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Old Nick Crossed the Mississippi: The Figure of the Devil in Late Cold War Era Novels of the American West

Michael Walonen

¹ The literature and folklore of the American West abound with appearances by the figure of the devil that well up from the deep substrata of U.S. cultures. During the late Cold War period (1968-1991) literary deployments of the devil within Western settings take on particularly pointed thematic contours that variously challenge and/or reinforce mainstream conceptions of evil and in doing so seek to come to terms with the meaning and direction of change in this period of vast social and cultural permutation. These long two decades saw, among other things, the emergences of the cultural realities critics have come to label postmodern, the social-structural realities dubbed postindustrial, and the various technologies of the Information Age. At the same time, they marked the birth and growth of neoliberalism as an ideology and political-economic system: the shift away from the early postwar form of social state that sought to guarantee full employment and provide a basic set of New Deal-spirited protections to its citizens, to a sort of governance driven by free market logic, privatization, and corporate power, in which citizens are atomized and valued almost exclusively in their functioning as consumers. These disorienting nature of these changes can in part explain the need of

cultural producers to look for conceptual anchors in such absolutist, foundational cultural figures as the devil, particularly given how in the face of these changes and the increasingly voluble calls of different social groups for recognition of their practices, value systems, and needs, Americans found themselves challenged to adopt more relativistic, multiculturalist outlooks. In addition, various historical events, examined below, provoked a particular cultural fixation on the nature of evil and the dark side of the American experience during this period, which helped give birth to the narrative uses of the devil figure in the three novels to be analyzed in this essay: Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), and Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). Focusing on novels—the most heteroglossic of literary genres, Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us—published by these three writers over a span of sixteen years will facilitate a consideration of the range of conceptualizations of the role and nature of evil during this era of tumult and transformation.

² An exhaustive treatment of the figure of the devil in the narrative fiction of the American West would need to consider a broader array of genres and stretch farther back in time to consider such works as Robert Bloch's "That Hellbound Train" (1958) and even representations of such early frontier moments as Robert M. Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), as well as other rich and deserving texts like Robert Heinlein's *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (1984). However, taken collectively the works of King, McCarthy, and Reed offer especially penetrating, even portentous, insight into the evolving social character of late Cold War/early postmodern America and the ways in which American cultural producers have conceived of the (internal or external) moral Other. My analysis will address some of the ethical, socio-historical, and political conflicts represented through the figure of the devil in the literature of the American West during this late-Cold War period of cultural change.

³ But before considering the thematic uses of the devil figure in the three novels in question, it bears asking why the geography of the West, and particularly the Southwest, has so frequently been conceptualized in terms of the diabolic. One aspect of this cultural equation is evident in descriptions of the region's once-sparsely settled reaches, which often take on satanic overtones due to its apparent

maleficence, its strangeness and seeming hostility.ⁱ For example, as Craig Miller observes in his "Nature and Cowboy Poetry," pre-twentieth-century cowboy ballads from West Texas and the surrounding area recurrently equate the region with the devil and hell (227). In anonymous works like "The Llano Estacado" and "Wrangler Kid" the harshness of the land is described as a form of hell come to earth, while in Homer W. Bryant's "He Rang the Devil's Knell" the vocations of the cowboy and the devil, with their common hardships and hell raising, are conflated, with the latter being presented in the role of the former (Miller 229-230). The ballad "Hell in Texas," on the other hand, presents the desiccated land "on the Rio Grande" as a home relegated to the devil by God because it is so harsh, rugged, and infertile. The devil has proceeded, so the song goes, to further accentuate these attributes so that the land conforms to his image: "he put thorns on the cacti and horns on the toads ... and poisoned the feet of the centipede." "Hell in Texas" presents even the comforts the state has to offer as taking on a diabolical character, with its water "a regular cathartic that smelt like bad eggs" and its cuisine dominated by red pepper that makes its eater "shout / 'I've a hell on the inside as well as without.'" Other cowboy ballads, such as Gail Gardner's "Sierry Petes" (also known as "Tying Knots in the Devil's Tail"), present the West as the devil's dwelling place, but in a less formidable manner, with the devil functioning as just one more hostile element of the land for the intrepid cowboy to tame and dispense with. This work narrates the encounter in the mountains near Prescott, Arizona between two tough cowboys and the Prince of Darkness, during the course of which the former lasso, tie up, brand, and knot the tail of the latter. At the song's conclusion the two leave the devil in the mountains, bound and howling in rage and discomfort, thus symbolically embodying the view that while the devilish aspects of the West have been tamed by rugged American individualists, they have not been altogether expunged.

