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Erik Mortenson

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What the Shadows Know: The Crime-Fighting Hero the Shadow and His Haunting of Late-1950s Literature

Erik Mortenson

During the Depression era of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s, millions of Americans sought escape from the tumultuous times in pulp magazines, comic books, and radio programs. In the face of mob violence, joblessness, war, and social upheaval, masked crusaders provided a much needed source of security where good triumphed over evil and wrongs were made right. Heroes such as Doc Savage, the Flash, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Captain America, and Superman were always there to save the day, making the world seem fair and in order. This imaginative world not only was an escape from less cheery realities but also ended up providing nostalgic memories of childhood for many writers of the early Cold War years.

But not all crime fighters presented such an optimistic outlook. The Shadow, who began life in a 1931 pulp magazine but eventually crossed over into radio, was an ambiguous sort of crime fighter. Called “the Shadow” because he moved undetected in these dark spaces, his name provided a hint to his divided character. Although he clearly defended the interests of the average citizen, the Shadow also satisfied the demand for a vigilante justice. His diabolical laughter is perhaps the best sign of his ambiguity. One assumes that it is directed at his adversaries, but its vengeful and spiteful nature strikes fear into victims, as well as victimizers. He was a tour guide to the underworld, providing his fans with a taste of the shady, clandestine lives of the criminals he pursued. Relishing his

role, the Shadow went beyond the simple exploits of a superhero like Superman, and even those he saved were not sure whether they would like to come across him on a dark night in a strange alley.

This paper explores the role that the Shadow plays in the work of Sylvia Plath, Jack Kerouac, and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and the reasons these writers were attracted to him. At first glance, this seems an odd assortment of writers to bring together. Though these writers shared an interest in the confessional writing that gained momentum in the 1950s, their differences are more striking than their similarities. Plath, who married the British poet Ted Hughes and had two children, spent a good deal of time in England writing highly controlled verse. Kerouac, a peripatetic loner who celebrated America, insisted on spontaneous, free-flowing production. Baraka, an African American writer struggling with a racist America, eventually took the uptown train from the village to Harlem in order to produce more politicized work meant to directly affect his community. What unites these different writers is their mutual interest in the undercurrent of ambiguity that permeates the Shadow. All three writers penned tributes to this crime fighter, using him to examine the loss of childhood innocence and entry into the adult world. But the ambiguity the Shadow represented also provided a means of critiquing the binary dichotomies that helped define the postwar world. Plath, Kerouac, and Baraka used the Shadow to explore the obverse side of American optimism, simultaneously questioning the innocence of childhood and the conformism of America along the way.¹

The Shadow Knows

Although the pulps and the radio both shared the Shadow, the character manifested differently in each. In the pulps, the Shadow is part hardboiled detective and part mysterious avenger in equal turns. Lamont Cranston, his alter ego, is the same man about town as in the radio programs and resorts to the same type of deduction to solve his cases. But the pulp Shadow draws heavily on the detective novels of the period. He is tough, streetwise, and lives by his own code of vigilante justice outside the law. The pulp Shadow also has a stable of helpers (along with several alter egos) to do his bidding. He and his gang battle villains in streets and alleyways until the Shadow ends victorious, with the evildoers either dead or behind bars. The illustrations for the pulps likewise point to the influence of the hardboiled genre on Walter Gibson's writing [Figure 1]. The stark contrasts of light and darkness are stylistically similar to film noir, a genre that borrowed extensively from the novels of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler. The pulp Shadow fits nicely into a type of fiction that flourished in the 1930s and 1940s—the antihero who is beholden to his own code of ethics.

What set the pulp Shadow apart from his hardboiled counterparts is what Gibson called his “mysterioso” side.² In an interview with Ann Charters, Gibson remarked that he “didn’t want to go into fantasy or science fiction” with his

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CHAPTER I.

ABOARD THE LIMITED.

THE Eastern Limited was driving through the night. To scattered passengers, seated in the lounge of the observation car, the whistle of the locomotive came as a distant blare from far ahead. The train, though long and heavy, was maintaining its fast schedule.

Two men were chatting over newspapers. Strangers who had met aboard the train, they were discussing subjects of common interest. One news story seemed to have impressed them both.

"Well," one passenger was saying, "I can't criticize the governor of this state for pardoning those two convicts. He must have studied their cases mighty closely."

