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## Genre and Gender in Charles Bukowski'S Notes of a Dirty Old Man

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GENRE AND GENDER IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S

*NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Cleveland State University

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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at the

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This thesis has been approved  
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Professor Adam Sonstegard

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Department and Date

Dedicated to my families...*all of them.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*“There is no intent to hurt or malign living persons with this story. I am sincere when I say this. There is enough hurt now. I doubt that anything happened as happened in this story. The author was only caught in the inventiveness of his own mind. If this is a sin, then all creators of all times have sinned...c.b.” —Charles Bukowski, “Notes of a Dirty Old Man,” 1971.*

I would very much like to take this opportunity to thank my advisor, Dr. Jeff Karem, for allowing me to think I could focus on Charles Bukowski’s work for this project, and for helping me to sort it all out; also, Jane Dugan, for support and a bounty of helpful information throughout my time at CSU. Thanks to David Mraz for his thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. Marc Manack especially, and my whole family, provided patience and emotional support (and Patricia Feisthamel, always lending an ear) that went further than any of them can really know to help me complete this project. I guess most of all, though, I’d like to thank Harry for introducing me to Bukowski—cheers, Harry, wherever you are.

## GENRE AND GENDER

IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S *NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN*

KALLISTO J. VIMR

### ABSTRACT

Charles Bukowski's *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* is a genre-blurring, gender-blending "start" to the perpetual "work-in-progress" that constitutes his oeuvre. Bukowski's genre heterogeneity provides a literal shape-shifting that allows the Bukowski-character to experiment with his a fluid, indeterminate subjectivity, helping unravel the tight myth that binds him as a "dirty old man."

Examining one of the vignettes in the book, the column recounting Bukowski meeting Neal Cassady, showcases Bukowski's engagement with autobiography and creative nonfiction in order to respond to constructions of verisimilitude; this is inextricably linked to other organized constructions Bukowski must work in—or out from—namely the hierarchy of gender and masculinities. The questions and constructions of realistic genres illuminate the overtly created fictions of social norms. This highlights something often overlooked in the scholarly criticism; that is, Bukowski's explicit creation—his overt invention—of what others seem to assume is simply his natural, "direct and honest" style. Bukowski's commentary on gender, especially within the reprinted letters in *Notes*, ties to Bukowski's generic choices. Like economics and class, genre and gender are not (re)produced in an expected or hierarchical fashion in Bukowski's work, and *Notes* is one of many examples of the rhizomatic nature of Bukowski's commentary on literary and social organizations. For Bukowski, these realms are intricately related.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

By the time *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted half an issue to Charles Bukowski in 1985—the first academic journal listed in the MLA bibliography to provide peer-reviewed criticism on Bukowski’s work—Bukowski was 65 years old and had published more than a dozen works, including many collections of poetry, collections of short stories, three novels (including Bukowski’s autobiographical *Ham on Rye*), as well as his photo-illustrated travelogue of a trip to Germany: *Shakespeare Never Did This*. He was also working on the screenplay for *Barfly*. Despite his abundant oeuvre and a surge in Bukowski criticism, critics have not yet fully reckoned with the experimental shape of his writing, opting instead to use him as a generational touchstone, a biographical object, or a working class hero.

For example, much of the early criticism is written in conversational style: narratives that replicate Bukowski’s own themes and examine Bukowski’s life, rather than his work. At times, this criticism is more a memoir of how critics’ lives intersect

with Bukowski's, or how Bukowski's experiences somehow mirror their own. Aside from a half-dozen or so relatively recently-written articles, most notably Tamas Dobozy's "In the Country of Contradiction, the Hypocrite is King: Defining Dirty Realism is Charles Bukowski's *Factotum*," from 2001, and Thomas Kane's "The Deaths of the Authors: Literary Celebrity and Automortography in Acker, Barthelme, Bukowski, and Carver's Last Acts," from 2004, any non-conversational criticism tends to promote formalist arguments aimed at nullifying or validating Bukowski's "art" and his "representation" of the male hero (or anti-hero). Even at its best, such as in Russell Harrison's Black Sparrow Press published *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (1994), this kind of argument does a disservice to the individual work being analyzed in favor of confuting or justifying an overarching authorial persona, or the entire oeuvre, more generally. These formalist arguments, and to be fair, Harrison does also engage Marxism throughout his book, attempt to analyze Bukowski's writing to pinpoint the time in his life when he "achieve[d] mastery of the medium" (Harrison 19); or, how he manifests his "direct and honest apprehension of experience" (Brewer x) through the form and structure of the text. Although certainly not mandatory, the near-absence of theory-based criticism accentuates an academic disregard for Bukowski's work, especially in the last two decades, and especially in proportion to the size of his body of work. This paper means to continue the exploration of Bukowski's writing, by examining the collection *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*—an episodic and heterogeneous narrative that may well demonstrate the author's varied oeuvre in one book—with the expectation of redirecting the current professional conversation.

More specifically, this paper will focus on the genre-blurring, gender-blending book *Notes of a Dirty Old Man (Notes)* to explore some overlooked facets of Bukowski's early short prose. First, I will examine one of the vignettes in the book, the column recounting Bukowski meeting Neal Cassady, in order to highlight ways in which Bukowski engages autobiography and further, so-called literary nonfiction, in order to comment on and respond to constructions of verisimilitude; this is inextricably linked to other organized constructions Bukowski must work in—or out from—namely the hierarchy of gender and masculinities. The questions and constructions of realistic genres illuminate the overtly created fictions of social norms. Bukowski's journalistic commentary on social norms, fictively joined with multi-layered realities, highlights something often overlooked in the scholarly criticism; that is, Bukowski's explicit creation—his overt process of invention—of what others seem to assume is simply his natural, “direct and honest” style. Secondly, I will further investigate Bukowski's commentary on gender, especially within the reprinted letters in *Notes*, and how this too ties to Bukowski's generic choices. Like economics and class, the topics that are most often discussed in relation to Bukowski's work, but which I leave out of my discussion here, genre and gender are not (re)produced in an expected or hierarchical fashion in Bukowski's work, and *Notes* is one of many examples of the rhizomatic nature of Bukowski's commentary on literary and social organizations. For Bukowski, these realms are intricately related. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use the idea of the rhizome<sup>1</sup> to explore this potentiality. For example, the authors write,

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze and Guattari introduce the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* by asserting, “A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes...rats are rhizomes...the rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions

“There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another” (9). Spying the rhizomatics of the book is a constructive task because it forces us to make connections among the heterogeneous aspects of Bukowski’s writing. Too easily, Bukowski is lumped into positions of “pure” representation and an exploration of the variation within his oeuvre, and within specific works, is abandoned. This paper will show, however, that heterogeneity abounds, and the Bukowski-character (a collage of Bukowski-the-author, the Bukowski persona, and the character Bukowski as he appears in his early writing—a character I will describe more fully below) does not intend to represent a static “working class hero” or generational touchstone.

In *Notes*, readers get a map that helps link the generational, biographical, and class-based symbols of the writing to the multiplicities within these themes and with the fact that it is still fictionalized—no matter how “real” it may seem to some readers. Deleuze and Guattari offer a way for readers to encounter the multiplicities within Bukowski’s *Notes*, especially through their articulation of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari’s affirmative thoughts on the structure of the subject allow readers to recognize Bukowski’s altering and shape-shifting modes of story-telling; this helps remove the Bukowski-character from the hierarchically structured, autobiographical symbol that he is most often associated with, or explained as. By its very nature of heterogeneity, and the process by which it is manifested, Bukowski’s *Notes* demonstrates his rhizomatic association with any hierarchical “symbols” and expected representations: the work transforms, even under the expectations of the reader. By expanding on these kinds of

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to concretion into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other. The rhizome includes the best and worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed” (6-7).

ideas, and while utilizing historic information about Bukowski's writing and publishing practices, and continuing to build on and rely on previous analyses, this paper will hopefully succeed in invigorating the conversation surrounding Bukowski's early short prose, while providing a line of flight for a different kind of Bukowski criticism, more generally. With this paper I do not mean to attempt to invalidate earlier academic criticism, but instead mean to show one way to gain a fuller reading of Bukowski's early prose—to see it as dynamic, rather than as his merely early and unskilled depiction of the “undeniable realities” he masters later, as Harrison suggests (16)—by suggesting that journalism and genre freedom are the base of his later style and work.