⁴ But the West has been envisioned as not just a place rugged to the point of maleficence, but also in terms of a broader set of ideological constructs informing a sense of Western American place and the identity of its inhabitants. It is in this regard that the preponderance of the devil in the literature of the West can perhaps best be understood. In his essay "The Sense of Place" Wallace Stegner sees the West as lacking a firmly established cultural definition,

“that human attention” born of an admixture of memorialization and memory “that at its highest reach we will call poetry” (3). That is, just as the West has been seen historically as a site of spatial openness where new identities and forms of society could be forged, it has also been a place of relative semantic openness lacking a discernible social spatial character of the sort that is produced and codified by a large body of indigenous expressive culture.⁵ Because of this, the region has tended to be described in terms that reflect the essential mythic substratum of American national culture, as Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation*. Consequently, the most centrally archetypal American character types—figures including, for instance, the frontiersman, the good clergyman, the bad clergyman, and the rebel—have been especially preponderant in Western narratives. One of these figures, who has occupied a particularly obsessional role in both the American national mythic system and the expressive culture of the American West, is the devil. Cultural Historian W. Scott Poole vividly traces America’s historical obsession with the devil in his *Satan in America: The Devil We Know*, detailing why America, of all Western nations, has had such a distinctively pronounced relationship to this figure in its imaginary. He argues that America’s particular forms of religiousness have time again caused the country to look at social problems in theological terms, with the result that Americans of each successive era have seen themselves as innocent, externalizing the notion of evil by envisioning the enemy Other (Catholics, alcoholic beverages, first World War Germany, communists...) in diabolical terms (xi, xiv).

⁵ This tendency has been particularly pronounced in the American West, given that the region has held and continues to hold a special, psychically charged place in American history and the national imaginary—a synecdochic one, as the western frontier, starting with the Atlantic Seaboard and moving westward over time, has represented core American notions of promise, autonomy, and new beginning for generations of European-descended settlers and inhabitants. That is, the West as a site of cultural projection (rather than an actual lived environment) has been conceptualized as a place with a special paradigmatic relationship to American national identity. In light of this, it makes perfect sense that the figure of the devil, so psychically charged and fixating within American culture in general, would appear so

prominently within the literature of the American West. And so a broad cross-section of the chroniclers of the region, sparsely populated historically and at times seemingly hostile, have used it to serve as a site of confrontation with the devil. They envision it in terms akin to those Rudi Blesh uses to characterize the spaces of the Mississippi Delta where Robert Johnson legendarily bartered his soul: as “full of evil, surcharged with the terror of one alone among the moving, unseen shapes of the night. Wildly and terribly, the notes paint a dark wasteland” (qtd in Poole 129). In this manner the West has been culturally construed as a fraught, teleologically privileged setting for different versions of a struggle of moral forces imagined in distinctly American terms, one which had previously been imaginatively situated amidst the milieus of earlier frontiers, for instance, by Washington Irving in “The Devil and Tom Walker” and Nathaniel Hawthorne in “Young Goodman Brown.” Amongst the mountains, plains and deserts of the West, descendants of Tom Walker and Young Goodman Brown, latter-day representatives of America’s proverbial “city on a hill” have, in varying imaginative terms, been pitted by their creators against the ultimate imaginative embodiment of the malign and the destructive.ⁱⁱⁱ

⁶ This vision of the West as battleground for the clash between evil and distinctively American good is central to a work that lies close to the pulse of the contemporary United States in its apocalyptic purview and its absolutist forms of moral reckoning: Stephen King’s epic post-apocalyptic novel *The Stand*. King’s text narrates the story of a world in which over ninety-nine percent of America’s population has been killed off by a leaked government-engineered plague, the survivors of which end up grouping themselves into two camps, one located in Boulder, Colorado and led by the aged and saintly Mother Abigail, the other located in Las Vegas and led by the antichrist figure Randall Flagg. *The Stand* was an attempt by King to represent the “contradictions” he saw evident in the America of the Patty Hearst case, the Arab Oil Crisis, and the increasing despoilment of the environment as well as “write a fantasy epic [of good versus evil] on the scale of *The Lord of the Rings*, only with an American setting” (King *Danse Macabre* 370; King, “Inspiration”).

