three Receivers

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Why would William Burroughs leave “three off-tuned radios blaring static” in his room in Tangier (Leary 1983:95)? Was he waiting for code, for voices, for an ethereal or chthonic broadcast? Cocteau’s Orpheus tuned his car radio to pick up the latest from the underground. Leonardo heard voices on high in church bells, Joan of Arc, angels. Kerouac took dictation of his dialog with the waves and water of Big Sur. Dali looked to seaside rocks of Cadaqués to interpolate signs from noise; Artaud, upon the land of the Tarahumara; and Ernst at the scratches, pits, and grain of floors and other surfaces. Did Burroughs hope to transcribe what the white noise said, to log its wisdom into what had captivated him for so long: the science—or the pseudoscience—of fact? In collaboration with Brion Gysin, Ian Sommerville, and others he had in fact carried out experiments using tape recorders, many of which incorporated radio sound and static. At times, time and its voices would leak through: one experiment announced the presidential foibles of Watergate a decade before they happened. We don’t have to take his word for it. Whereas we have to take the word of Artaud or Kerouac for what they beheld, Burroughs appealed to phonographic repetition first for simple consensus and ultimately for clinical validation.

There are then many ways of producing words and voices on tape that did not get there by the usual recording procedure, words and voices that are quite definitely and clearly recognizable by a consensus of listeners. I have gotten words and voices from barking dogs. No doubt one could do much better with dolphins. And words will emerge from recordings of dripping faucets. In fact, almost any sound that is not too uniform may produce words. (1985a:54)

Perhaps the sibilants and fricatives of radio static were too uniform to say too much to many others besides himself.

Dinbetween Stations

It was obvious Burroughs was a writer, for accompanying the radios was a desk cluttered with papers. Could the radios have been fulfilling a mundane requirement by supplying the room with a surrogate café raucousness? Walter Benjamin recommends that writers at certain phases within the production of a work seek out complex sounds:

accompaniment by an étude or a cacophony of voices can become as significant for work as the perceptible silence of the night. If the latter
To sharpen the inner ear, the former acts as touchstone for a diction ample enough to bury even the most wayward thought. (1979:65)

The dish and din of café clamor can likewise soothe the conflict within the very act of writing—the gregarious motive of communication versus the solitude of its execution (Burroughs was known to talk ears off)—by providing a chatty noise within which a collectively discursive interlocutor can be divined. Noise also models the supple field of exchange between inner speech/sounds and those of the world and, thus, can situate the writer in this tender fray. It is commonplace, for example, for even the most dedicated musical aesthete to listen at times more concertedly to the psyche than to the concert, oscillating between stage and seat, constantly interrupting or melding in a mix that is, ironically, the means through which an idea of unity is negotiated. In the café where the sound is not the object of thought, the mix is exteriorized and thus brings unity to an inaudible intellectual life by providing an atmospheric dispensary for tangents.

This phenomenal modulation would have become more complex for Burroughs if the radios wandered from static toward tuning. Depending upon the density of the dial, information would be taunted heterodynamically by static fusing and warbling along the trajectories of signals, then multiplied by the three radios, to equal an axial formation splayed across the room—a drifting din between and among many stations at once. Because all would be disruption it would provide a silence where there could be no disruption. Is this odd bucolia why artists and composers have historically tuned in between stations, or why inbetween stations has been a youthful entreaty into art? Pauline Oliveros recounted how, growing up in the 1930s,

> I used to listen to my grandfather’s crystal radio over earphones. I loved the crackling static. […] I used to spend a lot of time tuning my father’s radio, especially to the whistles and white noise between the stations. […] I loved all the negative operant phenomena of systems. (1973:246)

Stefan Themerson’s experience took place in the previous decade:

> When I was 14 (in 1924) I built myself a wireless-set [...]. [W]hat fascinated me more than the fact of hearing a girl’s singing voice coming to my earphones from such strange places as Hilversum, was the noise, to me the Noise of the Celestial Spheres, and the divine interference—whistling when tuning. It became an instrument for producing new, hitherto unheard sounds, which at the time no person would have thought had anything to do with “music.” (1970:n.p.)