That *Notes* began as a weekly newspaper column is no small consideration in my argument. In fact, the life of the text is quite central to the ideas presented here.<sup>2</sup> In 1967, Charles Bukowski began contributing a weekly column to one of Los Angeles's underground newspapers, John Bryan's *Open City*, titled “Notes of a Dirty Old Man.” Bryan hoped Bukowski's contribution would boost circulation as Bukowski had experience publishing with alternative presses and had gained notoriety among the audiences of the alternative press and underground literary/poetry scene in the sixties.<sup>3</sup> Broadsides, pamphlets, mimeographed journals and magazines, and artistically bound and illustrated small-run art books, were already essential to Bukowski's moderate success, indeed to the popularity of poetry at the time. Up until accepting these deadline driven assignments, Bukowski wrote mainly poetry and short prose (he did not write and

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<sup>2</sup> In *Notes*, the author's characterization of himself begins with the by-line of the column (which is his own name). Bukowski even uses his name within the columns themselves. Only later does Bukowski really build and experiment with the persona based on his semi-autobiographical character, Henry Chinaski.

<sup>3</sup> Information relating to the events surrounding Bukowski's emerging notoriety in the small presses, as well as his acceptance of the offer to write “Notes,” can be found in many biographies, such as Neeli Cherkovski's *Hank*, Howard Sounes' *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, and Barry Miles' *Charles Bukowski*.

publish his first novel, *Post Office*, until late 1970/early 1971). For his efforts in poetry, he was named Outsider of the Year in 1963 by Jon and Louise Webb's notable *Outsider Magazine*. That same year, the Webb's Loujon Press published a limited edition of a collection of poems and illustrations by Bukowski titled *It Catches My Heart in its Hands*. Likewise, his broadsides were part of a resurgence of poetry anchored in the social protests and anti-war movement, but that eventually expanded with more far-reaching, mainstream influence. Because of the ephemeral nature of broadside publishing, mimeographed magazines, and independent newspapers, there is little hard record of Bukowski's work at this time. Therefore, Bukowski had the opportunity to explore the potentiality of his prose as a "work-in-progress" that ensures a continual remaking.

In 1969, Essex House, a publisher of experimental erotica headed by Brian Kirby, published, according to Bukowski's own forward to the collection, "selections from about fourteen months worth of columns" (6). Bound together, the newspaper columns were culled for this particular audience.<sup>4</sup> The book borrows as its title the title of the column. *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* mixes semi-autobiographical "reporting" with more traditional narrative and poetic techniques; each vignette ranges in length from one paragraph to several pages, with a line placed between entries or topics to demarcate the beginning of a new episode or vignette, and seems to bring together, at last, in a very material way, much of what had been well-received regarding his "published" ephemera.

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<sup>4</sup> This publishing house was not altogether removed, however, from the whole of the alternative press scene. Bukowski would later dismiss Essex House as a "porny publisher," but the collection of books put out by Kirby in the Essex House line was attractively bound, literary work done by experimental poets and genre-writers.

There are of course, many other differences between the column as it appeared in the paper, and the collection. In book form, there are no dates of original publication, no titles, and no by-line; all elements that were present in the original newspaper column linking it directly to the idea of “news” and objectified reporting expected by readers. Removing these kinds of cues asks the reader to reconfigure a number of assumptions: the expectations of genre and book material, to be sure, but especially the connection between fact and fiction—or more specifically, the connection between the idea that news is often accepted as fact, and that fiction is seemingly free from that kind of frame of reference. The remaining links in the book to “news,” while still present, are more subversive, and rely on readers’ own interpretation of the text. Bukowski plays freely with these differences and uses them to continue his work-in-progress and to situate a style that would later become nearly synonymous with his persona. To rethink Bukowski in this way is altogether different from what most critics have asked of his work in the past, preferring instead to lock Bukowski into a “direct and honest” unwavering mode that altogether stops the possibility of further investigation, somehow equating his writing with his life. Furthermore, the “page breaks” visually affect the reader’s experience by forcing the reader to stop reading and then start up again. This may mimic the way readers approached the columns, having to wait each week for the next column to appear, or it may simply add to the reciprocal tension between the two genres and the ambiguous nature of the columns. Consequently, there are constant nods to the original columns that should not be overlooked highlighting that the work already exists in multiples.

For these reasons, this paper analyzes *Notes* as both a collection of short stories and a reprinting of an newspaper column; each entry stands alone, as it would have in its

original form, but also can be read as one complete collection—the way it is cemented in book form—the way the larger audience became familiar with it.<sup>5</sup> This book form, despite obvious differences, not only “mimics” so-called pure fiction, but also shows many similarities to Bukowski’s prose poetry, magnifying Bukowski’s play with genre.<sup>6</sup>

The reader can negotiate between the words as they appear in the book, but due to the inherent qualities of ephemera, only the idea of the column appearing in *Open City* in the late sixties. There is a kind of tension in this ambiguous connectivity; the later text (in book form) could not exist without the former text (in column form), but the column was not written with the expectation of the book. Furthermore, a reader of the book is aware of the columns, not only because of the obvious and subversive cues, but precisely because Bukowski makes the reader aware in his forward to the collection, nodding to the ephemera. The tension is underscored because Bukowski self-consciously calls attention to himself as the author and also calls attention to the original columns; or, he is calling attention to the differences in the format so that the reader is forced to, at least in part, (re)place some of the historical time and place of the original publication: Bukowski goes on in his introduction, “...the writing got done by itself. There was not the tenseness or the careful carving with a bit of dull blade, that was needed to write something for *The Atlantic Monthly*. Nor was there any need to simply tap out a flat and careless journalism (er, □ournalese??). There seemed to be no pressures” (6). Bukowski purposefully renders a connection to more objectified news (and his dislike of its conventions) in order

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<sup>5</sup> This is vaguely similar to the layout of the more contemporary book-length column compilation, *Sex and the City*, by Candace Bushnell. The columns in Bushnell’s book are also removed from their original place, excluding all the dates of original publication, and editing the columns for book format. Bushnell, however, uses section and chapter titles to move the reader through a more explicit plot line; even more distinct from a short story than Bukowski’s collection, Bushnell’s reads like a novel, limiting the interaction between the columns and the book.

<sup>6</sup> Genre here, and throughout the paper, is not defined by discourse or content, but by where or how the text is published.

to point out the differences between his work, and what many readers might expect to come from a newspaper. That the columns are not “journalese” describes both the kind of columns Bukowski hopes they are, and reveals journalism as a narrative mode, more generally; and it cannot altogether diminish the reader’s association of newspaper columns with newspaper content. Rather than creating a similarity between journalism’s and Bukowski’s own, “direct and honest style” this confuses the representation of reality in any autobiographical or journalistic reporting. Bukowski’s introduction to the collection goes on to situate it not only by place—referring to publishing the columns in the independent L.A. paper—but also in time. Although artifacts of L.A. in the sixties, most of the columns in the book are not overtly describing specific places or moments in the past; that is, the reader does not often come away with the “Five W’s.”

In his introduction Bukowski then tells, in his way of turning nearly everything into an entertaining narrative, of the inception of *Open City* and how John Bryan, the editor, was fired from the *Herald-Examiner* because he “objected to them airbrushing the cock and balls off of the Christ child [...for the...] cover of their magazine for the Christmas issue” (5). Readers can then flip ahead to any point and begin reading, yet the introduction forces at least one association for the reader in that the book and the columns are inextricably linked. The columns bound together in the book are not necessarily bound to one historical moment, but then again, as Bukowski reminds the reader in his introduction: “It’s all very strange. Just think, if they hadn’t airbrushed the cock and balls off the Christ child, you wouldn’t be reading this” (7).