⁷ The novel’s personification of malignity and darkness, Flagg, is not the devil per se; in the words of Mother Abigail, “He ain’t Satan...but he and Satan know each other

and have kept their councils together of old" (504). In a hypnosis-induced trance Tom Cullen, one of Mother Abigail's compatriots, reveals that Flagg is an incarnation of Legion, the possessing demon(s) Christ drove into a herd of pigs in the bible (Mark 5:9, Luke 8:30, Matthew 8:28-34). But this demon has a distinctively American character—the paragraph that first introduces Flagg notes that "From New Orleans to Nogales, from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine, it was his country, and none knew or loved it better" (171). Flagg personifies the dark side of the American character, the forces of disorder, hatred, and violence that have run through the nation's history. As Jenifer Michelle D'Elia observes, "By the time Randall Flagg is introduced, readers are ready to accept that Flagg knows America—his kind of evil resonates in the landscape of a country that has long been home to dastardly deeds"(118). Flagg has instigated anti-establishmentarian violence, furthered and participated in both white-on-black and black-on-white racial violence, and helped to inspire serial killer Charles Starkweather and presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald (174-175).^{iv} King uses him to come to terms with the violent turn taken by the counter culture in the 1970s, noting that "[h]e sometimes thought he might have been born in [the] strife" of the Civil Rights Movement and placing him in conspiratorial contact with the Symbionese Liberation Army and associates of the Weathermen.^v While postwar evangelical Christianity envisioned an imminent coming of the Antichrist and end of time as an attack by an inimical, *external* force, King imagined the rise of the demonic as a rallying of a will towards destruction that has long been a part of the American equation, just as the disease that wipes out American society in the novel has been domestically engineered.

⁸ Out of the ashes of America's plague-ravaged society Flagg sets up a new capital in Las Vegas, drawing to him through their dreams the plague survivors whose character flaws are stronger than their innate goodness: "Shoplifters and sex fiends and people who like to use their fists...Not just the evil ones that are like him, but the weak ones...the lonely ones...the ones that have left God out of their hearts" (503). Together, they plan to take over and enslave the community set up by Mother Abigail and her followers in Boulder, Colorado, setting up a conflict with Manichean and Christian, as well as American nationalist, overtones. On the one hand, it is a relatively unambiguous struggle between good and evil, light and dark, but at the same time

it is a struggle of competing visions of America. The plague abates on the Fourth of July, a date that symbolically figures the survivors as creators of a new America. Flagg's people quickly reestablish the America of material comfort, Henry Miller's "air-conditioned nightmare" complete with the very un-utilitarian running fountains of Las Vegas. Theirs is also the control-society America of the prison and military industrial complexes, of repressive executions designed to scare potential criminals and preemptive military strikes against their perceived enemies. In contrast, the Boulder group clearly sees itself as the standard bearers of the U.S.A. and accordingly seeks to re-inaugurate the old socio-political order—as Leonard Cassuto notes, while Las Vegas lies in a symbolically resonant valley, the more highly elevated Boulder functions in the text as a modern version of the Puritan's American exceptionalist "city on a hill" (83).^{vi} At their first town hall meeting they sing the "Star-Spangled Banner" and one of their first items of business is to readopt the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But this drive by the novel's "good guys" to recreate their bygone society places in evidence two of its foundational tensions: that between the individual and the group and that between the natural world and technologically infused industrial / postindustrial society analyzed at length by Leo Marx in his *The Machine in the Garden*.^{vii} Throughout America's history its cultural valuation of individualistic self-determination—manifested in such various forms as its relentless drive towards economic advancement and its collective distaste for public transportation—has stood at odds with attachment to the larger community, society, and social good. In *The Stand* the Other is a source of danger—first of contagion, then, after the collapse of society, of violence—but the survivors of the plague quickly seek out other individuals to ward off loneliness, for mutual protection, and for self-affirmation. As Glen Bateman, the novel's resident sociologist affirms, "man is a gregarious, social animal, and eventually we'll get back together, if only so we can tell each other stories about how we survived the great plague of 1990" (332). However, for Stu and Frannie, two of the novel's main characters who survive up through its end, this need is outweighed by the bureaucratization, politicking, and insecurity that arise as the Boulder society evolves. Consequently, they leave the settlement, opting for that perpetual American gesture, dating back to the Puritan settlement of New England and the Westward expansion of the country, of lighting out for unoccupied territories in

search of space and autonomy to set up purer and less repressive social order.^{viii}

⁹ The text's conflation of Christianity and American nationalism within the apocalyptic narrative mode functions on other registers as well. *The Stand* presents right and wrong almost exclusively in absolute, metaphysical terms. Mother Abigail, represented throughout the text as a saintly and oracular authoritative voice within a world of destruction and uncertainty, shakes her head in tolerant disdain at the mainline Protestant and post-Vatican II Catholic tendency to view the devil in metaphorical terms. She muses that according to "the new preachers who had got on the land the last twenty years or so,"