Figure 1: *The Shadow Magazine* depicted the crime fighter in action scenes reminiscent of the hardboiled and film noir genres, hat and cloak covering his identity as he casts his dark shadow on the wall.

character but rather wanted to create a “mysterious man who comes out of the dark.”³ This mysterious aspect occurs repeatedly in the pulp magazines and is ultimately responsible for creating a character that exists on the border between tough vigilante and superhuman crime fighter. The Shadow’s strangeness could be heard in his laugh. In “The Red Blot,” the narrator declares that “a whispering laugh—an uncanny announcement of a sinister presence—this betokened the arrival of The Shadow.”⁴ In another novel, his laugh is described as “mocking,” “merciless,” and filled with “hollow mirth.”⁵ Terms like “uncanny presence” and the name “the Shadow” reinforce the sort of *mysterioso* atmosphere that Gibson created in his work. The Shadow unsettles as well as protects.

The Shadow, however, started out on the radio. The 1930s and 1940s were radio’s golden age, and the Shadow was one of its most popular shows, reaching “more than 15 million listeners at home” and “becoming the highest rated dramatic program on the air” during its peak years.⁶ *The Shadow* radio programs hinged on the conceit that the Shadow, through a skill learned “years ago in the Orient,” has the ability to “cloud men’s minds” so that he can move through the show undetected by the villains.⁷ Most episodes relied on this power to place the Shadow in private dialogue with the villain in order to extract a confession. The Shadow becomes the conscience of the character, and through threats and cajolery the criminal eventually either confesses or helps the Shadow to apprehend the guilty party. Though the radio programs were a bit less violent than the pulps, the Shadow is more than willing to employ vigilante justice in both to achieve his ends.

The Shadow’s signature trademark, his diabolical laugh, bookended each program and allowed him to startle his victims, lending an eerie quality to the radio programs and striking fear into the hearts of his opponents. Thus, his famous line, “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows,” is both a statement of fact and a threat. The radio show retained a bit more ambiguity than the pulps, because it is not always clear whether “the Shadow knows” before the evildoer confesses or after. Yet like his pulp counterpart, the Shadow, a “student of science,” can usually deduce what that criminal is plotting.⁸ In the end, however, Lamont Cranston yields to the Shadow in order to extract an airtight confession and wrap up the facts of the case for the listeners.

Ultimately, it was his secrecy that set the Shadow apart from other crime fighters. The Shadow confounds easy dichotomies, proving that the darkness, or better yet, the space between light and darkness, holds the possibility for something positive to emerge. But in the case of the Shadow, it is a good always tinged with an undercurrent of fear, always ready to disappear back into mocking laughter. While he may have declared at the end of the programs that “the weed of crime bears bitter fruit . . . crime does not pay,” the methods he used to arrive at that conclusion sent a mixed message.

Plath's Dark Understanding

We normally think of understanding in terms of the visible. Phrases such as "seeing is believing" and "shedding light on the subject" highlight this assumption. Truth is illumination, like lightbulbs going on over a cartoon character's head or sunbeams streaming down from the heavens. But for Plath, it is the shadows that figure as the source of understanding in her work. In her 1955 short story "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," Plath addresses the theme of lost innocence through a judicious use of shadow imagery. Plath returns to this theme in her 1959 story "The Shadow," where she exchanges Superman for the Shadow in order to broaden a story about the loss of childhood innocence into a contemporary social critique. The Shadow, with his ability to "know what evil lurks in the hearts of men," reveals the duplicity and hypocrisy that Plath's work repeatedly struggles to announce. Standing at the threshold between good and evil, the Shadow allows Plath to reveal the dark truths of the postwar world.

In "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," the narrator's problems begin with a film. At her friend Paula's birthday party, the children are taken to see *Snow White*. But the double feature also includes a "movie about prisoners of the Japanese who were being tortured by having no food or water."⁹ The juxtaposition of the purity of *Snow White* and the atrocities of the war film is the beginning of the narrator's loss of innocence. Not only does the film undermine the make-believe world of the fairy tale, it also brings into sharp contrast the artificiality of the innocent war games the narrator had played earlier with her friends. Her twilight dreams of flying with Superman are replaced by darker images of conflict: "No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figure came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams."¹⁰ As disturbing as this violent intrusion into her peaceful childhood is, it is only the prelude to a full understanding of the world's horrors.