## CHAPTER II

### GENRE AND “THE CASSADY COLUMN”

This rhizomatic nature of genre is exemplified in the column recounting Bukowski’s introduction to Neal Cassady. In this vignette, rather long for the collection at just over three pages, Bukowski maps out and summarizes Cassady’s life and death through a narrative, and while doing so, muddles the previous and future versions of Cassady, as well, while still acknowledging, borrowing from, and building on those versions. The column immediately invokes many genres early on, including journalistic reporting, biography, memoir, and the hard-to-define dirty realism—a kind of gritty, urban naturalism—Bukowski is often associated with.<sup>7</sup> The subject, Neal Cassady himself, also evokes many genres, as he is perhaps best known as a character in other people’s work: work that itself is varied in genre, including Jack Kerouac’s spontaneous

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, a poet and critic who was himself tangled up with the Beats, wrote in a *New York Times* book review on July 5, 1964 of *It Catches My Heart In Its Hands*, Bukowski’s poetry is “simple, casual, honest, uncooked. He writes about what he knows...the poignant, natural real scene around him where the last ride set him down.” I suspect Rexroth’s own “outsider” status helped catapult this kind of evaluation as *the* evaluation, perhaps one of Bukowski’s first “good” mainstream reviews.

prose, Allen Ginsberg's poetry, and Grateful Dead's lyrics. Incidentally, most references to Cassady involve him driving a vehicle, such as in Ginsberg's *Howl*. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (4-5). And in fact, as Bukowski is writing this, another role for Cassady is being created by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* published in 1968. In that book, an early, extended example of "new journalism," Cassady is the driver of the Merry Pranksters bus. Throughout this vignette, Bukowski oscillates around "reality" and fiction by building off of and in to the other portrayals of Cassady, adding another layer in the assemblage. This tension is different from the tension created by readers working back and forth between columns and book. Instead, Bukowski is explicitly referencing contemporary writers in an expectation of, and experimentation with, this conversation. The goal of this experimentation may be to critique, or at least comment on, Kerouac's essentializing prose in *On the Road* to underscore how Bukowski's project is different, or why it is needed. Kerouac seems to work within a specific organization; mostly aborescent, his intertextual experiment grows directly from previous works, not just metaphorically, but literally chronologically.

Unlike Kerouac's fictionalized account (at the time it was written, cloaked by the then more definable term "novel," and bolstered by the use of fictive names), Bukowski hints at journalism by using Cassady's name. Bukowski introduces Cassady through Cassady's death and through his portrayal in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: "I met Kerouac's boy Neal C. shortly before he went down to lay along those Mexican railroad tracks to die" (23). Bukowski then removes Cassady from *On the Road*, releasing him

from his Dean Moriarty persona, by explaining, “you liked [Cassady] even though you didn’t want to because Kerouac had set him up for the sucker punch and Neal had bit, kept biting. but you know Neal was o.k. and another way of looking at it, Jack had only written the book, he wasn’t Neal’s mother. just his destructor, deliberate or otherwise” (24). In this way, Bukowski invokes the Cassady/Moriarty character that Kerouac birthed in *On the Road*, but also suggests the obvious potentiality for Cassady’s differences from the way Kerouac represented Cassady in his book; Bukowski refigures Cassady while at the same time offering, or conceding, to the reader the existent connection with Kerouac. More nuanced than journalistic reporting, Bukowski works with the existing myth as a myth. Bukowski suggests that Kerouac, through writing Cassady, is Cassady’s “...destructor, deliberate or otherwise” (24). This that Bukowski is writing, alternatively, is no biography of Cassady, and for Bukowski, that must mean Kerouac’s version is not either—Bukowski does not create a life for Cassady, but instead de(con)structs reality through revealing the construct of the fiction and textual image. Or, through the new construction, the construct in Kerouac is revealed. Despite using Cassady’s real name, Bukowski is less concerned with offering any “authentic” version of Cassady. In fact, Bukowski’s version provides a metafiction, whereas Kerouac seems to prioritize an “authentic” representation. In Bukowski’s version, the reader’s disbelief is not suspended. The reader cannot escape into the story and is always jolted back and forth from a “reality” and the world of the story. What if the original scroll had been published in 1957 instead of the *On the Road* readers received at that time? What if Truman Capote had not bothered even to thinly veil the characters in *Answered Prayers*? This kind of rhizomatic association between fictions and facts is intriguing not only

because it challenges what we think particular genres of fiction are “supposed” to do, but because it magnifies the potential illusion of a reader’s own reality and any reality to be found in creative journalism. By invoking Kerouac, Bukowski suggests that he knows the reader will already be remembering Cassady through Kerouac anyway, whether or not the reader is aware of the signification. By providing this kind of interplay between fact and fiction, by magnifying the illusion of the reader’s own realities, Bukowski also forces the reader to question the autobiography of Bukowski’s image of himself, as well. For instance, if we are forced to notice differences between Kerouac’s Cassady and Bukowski’s Cassady—helping to reveal differences between a “true” Cassady in Kerouac’s roman a clef and a “true” Cassady in Bukowski’s newspaper column—this in turn helps readers question whether a “true” Bukowski can be found in his own work, and what truth lies in an account regarded as news, or nonfiction, no matter where it appears.

These comparisons are important, as they illuminate the significance of the explicit divergences in Bukowski’s work that create a more dynamic dialogism than can be found in Kerouac’s book as it was published in 1957. And because it displays part of what might be seen as a movement during the time Bukowski was writing, away from objectified news and monologic fiction. For my purposes, both of these are important distinctions of work like Bukowski’s *Notes*. John C. Hartsock in his book, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (2000), tackles only the emergence of literary journalism, but I think his location of the emergence of modern literary journalism is also pertinent to the movement away from monologic fiction, as well. Hartsock, although he is often generous with his broad categorization of the genre at times, in his first chapter “Locating the Emergence,” finds

it important to distinguish between nonfiction that uses narrative conventions and fictionalized writing that bears a resemblance to nonfiction. One example is his distinction between George Ade's 1890s columns where a column "might or might not contain fictionalized characters and thus...has to be examined carefully to determine that it is nonfiction" (35). He nevertheless links Ade to "nonfiction" columnist Ben Hecht and his 1920's column "1001 Afternoons in Chicago," and Mike Royko's columns, as well. Both columnists took liberties with the truth, and that Hartsock seems content to look past. All of these columnists certainly share much by way of style with the style Bukowski adopted for his own columns. The column format is important because as these earlier columnists prove, audiences are aware, and accepting, of a kind of fictive "play," within the newspaper format, at least in the column. Readers are accepting of liberties taken with objectified news, even within the more largely circulated papers, and readers of Bukowski can find many style similarities to Hecht and Royko (even, perhaps, with Samuel Johnson), sometimes even mundane similarities, such as the 800-word convention. Albeit in Bukowski's columns, the freedom provided by the sixties-era independent paper ensured that his adherence to any convention was rather a loose one.

Although Hartsock's more detailed distinctions may only be important considerations in his presentation of a history of the form, some of his argument is nevertheless useful to consider while examining Bukowski's *Notes*. Modern narrative journalism comes about, according to Hartsock, due to a resistance to objectified news. The techniques that create the mode share a common purpose; namely, to allow "the individual to acquir[e] the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image" (Hartsock summarizing Bakhtin 53). Hartsock goes on to

explain, “narrative literary journalism has attempted then, to drag the journalistic concept of a verifiable reality reflected in a truth claim ‘into a zone of contact with reality’ that can only be shaped by subjectivity” (53). This is exemplified in later work, such as *Hollywood*, which can be read as a “report” of Bukowski’s experiences making *Barfly*, but is also apparent in this very early prose, as well. There is no linear trajectory that can account for the way the reader will approach an adaptation of “reality” already steeped in fiction, which automatically removes the work from a monologic base. Both the characterization of Cassady and Bukowski’s own characterization of himself (readers have read either many columns or half the book, and have no doubt encountered some mythological information from other sources, even if only the back of the book cover) are already being considered by the reader.<sup>8</sup> What Bukowski seems to do, though, is create a disruption that succeeds in destabilizing both personas by allowing and acknowledging a more varied dialogue.

One way Bukowski alters but relies on depictions of Cassady by others is in the portrayal of Cassady’s momentum in the car ride after their initial meeting. As Bukowski says of Cassady’s driving, “it was his bullring, his racetrack, it was holy and necessary” (25).<sup>9</sup> Along the ride, the car races through “hairline” near misses with other cars and Bukowski observes that Cassady “could have slowed down and followed the traffic...but he would have lost his movement” (25). Cassady’s movement in Bukowski’s column may carry him forward, but more essentially, the momentum carries him from one place

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<sup>8</sup> For a marxist analysis of Bukowski’s persona that tackles the hard-to-define “dirty realism” and his autobiographical characterization through his use of Henry Chinaski, refer to Tamas Dobozy’s 2001 article “In the Country of Contradiction, the Hypocrite is King: Defining Dirty Realism is Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum*.”