There wasn't really any Satan, that was their gospel. There was evil, and it probably came from original sin, but it was in all of us and getting it out was as impossible as getting an egg out of its shell without cracking it. According to the way these new preachers had it, Satan was like a jigsaw puzzle—and every man, woman, and child on earth added his or her little piece to make up the whole. Yes, all that had a good modern sound to it; the trouble with it was that it wasn't true. (503-504)

¹⁰ Instead, the novel offers the unambiguously demonic Flagg, user of black magic and fomenter of destruction. Seeing the enemy in the unwavering moral terms that Mother Abigail does and the novel's characters and readers are encouraged to do, is the first step towards representing the destruction of Flagg and his followers as rational, necessary, and redemptive, in the sense that Richard Slotkin explores the archetypal narrative pattern of redemptive savage warfare against the alien Other in his trilogy of studies of the mythologies of the American West. If Flagg embodies absolute evil, then all means of combatting him become legitimate, including the Boulder settlement's sending three particularly vulnerable members of its community into harm's way as spies: a retarded man, an elderly former judge, and a woman who has been viciously and repeatedly sexually abused in the wake of the plague. Here the logic of the Boulder survivors is redolent of the worst of the long cultural pedigree of American exceptionalism coupling with the demonization of the enemy Other to justify all manner of transgressions of its ostensible ideals—a trend whose genealogy W. Scott Poole chronicles at length in his *Satan in America*.

¹¹ This struggle of American good versus American evil in *The Stand* is charted in terms of a highly significant mythopoetic cartography. Most of the Boulder settlers who

figure at all significantly in the plot, including the novel's three most central characters—Frannie, Stu, and Larry Underwood—journey to Colorado from the New England states, reenacting the historical westward migration of the Euro-American people (at least according to the popular, Anglo-centric version of U.S. history, with its privileging of the Puritans as founding fathers at the expense of the Spanish, French, and Virginia colonies). Just as the West has represented promise and potential rebirth in the American geo-cultural imaginary, the northeast, which continues to hold by far the largest concentration of the nation's population, has been equated with the old America of privilege, establishment, and tradition.^{ix} Western movement has, accordingly, been imagined in temporal as well as spatial terms, as a movement into a future which, given America's prevalent millenarian outlook, teems with the prospect of Armageddon.^x So King's choice of the West as the battleground for his good and evil survivors has a naturalized, intuitive aspect to it, which is highlighted by the fact that after the plague has run its course Larry first travels east to the Atlantic Ocean during a period of mental/emotional breakdown, only to find "land's end" and join up with two other survivors, with whom he turns around and heads west.

Just as significant as the historical and symbolic resonances of the Western region in the text, though, are the archetypal locations within it that *The Stand* employs as settings.^{xi} Las Vegas, the proverbial den of iniquity of American popular imagination, makes for a logical base of operations for Flagg's camp, particularly given that the novel's first and revised editions were published before Sin City began efforts to tweak its public image in a more family-friendly way during the 1990s. Boulder as the "good guys'" city is less clear of a choice, though part of the reason may lie in the city's history of progressive governance and local culture. More significant, though, is the fact that Boulder lies just to the east of the Great Divide, while Las Vegas stands to its west. Thus in the novel good and evil, even if they are grounded in a common American historical experience, do not bleed into each other ambiguously or relativistically—they are close but profoundly separated by a formidable boundary which the novel's heroes must traverse in their climactic quest to do battle with evil in the form of the satanic Flagg.

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* offers a very different moral vision than *The Stand*, employing the devil figure to dramatize the intertwined nature of civilization and barbarity rather than the Christian tradition of Manichean morality; it also sets its sights on the foundational past rather than an alternative present in attempting to come to terms with America's defining relationship to evil. Set amidst the badlands of West Texas, Arizona, California, and Northern Mexico, the novel recounts the experiences of a protagonist known only as "the kid" (and briefly, during the text's dénouement, as "the man") as he participates in an ill-conceived invasion of the state of Sonora with a company of filibusters, is imprisoned in a Mexican jail, released, and then engages in a genocidal hunt for Native American scalps with the historically inspired Glanton gang, whose members are gradually winnowed away by misadventure and the predations of one of their leaders, Judge Holden. Philosophical and brutally violent, the judge functions in *Blood Meridian* as a kind of Mephistopheles figure, as John Sepich observes (121-126).^{xii}