The true moment of dark understanding occurs when Paula slips in an oil slick and besmirches her new snowsuit. While the slip is accidental, Paula immediately singles out the narrator with an accusatory "You pushed me."¹¹ The other children pick up the chant, and the narrator walks away. Unfortunately, this act of betrayal and hypocrisy is exacerbated by her parents' subsequent actions. She arrives home, where bright images of light appear to support the idea that all is well: "Candles were set on the white linen tablecloth, and miniature flames flickered in the silver and the glasses. I could see another room reflected beyond the dark dining-room window where the people laughed and talked in a secure web of light, held together by its indestructible brilliance."¹² But the arrival of an unexpected visitor breaks the illusion. As her mother learns of the rumor from a neighbor, she asks her daughter why she didn't tell her about what happened. When the narrator denies the accusation, her mother claims, "Of course we'll believe you." But this claim of parental support is ambiguous,

undermined as it is by the phrase “Of course,” which could signal either unwavering support or familial obligation.

The change of mood is reinforced by images of ever-encroaching shadows. The narrator retreats up a darkened staircase and down a hall “without turning on the light switch” to her room.¹³ Uncle Frank, whom the narrator had earlier associated with the figure of Superman, comes to the distraught girl to offer consolation and discover the truth. But his role as male protector is challenged. While the narrator can see his “strong shoulders bulk against the moonlight,” nevertheless “in the shadows his face was featureless.”¹⁴ Uncle Frank is equally noncommittal when the narrator repeats her innocence, claiming, “Okay, but we’ll pay for another snowsuit anyway just to make everybody happy.”¹⁵ Good does not triumph here, and it is unclear whether Uncle Frank even believes her. The paying for another snowsuit despite her innocence covers the act in a further layer of hypocrisy. Motives and meanings, like Uncle Frank’s shadowed face, have become obscured.

Superman might save the day in the world of children, but in the world of adults, expediency rules. Uncle Frank tries to mitigate the damage with the claim that “ten years from now no one will ever know the difference,”¹⁶ but he obviously misses the point—it matters to his niece. The narrator is left by herself, with a sinking feeling of acceptance: “I lay there alone in bed, feeling the black shadow creeping up the underside of the world like a flood tide.”¹⁷ Here, the shadow represents the true knowledge of the world. Clear, illuminating light, which made everything seem so safe and secure, is replaced by a darkness that, while disturbing, nevertheless stands for a new understanding of how the world operates. The last line provides the story with its moral: “That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference.”¹⁸ This difference is the shadow of doubt that has crept up to overtake the narrator. The world is neither fair nor just.

Plath revisited the theme of lost innocence four years later in “The Shadow.” The overall structure and theme of this piece is identical to “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit.” The young narrator, who now has the name Sadie, discovers the truth about the world when an innocent game of tickling results in her biting the leg of her friend Leroy. In keeping with the Superman tale, the hypocrisy of the world extends beyond that of deceptive children and all the way into the adult world. But despite these similarities, the differences between these stories are telling. More ambiguous and in many ways darker, this updated version brings the cultural context of the story into starker contrast.

The title is the first clue to Plath’s new emphasis. The figure of Superman dominates the first tale, standing for truth and good and the imagination of flight. Replacing Superman with the Shadow immediately sends a darker message. The narrator actually likes Leroy, a boy who builds railroads, reads science fiction magazines, and constructs a radio set that “tuned in on regular programs like ‘The Shadow’.”¹⁹ While the narrator’s world is filled with the Green Hornet, Wonder Woman, Superman, and Mickey Mouse,²⁰ it is the

Shadow, with his “nasal, sardonic voice” rhetorically asking “Who knows what Evil lurks in the hearts of men?... The Shadow knows, heh, heh, heh, heh” that provides the children with their “accumulating evidence of the warped, brutish emotions current in the world beyond Washington Street and the precincts of the Hunnewell School.”²¹ Most of the radio programs and comic strips present a brighter picture of the world and lead to Sadie “seeing the picture so small, and in such elementary colors.”²² It is the Shadow who adds ambiguity to this picture, teaching the narrator “how mean people can be.”²³