<sup>9</sup> All emphases inside quotations, from *Notes* and supporting documents, are the authors’ and not my own, unless otherwise noted. All mechanical “errors” inside of quotations taken from *Notes* are in the original *Notes* text.

to another. By contrast, often the movement in *On the Road* is less productive; instead of giving Dean/Cassady agency, it can take it away. In one scene in *On the Road*, Dean slows the car to seventy, but Sal, Kerouac's narrator, explains knowingly, "I said, 'You're really going much too fast.' And he was flying along there on that slippery mud and just as I said that we hit a complete left turn...and we ended up backass in the ditch...A great stillness fell over everything" (Kerouac 227). In Kerouac's hands, Dean's momentum causes the two travelers to become stuck. On Bukowski's ride, though, they get where they are going: "Neal cut left. to me it looked as is we were going to ram right through the center of the car. it was obvious. but somehow, the motion of he other car's forward and our movement left coincided perfectly...Neal parked the thing and we went on in" (26). Bukowski said nothing to Cassady along the way; he seemingly did not know what to say. Although, Bukowski does admit that after the car would clear a dangerous turn he "would always say something ridiculous like, 'well, suck my dick!'" (25). Rather than instruct Cassady, as Sal Paradise chose to do, Bukowski reacts to him.

Another example of Bukowski's more varied dialogue can be found early in the vignette. Bukowski notes: "Bryan was handing out an assignment and some film to two young guys who were supposed to cover that show that kept getting busted. whatever happened to that show by the Frisco poet, I forget his name. anyhow, nobody was noticing Neal C. and Neal C. didn't care, or he pretended not to. when the song stopped, the 2 young guys left and Bryan introduced me to the fab Neal C." (24). Inside this description, Bukowski creates an alignment between the newspaper's reporting, a poet's performance, and his own writing about Neal Cassady. None of these are given precedence, or hierarchically established, but the relationship between all three genres is

still present, if illusory. Another way to differentiate between the fictionalizing of Kerouac's Moriarty and Bukowski's Cassady is with Bakhtin's heteroglossia. Even though Bakhtin is mainly referring to the novel form, the explanation is helpful here. Bakhtin asserts, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships..." (263). For example, the colloquial abbreviation of fabulous, "fab" in the quote from *Notes* above, evokes the early sixties, as much as the use of "Frisco" evokes Sal Paradise and Kerouac's fifties.

Bukowski's conversation with Kerouac is also revealed when Bukowski refers to Cassady and the "eternal light": "he never sat down. he kept moving around the floor, he was a little punchy with the action, the eternal light, but there wasn't any hatred in him" (24). Interestingly, Bukowski's use of the word "but" juxtaposes Kerouac's presentation of Cassady as a kind of saint surrounded by the eternal light, with "there wasn't any hatred in him" as if the former did not preclude the latter. Rather than unifying the assumptions found in the representation of Cassady as a saint, or a martyr, Bukowski contrasts that expectation. Not, then, a eulogy for Cassady, the column could be read more as a long obituary in a newspaper marking off moments in Cassady's life without creating a tribute to him. Furthermore, Bukowski re-presents Neal Cassady's death and what appeared in the news, or his actual obituary, by adding the anecdotal story of this meeting with Cassady—this meeting presents Cassady's life in the form(at) of an autobiographical story actually about Bukowski, or the Bukowski-character. Because in *Notes* Bukowski is not overtly constructing the fictive Henry Chinaski persona, the

character of Bukowski in the book, represented in part by his by-line in the columns, I refer to as the “Bukowski-character.” The Bukowski-character, rather than a direct representation of the biographical object, is a fluid and mutating character that can more actively push the columns in *Notes*. In this way, Bukowski adds his own story to Cassady’s, and acknowledges the reader’s participation in the event. The reader is asked to negotiate expectations about each character’s life. Kerouac’s version and the newspaper obituary bookend Cassady’s life but do not validate—do not really even recognize—the reader’s interpretation and interaction.

The vignette about Bukowski meeting Cassady does not finish at the end of the car ride and night spent with him, because “a few days later” John Bryan, the *Open City* editor who was also on the ride, phones Bukowski to tell him that Cassady died.

Bukowski, in a paragraph wholly directed to the reader, writes:

all those rides, all those pages of Kerouac, all that jail, to die alone under a frozen Mexican moon, alone, you understand? can’t you see the miserable puny cactii? [...] can’t you see the desert animals watching? the frogs, horned and simple, the snakes like slits of men’s minds crawling, stopping, waiting, dumb under a dumb Mexican moon. reptiles, flicks of things, looking across this guy in the sand in a white t-shirt. (26)

I quote at length because the passage builds a scene of Cassady’s death through conjuring Mexican wildlife imagery throughout and by asking the reader in the second person to see it, as in “can’t *you* see [...]?” (emphasis mine). Bukowski’s treatment of the images in this paragraph relies on detail, evoking the moon, desert, and snakes “like the slits of men’s minds,” details reminiscent of observational reporting, but Bukowski was not

there, so any further hint at “journalism” remains just that. Instead, through reading the passage, although the reader helps to interpret Cassady’s death, the reader also participates in Bukowski’s critique of nostalgia for Kerouac’s more monologic, signifying representation. Although we cannot see what actually happened, we can help build it through participating in the speech act Bukowski puts forward in his question, “can’t you see?”. Perhaps meta-performative, asking the audience to participate—the pleading with which Bukowski quite earnestly insists upon it—drives the force of the act of reading not just forward, or up, but out to the direction of a(ny) reader. Through Bukowski’s narration, though, the reader too asks the next to try and “see.” Bukowski’s column recognizes what Bakhtin calls the “contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” (272). That is, as Bakhtin explains, “every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia” (272). Bukowski is part of his historical moment, but only as bound to it as the last reader.

Furthermore, Cassady’s death did happen, whether we can “see” it through Bukowski’s rendering or not. And the mainstream newspapers, of course, reported an event much plainer (much more direct, or even “honest”): Cassady left a wedding drunk and later fell asleep, while walking home, along the railroad tracks; he was found the next morning in a coma and taken to the hospital. He died in the hospital later that day without regaining consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Not only is this not the Mexico of *On the Road*, but Bukowski reminds readers that, as we were not actually in the Mexico of *On the Road*,

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<sup>10</sup> In William Plummer’s 1981 biography of Cassady, *The Holy Goof*, he writes “a group of Indians found [Cassady] beside the [railroad] track a mile and a half outside of San Miguel. He was comatose and would later die that morning in a nearby hospital. The death certificate cited ‘generalized congestion,’ but the newspapers used more resonant language. Cassady died of overexposure, they said” (151-158).

we are not here in this Mexico either. We cannot see. And that is a striking reminder of the impossibility of any kind of universalism projected in *On the Road*. Dean Moriarty is not a saint, and more importantly cannot even be an everyman—not even one of a specific generation. Bukowski’s Neal Cassady is not either, but once removed from the hierarchy, Bukowski’s Cassady is created more wholly through interaction between the character, the author, and the audience.

This “memorial” creates another version of what happened to Cassady just before he died. As a prominent, iconic figure, Cassady and his life (and death) are significant to at least two generations (in the fifties, with the Beat culture, and in the sixties, with the acid culture). In the last ten years, critics and biographers have begun to focus on Cassady’s life and work, but between the time of his death and this renewed interest, there were few references to Cassady’s death outside the Beat culture. In some ways, Bukowski’s creation of Cassady’s death is Kerouacian in that through writing Cassady, Bukowski may, too, be his “destructor, deliberate or otherwise.” Bukowski, however, twists the “real,” utilizing the existing mythology of the Beats, to create a depiction that is more mythical than what the newspapers reported, and yet more difficult to accept, by critiquing the nostalgia it relies on.