When the gang first encounters the judge they are out of gunpowder and being pursued by a band of Apaches; he makes them a batch of gunpowder out of saltpeter, sulfur, guano, and urine, and, after the Apaches have been massacred, he joins the gang in a leadership capacity and helps to lead them down the road to greater and greater violence and eventual destruction. On first introducing Judge Holden, the narrator of this episode cryptically remarks, "Give the devil his due" (131). Indeed, as Sepich notes, in this section of the text the judge is described as a "sootysouled rascal" whose handiwork is liberally seasoned with references to "the devil," and "brimstone" (121). Further, throughout the novel Holden and the rest of the gang are associated with fire and whiskey (liquid fire), thus accentuating the hellish aspect of their situation (Sepich 150-151). What Sepich overlooks, however, is the fact that the imputations of devilishness and the entire narrative that casts his joining forces with the gang in a Faustian light come from the ex-priest Tobin, and they say just as much about Tobin's Manichean Christian outlook as they do about the character of the judge. The same goes for tent revivalist preacher Reverend Green's cry "This is him. The devil" (7), which Sepich also cites as evidence of Holden's devilishness. In other words, Sepich fails to adequately account for perspective—there are demonic aspects to Judge Holden (Sepich notes, for instance, two interesting

textual parallels between descriptions of the judge and Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" [119, 122]), but he represents a broader set of forces than this. On an archetypal level, he is just as much the Magus or the Alchemist. Philosophically, and most pertinently for this study of the diabolical aspects of Western place, the judge is an embodiment of George Bataille's dictum "I MYSELF AM WAR" (239). The judge represents everything that is brutal and carnal in human beings; he embraces existence as violence, flux, and the competing exertion of wills. He kills passionlessly and haphazardly; he knows jurisprudence, natural science, and modern and ancient languages—not out of any humanistic impulse or sense of calling, but for the sake of mastery. When called on to explain his meticulous cataloging of fauna and artifacts, he explains, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent ...Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earthIn order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation" (207). Here the judge's will to power manifests itself in the logical extreme of Western society's positivism and reduction of the external world to its immediate use values. For him this is one of the forms of violent struggle endemic to existence; in a kindred vein he conceives of the risk and carnage embodied in war as lying at the heart of the human condition:

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be...Men are born for games. Nothing else...But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all...war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (259-261)

- 14 Ultimately, it is in this, in his consummate embrace of the forces of destruction, upheaval, and non-productive expenditure that marks the malign and imposing Judge Holden as, in a sense, satanic.

15 The central narrative conflict in *Blood Meridian* is that of the judge, the personification of these principles, seeking to have the orphan, the kid, embrace him and his terms of existence in a father/son relationship. The kid kills and

scalps with the rest of the Glanton gang and is tempted to embrace their life of aimless bestiality and the judge's joyfully Hobbesian philosophy of life as "war of all against all" (96). However, on multiple occasions he shows mercy and/or compassion, both of which are anathema to the judge: for example, when he refuses to shoot the wounded Shelby, when he helps Brown remove an arrow from his leg at the risk of his own life, and when he refuses Tobin's urgings to shoot Holden. Because of this, when he visits him in a San Diego jail after their predatory waltz in the desert, Holden judges the kid a failure for not having turned away from his innate compassion to take up Holden's path, for thus betraying the gang in his heart. He condemns the kid: "Don't you know I'd have loved you like a son? ... [but] You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (319). In the end, the kid's triumph, his preservation of his humanity in the face of the judge's satanic temptations, is only temporary; perhaps the novel suggests that such a victory can only be contingent and transitory. Twenty-eight years after his exploits with the Glanton gang, the kid, now referred to as the man, reenounters the judge in a frontier bar, where he is overwhelmed and destroyed by him in an act of carnage that, for once in the novel, takes place off stage, and has consequently haunted the most prurient corners of its readers' imaginations.

¹⁶ As Stephen Shaviro compellingly argues, the textuality of *Blood Meridian*, wavering between history and archetype, realism and symbolism, fosters a particular relationship between the reader and its many scenes of violence, one of complicity with the brutal acts of Judge Holden and the rest of the gang (155-156). As such, *Blood Meridian* gorily reenacts America's westward-pushing Manifest Destiny in a way that renders the reader a culpable participant rather than a passive, abstracted observer free to take a sanctimonious position of moral condemnation (187). So the crucible of the soul the kid faces is the reader's and the American nation's as well: how to preserve the best of one's human capacities in the face of the equally human "satanic" drive to eradicate the Other and possess all that can be forcibly taken.