Maurice Martenot, while a wireless operator at the end of World War I, heard the heterodynes he would later design into the Ondes Martenot of 1928; and in 1933, in the Italian Futurist manifesto La Radia, F.T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata proposed “[t]he utilization of interference between stations and of the birth and evanescence of the sounds” ([1933] 1992:268). Among the sounds John Cage wanted “to capture and control,” to train for the future of music as he saw it in 1937, was the “static between the stations” (1961:3). Whereas Cage used music to make noise significant (his first music radio foray being in 1942 with Credo in Us), a Newsweek music critic in 1954 used radio noise to make music insignificant: “Christian Wolff’s ‘Suite by Chance’ could have resulted from Dennis the Menace let loose with an amateur short-wave set” (Dumm 1954:76).
Second Receiver, Third Piece of Furniture

Another piece of furniture often found in many of Burroughs's rooms, from Texas to Tangier, was about the size of a small telephone booth. This orgone accumulator was built according to the instructions of Wilhelm Reich, whose biopsychiatric theory extended the electrical functioning of earlier organismic theories to include a class of bionic energy understood in primarily sexual terms: "There seems to exist one basic law that governs the total organism, in addition to governing its autonomic organs. [...] The orgasm formula [...] emerges as the life formula itself" ([1948] 1973:5). Orgasmic energy was at play between inorganic and organic states, sparking and tingling inside and outside the organism and, most importantly, it was distributed throughout the earth's atmosphere, an eroticized Bachelardian logosphere gone past the talking stage. The orgone box was designed to receive and concentrate this energy and to pass it on to the individual seated inside. The dissipation and accumulation of orgonotic energy between the individual and the atmosphere was thereby the fundamental, global exchange of life energies, a way of situating the seated.

Although Reich had invented the accumulator before 1945, by the time Burroughs began soaking up orgone energy it was set against the background of another radiation: from the bombs the United States exploded on the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and from the above-ground testing that followed during the postwar years. The atmosphere was now radiant with orgone energy and fallout, not to mention saturated with the transmissions of the consciousness industry in the form of radio and television. In 1950 Joan Burroughs had convinced her husband that atomic fallout was not merely degenerative physiologically but was also involved in psychic control. Five years later the effects of above-ground nuclear tests conducted by "these life-hating, character armadillos" (Burroughs's Reichian slang for severely repressed individuals) were very much on his mind: "Thirty more explosions and we've had it, and nobody shows any indication of curtailing their precious experiments." In 1957 Burroughs read the "most sinister news bulletin" that reported that the "only forms of life that mutate favorably under radiation are the smallest, namely the viruses. Flash. Centipedes a hundred feet long eaten by viruses big as bed bugs under a gray sky of fall-out," and he thought that a virus in Tangier that purportedly suppressed the sex drive might be one such mutation: "God knows how many atypical virus strains may follow in the wake of atomic experiments." In Interzone the imagery of atomic mutations combined with the radiation technology of the orgone accumulator to produce the variety of mutants in the famed "Spare Ass Annie" section: "Pregnant women were placed in the boxes and left on the peak for a period of three hours. Often the women died, but those who survived usually produced monsters" (1989:102–03). People play radio throughout the day as a background sound track to their anomie and to pathetically establish themselves among a serial community. The community is atomized, and radio static, the sound of a Geiger counter.

Soft Rock Crystal Set

But can Burroughs's three radios be reduced to generators of a productive noise, musicalized sound, instrumental registration, or set up as a private sensory clinic? Despite how "off-tuned" they were, they can never be less significant than a potentiated broadcast. In this way, they stood next to the radio stationed at the very beginning of the style made famous in Naked Lunch, a style first exercised in the Interzone piece known as "Word." In the beginning
was “Word” and the word was radio from its beginning, in the form of a descriptive pastiche of sounds that audibly carries words off the page at the moment one arrives on the page. In a similar action, the sounds were heard on a receiver that was ejaculating.

The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth in and out fore and aft like an innaresting sex arrangement. This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yipes and the slamming steel shutters of commerce, screams of pain and pathos and screams plain pathic, copulating cats and outraged squawk of the displaced Bull-head, prophetic mutterings of bnijo in nutmeg trance, snapping necks and screaming mandrakes, sigh of orgasm, heroin silent as the dawn in thirsty cells, Radio Cairo screaming like a berserk tobacco auction, and flutes of Ramadan fanning the sick junky like a gentle lush worker in the gray subway dawn, feeling with delicate fingers for the green folding crackle.

This is Revelation and Prophecy of what I can pick up without FM on my 1920 crystal set with antennae of jissom. (Burroughs 1989:135–36 and 1959:229)

For Burroughs there were two forms of technology enabling an ease of ejaculation. The first is the chemical by-product of junk: the hair-trigger masturbation while kicking a habit. The second is the orgone box: “The orgones produce a prickling sensation frequently associated with erotic stimulation and spontaneous orgasm. —Now a spontaneous, waking orgasm is a rare occurrence even in adolescence. Only one I ever experienced was in the orgone accumulator I made in Texas.” But the jissom antennae are part of a much more complex technology. Jissom is made of the same protoplasm which Count Alfred Korzybski, in his organismic theory of general semantics championed by Burroughs, characterized as “human being.” Protoplasm not only mobilizes all the organism’s psychophysiological functioning, it also connects it colloidally with inorganic matter. Its radiophonic significance comes into play first in the way that the surface is not merely on the surface, but enveloped evenly throughout, and second because “by necessity all surfaces are made up of electrical charges” (Korzybski [1933] 1958:113). The greater the surface, the better the reception. The more accelerated the transmission of stimuli throughout the organism via the protoplastic medium, the more pronounced the psychosomatic effect upon consciousness.