The uncertainty that the narrator gradually experiences begins with the radio programs. Doubt grows slowly until it eventually affects the adult world and leads to the story’s climax. As Sadie relates, “Each week Leroy and I studied our lesson: somewhere innocent victims were being turned into rats by a vicious, experimental drug, burned on their bare feet with candles, fed to an indoor pool of piranha fish.”²⁴ But such stylized torture gives way to the real thing, as Leroy learns through hearsay of Japanese bamboo torture methods, which in turn are made real by a wartime film that depicts American prisoners of war dying of thirst while sadistic Japanese guards look on. Still, the Shadow is a world of make-believe as well, reinstituting, at the end of every half hour, a world of order and stability: “We had no cause to wonder: *Will* the good people win? Only: *How?*”²⁵

But the real horror of the world quickly enters the narrator’s life in the form of history. Air raids and dark cellars begin to alert the narrator to a new threat that points to both the Second World War and the Cold War. “In spite of my assiduous study of the world,” she drily comments, “there was something I had not been told.”²⁶ She finds her answer soon enough in the actions of her friends and neighbors. Although the narrator has made peace with Leroy and his sister Maureen, the incident is still circulating. Maureen informs her of this fact on the way to school: “‘My mother says it’s not your fault for biting Leroy,’ she called out in clear, saccharine tones. ‘My mother says it’s because your father’s German’.”²⁷ The narrator tries to make sense of this senseless assertion. She reasons that although her father does teach German at the city college and does not go to church regularly, “that didn’t make him any less American.”²⁸ The racism of the charge, along with the hypocrisy of churchgoers groundlessly claiming that a man of German descent might be a “spy,” sends the narrator running home to her mother.²⁹ In a scene reminiscent of “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” Sadie enters a darkened house with only “wan light” and proceeds to question her mother about the accusations.³⁰ Her mother explains that “in wartime people often become frightened and forget what they know,” adding that Sadie’s father might have to “go away from us” for a little while to a camp for German citizens.³¹

The invocation of such disturbing historical events makes “The Shadow” a more direct social statement. Robin Peel’s *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* and Al Strangeways’s *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows* both link the discourse surrounding Nazism and the Holocaust with the burgeoning

Cold War concern over nuclear war as evidenced by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The ideological hypocrisy and self-serving rhetoric of the Nazi regime can easily be mapped onto the rampant McCarthyism in the mid-1950s, as well as onto the discourse surrounding the postwar nuclear world. Luke Ferretter observes that Plath's references to Japanese concentration camps in both "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Shadow" have a double meaning, since the FBI "arrested over 6,000 German aliens during the war, and detained them in some fifty camps," and that "Plath knew about these camps."³² Given her German and Austrian ancestry, Plath saw these events as contributing to her sense of the loss of a childhood belief in justice. And given Cold War rhetoric that demonized those outside prevailing norms, it is easy to see Plath's story as symbolic of McCarthy's hunt for subversives. America may claim to be a country of freedom where individuals and their rights are respected, but historical events cast their shadow over such assertions. As a postwar culture of conformity aptly proved, American freedoms were often paradoxical.

Plath again closes the story with the image of the shadow figured as understanding: "I understood, then, that she was trying to give me the piece to the puzzle I had not possessed. The shadow in my mind lengthened with the night blotting out our half of the world, and beyond it; the whole globe seemed sunk in darkness."³³ The lengthening of the shadow in Sadie's mind dramatizes the slippery slope that such insights inaugurate. Once the dualistic notion of good versus bad, right versus wrong is dispensed with, everything becomes subject to review—friends, neighbors, Superman, America, God, "the whole globe." Sadie's "our half of the world," a reference that points simultaneously to America, the Allied forces, and the free world as opposed to the Communist world, suddenly comes under shadow. Even the Shadow comes under review. In the make-believe world of radio, the darkness is protected by a lurking presence bent on the punishment of the wicked. Now darkness has been evacuated, plunging the narrator into a world she never thought possible. The title of the piece takes on a double resonance, standing for both the radio hero who inaugurates Sadie's interest in knowing the world and the lengthening shadow that stands for her full realization. Thus, Sadie's revelation that "I don't think there is any God then" is answered by her mother's terse response, "Some people think that."³⁴ Sadie is denied even the consolation of atheism—true understanding is the realization that nothing can truly be known.