¹⁷While McCarthy uses the diabolic to lay bare the barbarity that exists as the shadow side of civilization, Ishmael Reed seeks to reclaim and reconfigure the devil figure as a means of contesting the dominant values of his era. His pataphysicist *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is a counter-cultural work written at the crest of the late-sixties period of social protest, a time whose desperate seeking after alternative forms of spirituality and fervent exploration of sensual gratification led to various forms of fascination with and reappraisals of Satanism and the figure of the devil, as Gavin Baddeley notes in his *Lucifer Rising* (43). Reed's devil figure, protagonist Loop Garoo Kid, bears the stamp of this Age of Aquarius cultural moment: he is a Dionysian figure employed narratively to subvert the early Christian equation of the pagan underworld and fertility gods with the diabolic (Russell 11), thereby challenging the puritanism of American culture and its persecution of dissenting groups in the name of Christianity.

¹⁸*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* narrates the adventures of a rodeo rider and hoodoo shaman named the Loop Garoo Kid in and around the Western settlement of Yellow Back Radio during a time that is part 1960s, part Old West, and part Lewis and Clark expedition.^{xiii} The book begins with Loop Garoo Kid and a small group of fellow performers in a traveling circus arriving in the town of Yellow Back Radio, where, in a fairly straightforward nod to the youth unrest of the 1960s, they find that the fun-seeking children of the town have driven off the adults and taken over. Shortly thereafter, many of the children and most of Loop's companions are slaughtered by gunmen working for arch-capitalist land baron and cattle rancher Drag Gibson. Loop then goes into hiding, from which he casts hoodoo curses on Drag and his cattle until the former is forced to call in the pope.^{xiv} The book ends with Drag and the white, Christian, capitalist establishment he represents defeated by a coalition of the subaltern, while Loop, having fulfilled his role, rides off on the pope's ship.

¹⁹At its outset the text subtly places in evidence the fact that Loop is Lucifer, the fallen angel, noting that he has a cleft foot and was "booted out of his father's house after a quarrel," but this identification isn't noted again or reinforced until Loop's meeting with the pope towards the end of the narrative (9). This matter-of-fact diabolicalness helps Reed demystify the evil of the devil, reconfiguring him to suit his own thematic purposes Robert Elliot Fox notes

that the text particularly keys in on the Promethean aspects of the devil, those beloved by the Romantics, in the Loop Garoo Kid (45). Just as prominent, if not more so, are the chthonian elements. Loop hides out in a cave like pagan male fertility gods and carries a large snake around with him. Along these same lines, the text playfully mocks Christianity's conflation of virginity and idealized maternity by posing the Virgin Mary as a hyper-sexual mother goddess lusting after Loop, who proceeds to pimp her out (163).

²⁰In addition to casting Loop's diabolicalness in a way that draws on the subversive cultural resonances of an underworld male fertility god, Reed's text poses him as a sort of trickster figure as well, thereby using this Africana cultural trope to undermine the traditional Western good/evil binary opposition. Loop, who like many other tricksters and shamanic figures in the Africana tradition was born with a caul, repeatedly uses spells and other forms of trickery to subvert the efforts of Drag and other characters to achieve domination over their human fellows by undermining such rudiments of social power as property and public image (9). Through the use of his hoodoo spells, he publically humiliates the town preacher, brings down a variety of illnesses upon Drag, and kills off the latter's livestock. Loop tells the Pope that his power does not have evil sources, but is more of a cosmic joke: "I've always been harmless—St. Nick coming down the chimney, children leaving soup for me—always made to appear foolish, the scapegoat of all history" (165). The same sense is conveyed when he preens in the mirror the preacher uses to ward him off and lashes the crucifix from the preacher's hand before comically reducing him to a "quivering mumbling heap" with a series of taunting insults and whip cracks (103).

²¹This tricksterish undermining of the preacher is part of the overarching animosity the text poses as existing between the Christian church and the "impious" sexuality and sense of play of older faiths. As Reginald Martin observes, the text conceives of Christianity and its figurehead the pope as establishmentarian powers which constrain the possibilities of leading a "full" life and seek to eradicate groups offering alternatives (75). Loop castigates the pope for having "cooked up" the witch-hunting manual "the Witches' Hammer [*sic*] ... to crush my followers way back when" and for the Catholic Church's "massacre" of "the Gnostics, not to mention the Bogomils, Abigenses, and Waldenses" (162, 165). At issue here is the church's and

Western society's violent intolerance of differing worldviews and ways of living, made possible by the process of canonization, of "ascrib[ing] to hearsay [*sic*], apocrypha or superstition" forms of narrative, being, and belief outside of the keen of the narrow institutionalized Christian purview (164). These have included the "satanic" varieties of spiritual practice represented by Loop, particularly African forms of knowledge and religion, which have been delegitimized, "discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited,'" to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison (61). As the pope in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* admits:

We've tried to hide the facts by ridiculing the history of Sub-Saharan Africa and claiming that of North Africa as our own. Notice how the term "blackamoor" was dropped from St. Augustine's name, and how our friends the German Aryan scholars faked the history of the Egyptians by claiming them to be white....when African slaves were sent to Haiti, Santo Domingo and other Latin American countries, we Catholics attempted to change their pantheon, but the natives merely placed our art alongside theirs. Our insipid and uninspiring saints were no match for theirs....When Vodun arrived in America, the authorities became so paranoid they banned it for a dozen or so years....Loop Garoo seems to be practicing a syncretistic American version....It's important that we wipe it out because it can always become a revolutionary force. Many of the Haitian revolutionaries were practicing priests. (153-154)

²²In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, as in other works from the same period like his celebrated *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Reed imagines a more inclusive, multicultural social order that forgoes this sort of repressiveness. The spirit he imagines undergirding such a society is what he terms "neo-hoodoo," a force of primal spontaneity, vitality, and sexuality opposed to the rigid pieties of Christianity ("Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto" 2064). For Reed, as postulated through his neo-hoodoo priest, the Loop Garoo Kid, and in somewhat more expository discursive terms in his "Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto," Neo-Hoodoo is the Dionysian force of flux and creation that runs through traditional African religion and rock and roll. It is the carnivalesque spirit that can potentially disorder the foundations of American society, clearing the way for a promiscuous mixing of different cultures and their attendant spaces that poses such a threat to the established order (Fox 49; Swope 613-4, 620). The resolution to this conflict in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is not one of happy adaptation of the spirit of Neo-Hoodoo, however. Rather, the citizens of the West (Americans), child and adult (hippies and bourgeoisie), turn away from the large scale cultural conflict Loop is

engaged in and head towards a gaudy city of mass produced material comfort rising in the West: “in the distance could be seen rising a really garish smaltzy [*sic*] super technological anarcho-paradise. The people began to trot in slow motion towards the blue kidney shaped swimming pools, the White Castle restaurants, the drive-in bonanza markets, the computerized buses and free airplanes, the free anything one desired” (170). This fictional movement West towards this Las Vegas-esque materialist “Ciabola”^{xv} in abandonment of the revolutions of the 1960s strikes a prescient chord, given the number of theorists such as Robert Venturi who have seen a distillation of postmodern America as a whole in Las Vegas’s superficial affluence, free play of glitzy signs, and unfettered celebration of the pop cultural.

²³So for Reed, the devil who defines the struggle over the tack of progress and the definition of Western space is left by society’s wayside in the endgame, as the forward march of consumer capitalism demonstrates a remarkable capacity to sidestep otherwise intractable forms of conflict. King’s more conventional devil survives the nuclear blast that levels Las Vegas at the end of *The Stand*, being reborn in a far-off locale, and so he will continue to serve as an obstacle as Americans continue in their spatio-temporal movement westwards.^{xvi} So, it seems, will Cormac McCarthy’s dark force of life as war embodied in the judge: “He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die” (348). In this regard all three speak to the unresolved conflict and sense of moral flaw at the heart of American society: the enduring quality of the nation’s “dark side” for King, its unabating penchant for violence and imperialism for McCarthy, and the unconsummated promise of its countercultural revolution for Reed.

* * *

²⁴There are certain conjunctures of space and time that are particularly conducive to diabolic imaginings. This was the case for the Hebrews of Roman-occupied Judea, who first conceived of the idea of Satan as a separate and distinct entity as they sought to comprehend their oppressed social condition, and, in a very different way, for late-nineteenth-century Parisians, whose fascination with Satanism reflected an attempt to confront the incipient modern era while processing a deeply ingrained Catholic cultural pedigree (Russell 32-33). For America of the late-

twentieth century, confronted with the aftermath of the Vietnam War, rapid technological change, a rising tide of cultural and moral relativism, and a longstanding tradition of millenarian outlook, the devil has similarly served as a useful vehicle for dealing with cultural anxieties. Though, with the exception of King, these authors invert or reconfigure most of the conventional cultural associations attached to this figure, they nevertheless draw on the unparalleled symbolic power of the devil in the Western tradition, as they do upon the mythic conceptualization of the American West as a privileged site of encounter, showdown, and individualism. As writers who have deeply tapped into the cultural tensions of their era and the broader historio-cultural trajectories of the United States, King, McCarthy, and Reed give a sense of the range of thematic roles in which the devil has been employed in American writings of the late Cold War Era that take up the variegated issue of moral struggle in the continually charged, even if increasingly less culturally inchoate, spaces west of the Mississippi.