The mutated and simulated version of Cassady’s death shows how Bukowski can purposefully construct a reality in one small instance. More interesting than being a copy of the original, Bukowski’s rewriting is different from the original and alongside it, not necessarily above it. That Cassady did not die “alongside the Mexican railroad tracks” does not make Bukowski’s version of the story less important, because Bukowski constructs a world that may or may not really exist. This is in contrast to the way critics

focus on Bukowski's representation of the world as it "really" exists, claiming that part of Bukowski's success comes from his writing from experience. Brewer writes, for example, "at its best, [Bukowski's] work earns its understandings, its truths, and its discoveries through a direct and honest apprehension of experience, without outside ideas imposed" (Brewer x). Or, "[Bukowski] expressed no interest in schools, movements, or explicit ideologies, instead attempting to write directly, with honesty and humor, of his experiences" (Brewer 9).<sup>11</sup> Bukowski, even in this early prose, does not put forth a standardized model of autobiography, nor of journalism, or even realism. Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome that "ceaselessly establishes connections" (7), Bukowski gives an alternative built from past depictions and adding to future versions. In this way, the rewriting of Cassady's death, eliminating the coma and the hospital, and forging with it instead the emblem of the vehicle—at the end it is the train—becomes not just a representation of Cassady's death, but ultimately an explicit interpretation. Does it matter that the reader may only know Bukowski's interpretation and may never know what "really" happened, or is it that Bukowski's meeting with Cassady is part of what really happened? So, the construct that began with Kerouac continues, as construction rather than an undoing or simplifying. At the end of the vignette, Bukowski proclaims, "the only night I met [Cassady] I said, 'Kerouac has written all your other chapters. I've already written your last one.' 'go ahead,' he said, 'write it.' end copy" (Bukowski,

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<sup>11</sup> This assertion—that Bukowski's work is somehow "honest"—existed before Brewer's book, and still persists. For example, in a recent article in the Daily 49er, the student paper at Cal State Long Beach, Barbara Navarro describes Bukowski as "an honest writer" as well as, incidentally, "the crudest and rudest man in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature": (<http://media.www.daily49er.com/media/storage/paper1042/news/2008/03/17/Diversions/In.Search.Of.The.Ultimate.Barfly.Charles.Bukowski-3271648.shtml>).

*Notes 26-27*).<sup>12</sup> This bit of dialogue shows a self-conscious creation of metafiction, but the overt critique of reality that the metafiction nods to is belied by the appearance of the narrative in the newspaper and the use of Cassady's (and the other character's in this column/vignette) real name. The stakes are higher: Bukowski does not completely engage reality, nor does he completely reject realism, in his critique. Where his story is read, however, seems to underscore one or the other as more likely.

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, until I looked up the incident and decided to accept the "encyclopedic" version of Cassady's death, I believed Bukowski was telling it "as it really happened."

### CHAPTER III

#### GENDER, RHETORIC, AND THE READER

The Cassady column is useful in highlighting Bukowski's often-overlooked genre multiplicity, and the importance of varied genre in rhizomatic or dialogic narratives like those in *Notes*. It is also useful as a transition into Bukowski's commentary on a social organization this paper will touch upon—that is, the construction of genders, specifically masculinities, and Bukowski's rejection of a clear gender mimesis, through rhizomatic potentiality. Rather than, or as one part of, a construction, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome frees the Bukowski-character from the definitive enacting of one kind of genre and of one kind of masculinity. The heterogeneous capacity of the Cassady column may appear in part from the parodic imitation Bukowski's employs intermittently to critique "realism" and "reportage." And above, I describe how within Bukowski's commentary on Kerouac's representation of Cassady, readers can begin to find Bukowski's commentary on his own representation of the "Bukowski persona" or the Bukowski-

character, which is created as a parodic juxtaposition against heteronormative masculinity (just as his “realistic” style is a parody of “realism” and “reportage”). And Bukowski’s play with genre, as well as his treatment of his own masculine persona, are important to dispelling the myth surrounding his “direct and honest” style. The Cassady column brings at least two masculine stereotypes to the forefront: that of the everyman, perhaps a version of Cassady, and that of the anti-hero, the expectation of the Bukowski-character. These literary “types” rely on the author’s projection of different aspects of a normative, or heterosexually traditional, masculinity. Although that column brings up these “typical” masculine characters, it does so by negating them as ideals or expectations through the interaction between parody, autobiography, and “straight” fiction. The column does not prioritize a masculine “ideal,” and indeed the characterization suggests the opposite: a rhizomatic oscillation. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “we fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are,” (*TP* 238). Bukowski’s maneuverings in the social organization of gender, especially within Bukowski’s (mis)representation of any hegemonic and/or heteronormative masculinity, call for a reading more complex than the label “dirty old man” suggests.

Hegemonic aspects of heteronormativity, however, present an alternate issue in that, although I believe Bukowski’s notion of a hegemonic masculinity is careful to acknowledge both the upsides and downsides of the hegemonic hierarchy, as Robert Hanke argues in “Theorizing Masculinity With/In the Media,” when analyzing issues of masculinity, we must “avoid redescribing hegemonic masculinity as an ideal character type” (187). The problem is whether by arguing either for or against some type of hegemonic or heteronormative ideal, the argument becomes itself a justification for a

continuation of the ideal, and in fact, part of upholding the ideal. Bukowski's oscillation *between* various nodes on a spectrum of masculinity, the hero/anti-hero, everyman/no man, and his oscillation between privileging any masculinity, helps him to prevent for readers a too-easily accepted "ideal" representation, but Hanke's concerns are important to note. Although, Bukowski does not necessarily create an ideal masculinity that upholds a patriarchal hegemony, as Gregg Lambert explains in "The Deleuzian Critique of Pure Fiction," "human intelligence often liberates itself from the circle (or closed society) only to find itself creator of another" (Lambert 137). Lambert's reading of Deleuze and Guattari is instructive here; as Lambert argues, "For Deleuze it was never a question of 'breaking-out' of the world that exists, but of creating the right conditions for the expression of the other possible worlds to 'break-in' in order to introduce variables into the world that exists, causing the quality of it's reality to undergo modifications, change, and becoming" (Lambert 137). Perhaps applying questions of masculinity to Bukowski's work in *Notes* seems beside the point. After all, the "dirty old man" moniker is in the title of the book. Nevertheless, as the oscillation in genre explored through the Cassidy column has shown, Bukowski was not necessarily bound to signifying labels—there actually is no "standard" or "ideal" in terms of genre. The consistent oscillation of the Bukowski character's masculinities, wavering at the points in between poet and proletariat, inventor and itinerant, reminds readers that rhizomatic "becoming [...] does not reduce to, or lean back to, 'appearing,' 'being,' 'equaling,' or 'producing'" (TP 239). Instead, as part of the undergoing of modifications in expected norms, Bukowski's masculinity allows these alternatives to break-in. Part of the difficulty many readers may have with Bukowski's at-times overt sexism is not only the gruff, gross, or even brutal

way with which he displays it, but that the alternate reading to Bukowski as sexist, is to read him as oppressed himself. This underscores the problem regarding the conflation of Bukowski with the Bukowski-character. A more rhizomatic reading saves the audience from feeling obligated to choose between these two hierarchically bound positions. In part, I base this portion of my argument on the assumption Ben Knights argues in *Writing Masculinities*: “texts which foreground the male artist simultaneously reveal assumptions and propagate norms about the nature of the social function of fictions” (49). And the “function of fictions” is something Bukowski is certainly commenting on through his “metafiction,” such as in *Notes*, and much of his work. In *Notes*, Bukowski is the writer of the newspaper columns, the creator of the text, and in his later prose, he often magnifies his writerly attributes through the creation of Henry Chinaski, a “down-and-out writer” who emerges over time as the Hollywood screenwriter. As a writer of fiction, Bukowski’s illusory hold on a masculine ideal is always undermined by his satiric treatment of “realism” as a genre—and as a satirist, Bukowski is always the jester, dallying with pretense rather than going to war, but as a journalist, Bukowski’s “treatment” of the writer of the columns is more difficult to dissect.

In Thomas Strychacz’s *Dangerous Masculinities: Conrad, Hemingway, and Lawrence*, Strychacz shows how modern, masculine representation can be theatrical: “masculine self-fashioning is a function of the theatrical performances that constitute it in a precarious and always temporary negotiation with others” (3). According to Strychacz, masculinity is a “fluid and always problematic self-staging” (3). Although Strychacz investigates the critical reception of Ernest Hemingway’s masculinities, some of his ideas can be applied to Bukowski as well. What I find comparable regarding Bukowski and

Hemingway is not necessarily the writing style (plenty of other critics draw comparisons there) but the way the authorial persona creates tension for readers who take the “journalistic” attributes of the content into consideration. For example, in 1960, Hemingway wrote the preface to his “memoir” *A Moveable Feast* ending it with, “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact” (ix). Strychacz argues that “masculinity” is difficult to define because, historically, past discourses surrounding masculinity have focused on an indefinable “essence.” If masculinity is a performance, then it cannot simply exist—whether it is read as fact or fiction.