The first sound Burroughs heard on this technology—schlupp—arose from the love Burroughs had for Allen Ginsberg toward the end of 1953. According to Ginsberg, “Schlupp for him was originally a very tender emotional direction, a desire to merge with a love, and as such, pretty vulnerable, tenderhearted and open on Burroughs’s part” (in Miles 1990:155). Schlupp has a cartoonlike onomatopoetic relationship to sounds of saliva, sweat, semen, and other sexual fluids and to the sounds of eating and digestion—all bodily sounds which, with the exception of the presence of teeth, have no bones. It is an appropriate sound for the unhewn hungers of junk or sex, for it is the body’s interior making its needs conspicuously known within the world. In his writing, schlupping first appeared as raw lust, “an amoeboïd protoplastic projection, straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other’s body, to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals” (Burroughs 1985b:36). Homosexual desire here produces an image of the cohabitation of one body since, according to Burroughs, “It’s a crucial factor in homosexual relationships to be the other person” (in Bockris 1982:60).
But schlupp quickly became destructive and pathogenic, being the sound effect for a full-body disembowelment and for a slimy, junk-driven osmotic action that completely usurps the other person. That was not the only sound of junk. A junky’s hunger could betray itself through privatized ultrasound or radiophonic transmissions with a “black insect laughter that seemed to serve some obscure function of orientation like a bat’s squeak,” or that could force the junky to “listen [...] down into himself” to tune in to the “silent frequency of junk” (Burroughs 1959:51). With his beloved substance finally in hand, the junky’s “face dissolved. His mouth undulated forward on a long tube and sucked in the black fuzz, vibrating in supersonic peristalsis disappeared in a silent, pink explosion” (52). These are a mix of sound and signals, out of reach of the frequency range of normal communication, feeding on the visual static of black fuzz in order to become stationed.

Burroughs’s 1920 crystal set was tuned-in to the “Composite City,” an auditive mosaic, a combination of the cultural klatch of Tangier (an arguably neutral zone of complete international intrigue) and the scattered array of correspondence and fragments compressed into service as the manuscript for Naked Lunch. The Islamic din is heard in “flutes of Ramadan” while the “riot yipes and the slamming steel shutters of commerce” are those of a jihad, derived from a little Broadway musical “number called the Jihad Jitters”:

Start is we hear riot noises in the distance. Ever hear it? It’s terrific. [...] You wouldn’t believe such noises could result from humans, all sorts of strange yips. Then the sound of shop shutters slamming down. Then the vocal comes on.

Schlupp returns as jihad through a mapping of orientalist alterity onto the alter idem of Burroughs’s dyadic sexual identification: “if someone starts inundating an area with Identical Replicas, everyone knows what is going on. The other citizens are subject to declare a “Schluppit” (wholesale massacre of all identifiable replicas)” (1959:164). The uniform saturation of difference in radio’s Composite City is experienced as a complete environment of noise and exemplified by the white noise of radio static, i.e., all possible frequencies at once, the routes through the publicness of the market pathologized and channeled into a rampaging broadcast.

Burroughs experienced this concretely in the noise of the languages foreign to him in Tangier. One day two friends and he were in the city:

Walking ahead of us was a middle-aged Arab couple, obviously poor country people down from the mountains. And one turned to the other and said, “WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?” We all heard it. Perhaps the Arab words just happened to sound like that. Perhaps it was a case of consensual scanning. (1985a:54–55)

Another friend sought friendship in foreignness through tuning in to interpolation on the radio:

I had a friend who went “mad” in Tangier. He was scanning out personal messages from Arab broadcasts. This is the more subjective phenomenon of personal scanning patterns. I say “more” rather than pose the either/or subjective/objective alternative, since all phenomena are both subjective and objective. He was, after all, listening to radio broadcasts. (1985a:55)

In this way we can ask whether the static on the three radios was nothing
but a live feed of the city that housed his room and, in turn, whether the same could be said of all radio broadcasts. For Burroughs, the Composite City local broadcast hallucinated yage-like the entire world as a place “where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market” (1959:106).