What the Shadow teaches is that, ironically, the space of darkness is where the reality of the world "comes to light." Visibility does not equal understanding because truth is never so clear. The Shadow was still a hero in the Cold War not because he was fighting the obvious criminals of the Depression or the ridiculous master villains of radio but because he was a symbol of the destruction of a hypocrisy that formed the backbone of McCarthyism, nuclear brinkmanship, and fervent patriotism. A great part of the appeal of this character for Plath (and for Kerouac and Baraka, as we will see) was that he contained both good and evil. Although he was on the side of justice, he nevertheless knew "what

evil lurks in the hearts of men.” The demand for sharp binaries that fail to fit the facts of the world produced hypocrisy in the postwar period. In a world where adults lie and superheroes fail, it is the darkened space of the Shadow that tells the truth.

Doctor Sax and Writing Done in the Shadows

Kerouac, in his coming-of-age novel *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three*, written 1952, uses the figure of the Shadow as a portal back into his childhood. Through his recently discovered spontaneous prose style, Kerouac is able to resurrect memory in the act of narration. But this reclamation is anything but stable. In the present-tense telling of the past, Kerouac draws on the Shadow and shadow imagery in general to comment on the gap between now and then. But the ostensible theme of lost childhood innocence and entry into the adult world quickly becomes a comment on America’s loss of political innocence, as Kerouac’s Cold War present intrudes on his past. In this space of retelling, the Shadow allows Kerouac to deconstruct the us-versus-them thinking that characterized Cold War discourse.

Doctor Sax owes its existence to the Shadow. Kerouac was an avid fan of the crime fighter, collecting issues of *The Shadow Magazine* and spending hours perusing them in his room. The autobiographically-based protagonist Jackie Duluo is also a fan, and there is much reading and trading of the magazines among his friends throughout the novel. Kerouac even considered titling his work after his favorite boyhood character. In a May 1952 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac states, “I have ‘Doctor Sax’ ready to go now ... or ‘The Shadow of Doctor Sax,’ I’ll simply blow on the vision of the Shadow in my 13th and 14th years on Sarah Ave. Lowell.”³⁵ The character of Doctor Sax is an amalgam in the novel, but by far the largest inspiration for Doctor Sax, both character and novel, was the Shadow.

Doctor Sax is an eclectic book. Its nominal aim is to describe the coming of age Kerouac experienced as an adolescent growing up in a French-Canadian household in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the Depression, but its presentation is anything but straightforward. Kerouac interweaves three narrative strands in an interesting, if sometimes disorienting, manner. The first, and by far most prevalent, is the various childhood remembrances of the narrator. Spending time with his mother, goofing around with his friends, and other such moments are brought to life in the rich detail and subconscious word play characteristic of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose. A gothic plot forms a counterpoint to this childhood world. Interspersed with such remembrances are descriptions of the vampire leader Count Condu and of the Wizard. These figures, along with a band of eccentrics, occupy a haunted castle on the hill overlooking the town. They are all part of a plot to expedite the arrival of an evil Snake who is slowly inching its way through the earth. Finally, there is Doctor Sax himself, who makes sporadic appearances throughout the novel, usually hiding in the

shadows with his hat and cape and emitting the strange, maniacal laugh that associates him with the figure of the Shadow. Doctor Sax initially appears to be evil but, like the Shadow, comes to represent the search for something vague and indefinable that the narrator was after all along.

What gives *Doctor Sax* its power is the complicated and intriguing manner in which Kerouac inscribes himself into the text. In one section, the narrator literally follows in Doctor Sax's shadows, trailing his "long, hollow, sepulchral laughter."³⁶ Cloaked by darkness, the author peers back into a past that remains undisturbed, describing the scenes of his youth from a voyeur's perspective. Commenting on the act of recording memory, however, has the uncanny result of doubling the author—Kerouac enters the past with the burden of the present's personal and social history. In the section titled "A Gloomy Bookmovie," Kerouac explicitly addresses his use of parentheses, writing "in these parentheses sections, so (-), the air is free, do what you will."³⁷ The "free air" of the parentheses allows the present-tense writer of the piece to be heard. Thus, when an older author comments on a cartoon about storing coal in the winter in parentheses, "(Depression Themes, now it's atom-bomb bins in the cellar communist dope ring)," we are immediately abstracted out of the time of the narrative and into the time of history.³⁸ Shadows, while omnipresent, are particularly suited to a Cold War theme. The postwar period is characterized by unseen forces—by Communists who are hiding everywhere, by dope rings that threaten even the most quiet and peaceful communities, and by an atomic bomb in a hidden silo that is already pointed directly at us. In the next chapter, Kerouac describes playing a self-made horse-racing game with marbles, describing the loss of one of these as "turning my world upside down like the atombomb."³⁹ The Cold War fifties replaces the Depression thirties as the historical condition of the text's making.