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NOTES

i. In this regard, narratives of the American West often resemble those of Puritan New England, in their imagining the "wilderness" surrounding them and its Native American inhabitants in devilish terms. This widespread trope of the Native American as savage devil, found for instance in the *Lonesome Dove* series of texts, is explored at length in such works as Shari M. Hundorf's *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* and Gretchen M. Bataille's collection *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations*.

ii. In both these regards, of course, this apprehension of the West has been predicated on an elision--an antipathy to and willful ignorance of the modes of relating to the land of the Native American tribes who had inhabited these territories long before the time of Euro-American encroachments.

iii. The aridness of much of the West, particularly those locales in the Southwest that the devil has been preponderantly imagined within, has no doubt reinforced this connection. As Maximilian Rudwin notes in his *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, the devil and demons have been particularly associated with desert spaces due to such biblical passages that situate them in "dry places," such as Matthew 12:43 and Luke 11:24 (62-63).

iv. In his recent novel *11/22/63* (2011), King attributes America's souring, its fall from what he presents as the grace of the Kennedy years, to Oswald.

v. Thus, while Philip Roth attributes this birth of violent revolutionary domestic dissent to the fecklessness and myopicness of the generation of early Cold War America in his *American Pastoral* (1997), King sees it as a manifestation of the

ingrown dark side of America's character. That is, while Roth envisions this epochal conflict in socio-political terms, King does so in metaphysical ones.

vi. Cassuto further notes that the novel's almost wholesale indifference to events occurring outside of the United States, within which it situates its grand conflict between good and evil, marks it as a bearer of American exceptionalist ideology (83).

vii. Jonathan P. Davis notes that this struggle "between pursuing the American dreams of life, liberty, and individual happiness and surrendering those values for the sake of keeping the societal machine rolling" is one of the most prominent thematic focuses in King's oeuvre (90).

viii. As numerous critics have pointed out, throughout his oeuvre King idealizes and sentimentalizes purity and innocence.

ix. Along these lines, the Trashcan Man, one of Flagg's associates, refers to Las Vegas in the novel as Ciabola, the legendary city of gold lying to the west.

x. For an incisive consideration of this cultural dynamic as it pertains to Southern California, see Mike Davis's "The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles" in his *Ecology of Fear*.

xi. Ed Casebeer observes in his "Dialogue Within the Archetypal Community of *The Stand*" that this same archetypal character extends to most of the personae of *The Stand* and many of King's other works, which accounts for much of their popularity.

xii. This is not to argue reductively the judge is simply Mephistopheles or the devil--he is a complex character bearing prominent aspects of this figure (making him relevant to this study), but also shades of Captain Ahab, Iago, and the archetypal figures noted below, among others.

xiii. "Loup garou" is French for werewolf, and so the protagonist's name lends him a dark protean quality. Additionally, as Robert Elliot Fox notes, "loop" plays off significations of continuity, circuitry, and being thrown for a loop (45).

xiv. Who functions in the text as an archetypal "any-pope," but whose textual clues also encourage the reader to see as the inquisitorial Pope Innocent VII.

xv. Here Reed, like the Trashcan Man in *The Stand*, uses the name of the mythic seven cities of gold sought out by the conquistadors to evoke the West as a goal/ideal.

xvi. The original sense of the Hebrew word "satan" is "one who obstructs" (Russell 28).

ABSTRACTS

The figure of the devil – employed time and again by Americans as a means of culturally construing the perceived enemy Other, as W. Scott Poole illustrates in his study *Satan in America* – appears with great frequency within the corpus of the literature of the American West. This essay focuses on Western regional novels of the late Cold War period (1968-1991), analyzing their manner of using the devil figure to variously challenge and/or reinforce mainstream conceptions

of evil and come to terms with the meaning and direction of America at a time of crossroads and vast social transfiguration. It argues that Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) employs the satanic Randall Flagg to interrogate what is taken as an intrinsic strain of evil running through America's history and emerging in especially pointed form in the social unrest and malaise of the late 1960s and 1970s. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), on the other hand, attributes Mephistophelean attributes (among others) to its antagonist Judge Holden as a means of dramatizing how barbarity, destruction, and expenditure are inexorably intertwined with the values and goals of civilization, while Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) reconfigures and repurposes the devil figure, drawing on the cultural valences of pagan male fertility figures and the Africana traditions he elsewhere conceptualizes as "neo-hoodoo" to wage a counter-cultural attack upon the pillars of American and Western Christian society.

INDEX

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