Two-Way Radio

The Composite City was also the myriad of fragments from correspondence and other sources held together as material for the manuscript to *Naked Lunch*. Many of these letters were trans-Atlantic letters to Ginsberg in which he would write down his “routines,” the performative means through which Burroughs generated his ideas. Once, because Ginsberg hadn’t written back in a long time, Burroughs became very distressed. His love for Ginsberg could go without the body but he needed someone to listen who understood him completely, so he could reproduce this understanding in himself through autoingestion. This had long been the case and, as Ginsberg said,

Bill became more and more demanding that there be some kind of mental schlupp. It had gone beyond the point of being humorous and playful. It seemed that Bill was demanding it for real. Bill wanted a relationship where there were no holds barred; to achieve an ultimate telepathic union of souls. (in Miles 1993:66)

Burroughs pleaded with the absent Ginsberg:

I have to have receiver for routine. If there is no one there to receive it, routine turns back on me like homeless curse and tears me apart, grows more and more insane (literal growth like cancer) and impossible, and fragmentary like berserk pin-ball machine and I am screaming: “Stop it! Stop it!”

He also needed Ginsberg because there was a danger in becoming the type of solitary sender that was later described in *Naked Lunch*.

A telepathic sender has to send all the time. He can never receive, because if he receives that means someone else has feelings of his own could louse up his continuity. The sender has to send all the time, but he can’t ever recharge himself by contact. Sooner or later he’s got no feelings to send. You can’t have feelings alone. (1959:163)

Sending is also dangerous because it can be debilitated by a lack of response and recoil into various means of control to survive. “Telepathy is not, by its nature, a one-way process. To attempt to set up a one-way telepathic broadcast must be regarded as an unqualified evil” (Burroughs 1959:167). The true evil, however, was not to be expressed in interpersonal ways but was itself an expression of the control exerted by the authoritarian state. In other words, the weight of humiliation of unrequited love has rolled over from a total lack of due process into outright manipulation and, moreover, it finds its technology hot-wired in encephalographic research: “Shortly after birth a surgeon could install connections in the brain. A miniature radio receiver could be plugged in and the subject controlled from State-controlled transmitters” (163). Two-way interpersonal communications become the means of both inner emigration and outright resistance against impersonal authority and the depersonalized crowd which it produced: “telepathy properly used and under-
stood could be the ultimate defense against any form of organized coercion or tyranny on the part of pressure groups or individual control addicts" (167). For Burroughs, just as the pathogenic slide into sending could be broken by one letter from Ginsberg (more specifically, letters at intervals to satisfy his routine habit), so too could authoritarianism be broken by actual communication. In this respect, he echoes Korzybski’s distinction between “sanity and un-sanity” subsumed within his overarching category of Physics and Related Sciences:

Non-arian, Scientific, Adult Standards of Evaluation:
Radio, as powerful means of communication and education.

Aristotelian, Infantile Standards, Evaluation of Commercialism, Militarism:
Commercialized radio, advertisements, private propaganda, often stimulating morbid inclinations of the mob. (Korzybski [1933] 1958:557)

Three Off-Tuned Radios

The three radios in his room in Tangier, the orgone box, and the 1920 crystal set with antennae of jissom were all receivers. For Burroughs, someone sending—anything—meant someone had to be able to receive it correctly or it could transform into a form of control. Without a built-in response his love and routines could make him sick, lost, and alone in the Composite City. To receive correctly, the person had to be predisposed through similarity for communication and not have similarity imposed upon them. In other words, it was a communicative relationship based upon the merger of individuals into a nonpathogenic schlupp, not into a crowd that has internalized a common set of supple dictates. Likewise, receiving could be therapeutic only if it contained the proper radiation; it could situate him among the global exchanges freely occurring within an openly sexualized atmosphere. Yet this was forced to occur against a background radiation of atomization, dissolution, and transmission whose advance into the foreground meant total control and destruction. The static of the three off-tuned radios, in this respect, was both communication and radiation. It was a potentiated broadcast situated in between sending and receiving, a place where Burroughs could listen and hear something similar to himself collected within the white noise of otherness. And no threat could come from an impotence engineered by a refusal to tune in.

Notes
1. From a letter to Allen Ginsberg, 1 May 1950 (in Burroughs 1993:70).
6. During the same conversation, Burroughs elaborated:

  In homosexual sex you know exactly what the other person is feeling, so you are identifying with the other person completely. In heterosexual sex you have no idea what the other person is feeling. [...] You can identify with them to the extent that you become them, which of course is quite impossible with heterosexual sex because you’re not a woman therefore you cannot feel or know what a woman feels. (in Bockris 1982:60)

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