The “direct and honest” style so many critics rely on to describe Bukowski’s writing might purposefully leave little room for ambiguity. The critics, in order to bypass the potential problem of defining masculinity as an act (rather than an essence), link the masculine representation in Bukowski’s work as a part of a minimalist and autobiographical style. Otherwise, as Strychacz writes regarding Hemingway, “if a manly author [...] could be mistaken about manhood—manhood would have to be argued for, or against. It would have to be enacted repeatedly in scholarly reviews, articles, learned arguments, in classrooms and lecture halls; it would become subject to, and the subject of, always inconclusive rhetorical practices” (101). Critics have almost insisted on Bukowski’s steadfast commitment to one kind of subject matter, one kind of tone, or one kind of apparent ideology as a way to cement a kind of authenticity. We have seen, though, how these assumptions are not true even in the small example of the Cassidy column. Questioning the fissures in genre helps illuminate, at the very least, the space for

questioning the accepted “authenticity” of Bukowski’s masculine portrayal—in the text, dialogues, and reader interpretation. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “what is a cry independent of the population it appeals to or takes as its witness” (*TP* 239). Whether or not he was aware of it, Bukowski plays with the subjective nature of “realism” and “reportage” especially through approaching different genres.<sup>13</sup> It is through the diverging and reconstituting of genre where a reader might first find the space to recognize Bukowski’s other oscillating themes, such as masculinities. Genre is one place where readers and critics can agree there is no commitment for Bukowski. He approaches the poem, short story, novel, screenplay, letter, interview, and non-fiction. This rhizomatic play with literary genres provides a literal shape shifting that allows Bukowski to experiment with his own “shape”—his own masculinity. For example, seeing Bukowski with a by-line and a recurring column nearly elevates Bukowski’s place in a hegemonic masculine hierarchy, especially one he could associate with the journalism published in big-city newspapers; in some ways it puts him in the company of Ben Hecht, Mike Royko, or, for the purpose of this comparison, Earnest Hemingway. This version of Bukowski is different from one readers would associate with an “underground” poet publishing in the mimeographed magazine scene that paid little money. As a starving artist, even a popular one, Bukowski enacts a masculinity that could be subordinated in a hegemonic hierarchy. Alternatively, at arguably his most famous point during his lifetime, Bukowski eventually entered the world of Hollywood and wrote the screenplay for *Barfly*, bringing not only some wealth, but also more universal and international notoriety. This is depicted through the novel *Hollywood*, and near the end of the book, at

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in his other work, readers can compare the almost romantic poem “Tragedy of the Leaves,” with any of the columns and find that in the latter there is less emphasis on structural elements or particular artistic techniques.

the film's premier, Henry Chinaski says to an actor: "I used to write a column, 'Notes of a Neanderthal Man'" (227). His comment sets off the juxtaposition of the version of the Bukowski-character who wrote the column, and the version who wrote the screenplay. There are also examples in other columns in *Notes*: Bukowski's parody of heteronormative masculinity is exemplified in his most frequently quoted column, the political rant.

In the rant, Bukowski weaves together the, at-first-glance contradictory, posturing of a man who is politically involved, macho, homophobic, academically intellectual, even violent. Early in the rant, Bukowski argues:

the thing in Prague has dampened a lot of boys who have forgotten Hungary. they hang in the parks with the Che idol, with pictures of Castro in their amulets...while William Burroughs, Jean Genet, and Allen Ginsburg lead them. these writers have gone, soft, cuckoo, eggshit, female—not homo but female—and if I were a cop I'd feel like clubbing their addled brains myself. (62-63)

The tone is not overtly literary or academic, even though the subject matter could be, but wheels about from one version of masculine posturing to another. He goes on, "the religious con boys are moving in with the revolutionary con boys and you can't tell asshole from pussy, brothers...God got out of the tree, took the snake and Eden's tight pussy away and now you've got Karl Marx throwing golden apples down from the same tree, mostly in blackface" (67). By almost casually mentioning such an array of masculine possibilities and clichés, Bukowski not only asks readers to resist the representation of masculinities that he creates, but shows that forms of masculinity can be

acted out, leaving room for himself to resist a heteronormative masculinity, in recognizing the (re)production of masculinity, more generally. If Bukowski successfully (whether sophisticatedly or not) alters readers' views of the construction of Cassady as the "hero/messiah," Dean Moriarty, of *On the Road*, or if he can question masculinity as in the rant, above, it seems less a leap to consider that he can also alter our ideal of the Bukowski-character's own masculinity. Perhaps in order to access the alternatives to the "honesty" of the style, readers must first "deal" with the Bukowski-character's masculinity.

David Charlson, in his published dissertation, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*, upholds the "Bukowski stereotype" by reminding readers that Bukowski labeled *himself* a "dirty old man." In fact, this label is used endlessly in Bukowski criticism, in a variety of ways, most often in puns. (A colleague of Bukowski's, Neeli Cherkovsky, uses "Notes on a Dirty Old Man.") Critics and writers seem to drop the label randomly, though, rarely referring to or directly analyzing the specific work associated with it: neither the columns nor the collection of columns in book form. Perhaps if they did, the label would no longer conjure the same associations—misogynistic, vulgar, lecherous—because the columns underscore an oscillating masculinity that often veers from and undermines that moniker. In his analysis of Bukowski's work, chiefly *Ham on Rye*, Charlson relies heavily on a sociological theory about violence; Michael Kaufman's "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence" (60), to analyze Bukowski's masculinity in the chapter titled "Problems of Masculinity: At 'Home,' at Work, at Play." While interesting, the sociological/psychoanalytical theory about violence does not quite seem a

good fit for Bukowski's masculinities, or for the themes in *Notes*. Nevertheless, Charlson's reliance on this mostly sociological study to point to violence in Bukowski's writing frequently upholds a hegemonic ideal and really seems to remove any seditious potential that might be found in Bukowski's persona or in the Bukowski-character. Admittedly, though, Charlson does problematize a hegemonic masculine ideal to some degree, by asking readers to consider Bukowski's work as typifying violence done to himself. This does create another emphasis for belligerent manhood as an "act" or "reaction," rather than as a possible masculine essence or ideal.

Readers who dismiss Bukowski because of his fluctuating place in a hierarchy, or the "dirty old man" label that "hamper[s] his reputation to this day and beyond" as Charlson claims (59), ultimately miss the many examples of oscillation (reality/creative nonfiction/fiction, poor/middle class/ rich, poetry/drama/prose, virile/limp/impotent). It is partly the responsibility of readers to acknowledge the irruptions in Bukowski's work, and in the idea of a "heteronormative" Bukowski-character, rather than rely on the image of the "dirty old man" whose reputation precedes him. As Hanke asserts, summarizing Pfeil, "when working men's bodies are mutating...this means they are open to redefinition and rearticulation" (200). Bukowski, through his columns, allows masculinity to become one of his "modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling" (Deleuze and Guattari, 239).

As another example, I will examine the reprinted "letters" in *Notes* that create two women, Unsigned and Meggy, as female characters Bukowski is apparently in correspondence with, but who, through their presence, help Bukowski showcase Bukowski's critique of heteronormative masculinity. In these letter/columns, readers

experience an often-used narrative technique of including a “letter” from a reader as a way of conversing with a character/reader through a column.<sup>14</sup> Although these letters are “from” women, they help to reveal some of the issues of Bukowski’s masculinities. Harrison, again in his 1994 book *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, like Charlson, also uses a kind of gender analysis to discuss themes in Bukowski’s work, in his chapter “Sex, Women and Irony.” However, Harrison’s treatment relies on a formalist argument based on the irony, or lack thereof, in Bukowski’s work. Although Harrison’s analysis mostly focuses on Bukowski’s treatment of female characters and his depiction of male-female relationships, Harrison does assert, regarding Bukowski’s “male chauvinism” that “what has become significant in [Bukowski’s] writing is the irony with which he has come to treat his protagonist’s machismo” (184). What Harrison deems irony, however, I have come to see more as parody devoid of irony. Locating any irony in Bukowski’s work may be useful to underscore his overt artistic expression, but Charlson asserts the obvious when he writes, “Charles Bukowski’s image as a ‘dirty old man’ ultimately points to the complicated issue of gender” (59). Bukowski is (in)famous for his depictions of women, his representations of relationships, and for his apparently endless creation of a seamy, and seemingly heteronormative, masculinity; these themes are as apparent in *Notes* as they are in most of Bukowski’s work. Despite Bukowski’s recurrent themes based on women and issues of gender, most of the criticism shies away from overt statements on the topic (there is little to no criticism, for example, that could be considered formally feminist). On the surface, some of Bukowski’s work can certainly be read as “chauvinistic,” and

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<sup>14</sup> Contemporary examples of this technique still occur. Recently, David Brooks, in a column titled “Lord of the Memes” uses a “letter” to comment on the changing landscape of “intellectual affectation” in the August 7, 2008, op-ed section of the *New York Times*.

often engages what could be called a normative or historically hegemonic patriarchal discourse, and many critics tend to gloss over this aspect of the writing. The aim of this part of my analysis is not to make up for lost time, but I hope that I show that the gender themes found in *Notes*, and the *seeming* hierarchical representation of gender in Bukowski's work, although rather disrespectful and crude at first glance, are but one part of the overall issues of writing multiplicities to be found in his work, or in *Notes* more specifically. Furthermore, his portrayal of female characters, especially within these letters, illuminates the permutation of Bukowski's persona, of his "honest" presentation of the "real," and of his apparent misogyny. Readers should then have trouble accepting Bukowski as essentially misogynist.

Bukowski introduces Meggy as a woman he has never met face-to-face, but seems to know fairly well, because he has seen pictures of her, has read her poetry, and has responded to her endless correspondence. Moreover, through her recurrence in the columns, she becomes something of a foil for the Bukowski character. He writes that Meggy "looks like a big healthy fuck" (138) but that, despite sending him her own poems, she is, "...just another female disappointment in the aging process and in her lessening husband; just another female dulled by her OWN easy sellout from the beginning and now piddling with the vacuum cleaner days and little troubles with junior who is also rapidly working towards zero times nothing" (139). Bukowski's description is easily read, at first, as sexist: hitting on all elements of misogyny. For example, in this quote he notes Meggy's age, marital status, and class: the vacuum cleaner is emblematic of the middle-class. Bukowski seems to see her as little more than an object of sexual desire. This apparent hatred is underscored by an apparent mistrust and fear, as

Bukowski describes, not just of Meggy, but of all women: “it is their own minds that women ingest into a man’s work—either willfully misreading the intent or either sensing tired prey upon the bloody cross. either way they screw it up good. whether they want to or have to, it doesn’t matter to the victim. which is the man, of course” (139). Although irritating, Bukowski is not arguing that women should stay home and vacuum. Actually, his tone and scolding seem to argue the opposite—creating a laughable image of the woman at home with the vacuum as actually the oppressor or destructor—a joke, or at least, certainly not literal. The masculinity of the Bukowski-character juxtaposed against Meggy, and women, is confused by the conflation of Bukowski’s authorial persona and the Bukowski-character’s masculinity. Strychacz explores the rhetoricity of masculinity through the “trope of masculine self-fashioning [...] it is a pose, a demonstration, and an act of persuasion, a temporary state developing out of the relationship between a man performing and an evaluating audience” (22). In the portion of *Notes* devoted to Meggy, she has a voice through the poetry she sends and through the letters, which are reprinted within the column—typeset and signed like a letter:

Love me,  
meggy

Meggy is there for the Bukowski-character to “act” against, or, in this example, to perform inaction. Bukowski tells Meggy’s story, he gets ready for work, but then does not go...thinks about writing a column, but cannot think of anything to say...thinks he should go and knock on her door wearing a button that says “Un-Bury Tom Mix” but then decides to finish his beer...(144). He continues, “but nothing will work. I just have to sit and wait” (144). The Bukowski-character is impotent to act, displaying not a heteronormative masculinity, but what Strychacz would call an “*alternative alternative*

masculinity” or possible non-heteronormative positions a white, heterosexual man might be able construct and while still being able to comment on the “cultural hegemony of masculinism” (26). Since “John Bryan wants a column” and Bukowski, “could tell him about meggy” even though “the meggy story is unfinished” and “she will be in [his] mailbox tomorrow morning” (144), the reader sees the Bukowski-character in a state of multiplicity. The column becomes Meggy’s letter. Bukowski cannot write anything, but through (re)writing the letters for the column, her thoughts become the column.

The letter, like a diary, could be considered a feminine form of writing, but Bukowski, too, writes in this way and acknowledges writing that has been done in this way, positioning him in a subordinated masculine position—even as he lambasts Meggy, he writes as she does, in letter form. Bukowski must then, at least sometimes, see the characterization of himself in a subordinated position, as he relies on Meggy to give himself a voice. The Tom Mix allusion brings another masculine stereotype, that of the cowboy, to the forefront. Bukowski is wearing the button, but in his inability to act, is portrayed as much less than a cowboy, everyman, hero, or even anti-hero. If he was able to represent the cowboy, though, would that posturing be construed by the audience as somehow inherent, an essence of masculinity beyond discourse? The Bukowski-character, contrasted against Meggy, deliberately sabotages his own heteronormatively masculine claims, with impotence. Strychacz claims that early Hemingway “critics regarded Hemingway’s defiant manly posturing as inane or even dangerous, and a real obstacle to negotiate on their way to an evaluation of his work” (85). Rather than trying to negotiate Bukowski’s “manly posturing” though, critics tend to ignore it altogether, and accept it as some kind of truism. In Hemingway criticism, as has been done with

Bukowski, critics seemed to accept a “true” representation of “ideal” masculinity within the Hemingway writing considered by them to be “style-less.” Unlike with Bukowski, however, Hemingway’s later works were thought by some critics to contain a “style” that was a poor imitation of his earlier “style-less” work. Strychacz explores the different ways critics approached the representation of the masculinity in this work, accepting it as a fictive construction<sup>15</sup>. This kind of precedence would seem to free Bukowski critics from relying on a “direct and honest” style; that is, if Hemingway’s later work can be analyzed as a “styled” and failed imitation of his earlier work, perhaps due to a “hard and clean prose style” and “brute, rapid, joyous jabs of blunt period upon period” that represent “a pure register of experience (and therefore style-less) but also somehow purely masculine (and thus a quite specific kind of style)” (87). Why then is Bukowski’s work, often also evaluated as “minimalist” and “a pure register of experience,” considered somehow only “direct and honest”? If Bukowski’s masculinity is somehow more convincing than Hemingway’s self-imitation, there should be little to find in the way of parody, but Bukowski’s impotence contrasted against Tom Mix’s cowboy masculinity is obviously rhetorical. Strychacz makes a convincing argument for the idea that “parody is gestic and self-consciously rhetorical; it is self-identical enough to remind us of an apparently self-identical style while reminding us of the difference parody makes” (99).

In another letter in *Notes*, Meggy’s language becomes that of an impoverished day laborer, she is “fired from lemon groves for being gone too long...and pickin’ too little” and she “walked out of the mission this morning. unnamable food attacking [her]

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<sup>15</sup> According to Strychacz, “while critics could allow Hemingway to be a conscious imitator, they could not (or would not) envisage the interesting possibility that Hemingway was really a self-parodist self-consciously engaged in unraveling his own stylistic and thematic concerns” (99).

hog maw guts” (141). This is not the unchallenged, comfortable or bored, middle-class woman waiting for her kids and husband to return. Although the force of the language comes across differently than when Bukowski writes of these themes, containing a more definitive “style”—more flourished—there is a clear echo in content. Meggy’s flourished prose is styled, as is Bukowski’s more “rigid” prose, and both “gendered” styles are then revealed as constructs. The apparent distinctions between the man and the woman are blurred again, showing the construction of gender through the writing process. Meggy’s usual closing is replaced with the letter M., making it difficult to know for sure if it even is a letter from Meggy. The Meggy character and the Bukowski persona blend here because they use the same genre and same themes, even if the style is contrasted. Ultimately, her “unfinished story” leaves room for hope that for Meggy and Bukowski, there is still something undefined.

Bukowski takes ample opportunity to undermine his apparent impotence, however, and as Knights argues, “we find in masculine narrative a recurrent ambivalence towards the figure of the male artist, who is at once envied for his direct contact with a highly charged and precious domain, and also despised as not altogether a man: the object of admiration as well as revulsion” (50). Knights goes on to suggest, “one traditional way of rescuing the split male artist from suspicion is to play up his patriarchal attributes: his dominance over women, and his superiority over subaltern men” (51). Although not constant in *Notes*, Bukowski does create opportunities to emphasize “patriarchal attributes.”

For example, the “unfinished” story of Meggy is contrasted with a column that seems complete. Like the column devoted to Meggy, this one reprints letters supposedly

from a woman, but they are unsigned, giving the author of the letters no name, and no real identity. In these letters, the author wants little more than to write about a hypothetical sexual encounter with Bukowski. As with Meggy, there is a poem, but it is almost pornographic; the line “I slowly hike my skirt up, hoping you’ll look at my thighs as you—“ is practically clichéd (130). Bukowski, in reaction to these letters, is not impotent to act as he was with Meggy; in fact, he seemingly writes a letter back immediately saying: Dear Unsigned, oh my god, baby, I can hardly wait! Yours truly, Charles Bukowski” (138). His “assumed” authorial persona is magnified here, because he signs his name, but the overt statement is still twisted. He wants to respond to her heterosexual act, but she is the person who takes control. At the very least, the tension helps to blur further the distinction between hegemonic representations—Bukowski is not emasculated here, but not in control, and seems to be able to occupy a space in between. Bukowski may then succeed at inhabiting the “underground” his readers want him to. In his rhizomatic processes, Bukowski pushes himself in gender multiplicity. As Strychacz notes, “belligerent manhood [...] is self-evidently rhetorical.

## CHAPTER IV

## CONCLUSION

These letters highlight the question of genre and ultimately the intrigue of *Notes* may be in its difference from Bukowski's later, more "congruent," prose. Other differences in the text of *Notes* can be found in its irregular application of mechanical conventions. Brewer claims, "the text is doggedly ungrammatical, redundant, and dedicated to its supposed artlessness" (46). This is evident even in the few examples I provide in this essay. Brewer notes that other critics have defended Bukowski's irregular mechanics in *Notes* as being a carefully constructed literary technique, but Brewer claims, "the eccentric use of lowercase letters to begin sentences seems little more than an unnecessary gimmick" (47). Here Brewer breaks with the "direct and honest" argument to point to this specific "gimmick," and because Brewer does not resolve this break, he cannot speculate on the importance of the play with punctuation and typesetting to the reader—the gimmick actually highlights Bukowski's artifice. Confined by the institution of journalism and the use of conventional realism, perhaps Bukowski relied on the typesetting to be experimental for him. More likely, however, Bukowski felt his

columns were analogous to personal letters; in his columns, he was writing letters to his readers rather than creating a formal literary publication. This can only be conjecture, but was apparently an idea that did hold some importance for him, as he mentions in an interview from 1974 that, “this could give the short story an open feeling, if it’s written in letter form (Gray 18). He was conflicted regarding this experiment because he also held that, although he had nothing to hide in his own letters, he felt writers’ correspondence was the one sacred place where they could write however they wanted. Collecting these letters, for Bukowski, actually pushes the letter genre into a public position. When the letters are collected and edited, they are subject to the same scrutiny as any other of the author’s writing, but the relative safety of the ephemeral indie newspaper mimics the true letter-writing arena.

One letter, written to Veryl Blatt a few years before Bukowski began contributing his column to *Open City*, sounds like it could have come from the collection. Bukowski writes: “veryl, you lovely baby of blue-eyed hurrah: I have written Blaz for o.k. on intro and of course we’ll get it. the most crazy thing on these letters, almost all of them drunken, is that most of the people have kept them [...] but the letters where a BLAM! a typewriter somewhere, an electric light (Bukowski, *Screams* 63). The focus, like much of *Notes*, is on writing, but the lack of capitalization at the beginning of sentences is the same as in *Notes*, as well. Brewer maintains that despite its “eccentric” quality, the punctuation may add to the ability of “the stories to...achieve an engaging immediacy” (47). The goal of achieving immediacy, which I believe Bukowski aimed for by relying on his letter-writing style, sets *Notes* apart from Bukowski’s other prose. Harrison, too, argues that the stories that appeared in the column are not as “distanced” as in

Bukowski's later short fiction. In fact, Harrison provides a statistical analysis presenting the percentage frequency of Bukowski's use of the third person in five of Bukowski's short story collections. (Incidentally, according to Harrison, 21% of *Notes* is written in the third person, compared to 76% of *Septuagenarian Stew*, published in 1990 (Harrison 305).)

Brewer claims: "A large portion of the biographical material in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* is recycled in *Post Office*, *Factotum*, *Barfly*, and several short stories. In nearly all cases, the subsequent use of experiences is more distanced, nuanced, and sophisticated" (46). However, a large portion of the material found in any of Bukowski's work is recycled.<sup>16</sup> That it is also true of *Notes* is not surprising. In fact, a large portion of the material in *Notes* turns up in the collected correspondence, expanding the multiplicities of genre. This bolsters the idea that Bukowski saw his early prose as part of a larger project, and ultimately, as a continual "work-in-progress." Consider the following portion of a letter from *Screams from the Balcony*, written to Jon and Louise Webb, in February of 1968:

met Neal Cassady before he died, up at Open City one night. I had some beer with me. have one, I said. He drank the thing like water. "have another," I said. he was crazier than I was. it was beginning to rain and we all got into the car, Bryan, myself and Cassady. We got one of the famous Cassady rides on the rain-slick streets [...] Neal was the hero of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. about a week after I met Neal they

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<sup>16</sup> For fascinating forum discussions about what material appears where, as well as a wealth of information about Bukowski's entire career, search [www.bukowski.net](http://www.bukowski.net).

found him dead along some railroad tracks in Mexico. he'd mixed too much booze with nembutal. deliberately, perhaps. (322-23)

The letter is very similar to the column that describes the same event, and some parts are even identical. The play with capitalization is also the same. Missing from the column, however, is any mention of Nembutal, alcohol, or suicide, which are apparently not important to Bukowski's representation of Cassady's death in the column. In the introduction to *Notes*, there is no play with grammar and capitalization. In addition, Bukowski said his letters should appear just as they are: he had nothing to hide and no need for censoring or changing them, in any way. The introduction, though, is like a short story, as well. In addition, it is similar to Bukowski's introduction to the Black Sparrow Press's reprinting of John Fante's *Ask the Dust*.

Bukowski's columns and letters form a rhizomatic association between his poetry and his prose, and they anticipate his work in books like *Hollywood* and *Factotum*. They also seem to exemplify not an "direct and honest style" but a fluid, indeterminate play with genre, which is accentuated by his mapping of fluid, indeterminate realities and masculinities. Whether, ultimately, readers can ever find Bukowski's invention, artifice, or fiction is not really the point, though. Certainly, other critics argue novels like *Post Office* or *Pulp* can only be read as straight fiction, or realism (just as one critic can argue that Kerouac's *On the Road* is the very epitome of the rhizome: see Marco Abel's "Speeding Across the Rhizome: Deleuze meets Kerouac *On The Road*"). Despite the seeming impasse, perhaps the rhizome is helpful here again: by focusing on Bukowski's rhizomatic and fictive play, we could, at the very least, accept the multiplicities of discourse and possibilities of alternate meanings or overtly political musings, in

Bukowski's work that is so often read as monologic, instead. Can readers and critics accept, as Strychacz asks, a modern man "contemplating his own manhood" (97)?

Bukowski's generic experiments, such as they are in *Notes*, are set on a precipice of place and time, somewhere between the generations and movements of the late-sixties and early-seventies, somewhere between modernism and post-modernism, whatever that can mean, and somewhere in or around America's West "with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers (Deleuze and Guattari, *TP* 19). These multiplicities are undeniable and readily available to the reader of *Notes*. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome may not be the tool that will unlock Bukowski's work in academe, but taking a chance on Bukowski's work shows that it can hold up to more intricate scrutiny. While critics have been involved in *knowing* the symbolic persona, Bukowski was experimenting with genre and dialogue, and those experiments succeeded in producing an asignifying result. What audiences assume is a direct, honest style essential to the creator, is actually a carefully created artistry expressed by a nomadic subject who shows through his genre multiplicities that he is not bound by biography.

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