Authorial intrusion is rife in the text, and it is within these narratorial asides that the political most clearly manifests. Thus, when Doctor Sax enumerates the future to his young charge, it feels as though we have caught up to the current Kerouac writing the novel in Mexico in 1952:

"You'll grow numb all over from inner paralytic thoughts, and bad chairs—that is known as Solitude. You'll inch along the ground on the day of your death and be pursued by the Editorial Cartoon Russian Bear with a knife, and in his bear hug he will poignard you in the red blood back to gleam in the pale Siberian sun—that is known as nightmares."⁴⁰

Kerouac is parodying Jacques's speech in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which he discusses the seven ages of man. Despite the seeming timelessness of the presentation, Kerouac's version leans heavily on the political. One can easily imagine this Editorial Cartoon Russian Bear with his arms embraced around postwar America while the knife stabs Uncle Sam in the "red blood

back.” But Kerouac labels this not “reality” or “politics” but “nightmares.” Kerouac’s political leanings were complicated, but what he really fought against were such easy binaries as left or right. Shadows, as ambiguous spaces that confound notions of dark and light, fit nicely into Kerouac’s political rhetoric. Kerouac leaves the question open as to whether the Russian Bear is really harmful. What is important for Doctor Sax’s friend to realize is that such possibilities will be used for political gain, to create nightmares that can then be manipulated.

The ambiguity the Shadow stands for makes him useful in challenging the simple binaries of the Cold War. The showdown at the end of the novel between Doctor Sax and the Wizard, for instance, is as much about postwar politics as it is about adolescent awakening. The arrival of the Snake heralds the second coming of Christ, a fact made explicit to the narrator when Doctor Sax declares, “My son, this is judgment day.”⁴¹ But Kerouac shifts registers, and what seems to be a religious battle quickly becomes a political one: “Liberals and reactionaries will be washed down the rivers of his drink, the Left and the Right will form a single silent tapeworm in his indestructible tube.”⁴² Party lines blur as everyone becomes a candidate for annihilation. Those under the Wizard’s leadership are involved in the same sort of intrigues and infighting that characterize the politics of the postwar adult world. Boaz Jr., for instance, becomes a McCarthy figure in his attempt to scapegoat a key member of a rival sect and to “make blood illegal so the Vampires could be jailed” in order to court favor with the Wizard.⁴³ Good versus evil is still the point here, but assigning these values to each of the characters becomes a bit more complicated. Kerouac challenges the polarizing binaries that the Cold War fostered, opting instead for a more transcendent solution. Doctor Sax makes it clear that there is some higher power that supersedes such petty distinctions—a “huge black bird” grabs the Snake with its beak and carries it off into heaven.⁴⁴

Kerouac’s ending also gestures to the Cold War in the form of the atomic bomb. Doctor Sax having proven ineffectual, all the pair can do is watch as the Snake emerges in a fashion similar to the billowing mushroom clouds that held such a fascination for the postwar public:

Showers of black dust made a shroud of wings and droop-drape bierlike background in the clear sky like a thundercloud without sense, in the center of its darkness darkly and more high rose the Mysterious Head twirling and squirming with a dragon’s felicity, the hook and curl was sure alive. I could hear girls of eternity as if screaming on rollercoasters; over the water came the hysterical symphony honks of some sad excited commotion in the bustling bosom earth. Into the beautiful glary pale of giant massclouds that had come to cover the sun, leaving a snow White hole, rose the mighty venom headed Serpent of Eternity.⁴⁵

This “thundercloud without sense” provides a feeling much akin to the nuclear sublime. The destruction is rendered as “girls of eternity” scream and the “hysterical symphony” honks. The mushroom cloud becomes the “massclouds,” seen as “beautiful glory” and blocking out the sun. All this leaves Doctor Sax and his charge gaping in awe, speechless. Drawing on Kerouac’s interest in the theories of Oswald Spengler, Fiona Paton theorizes that Kerouac’s “Atomic Faustus may hint at the prospect of such political imperialism: with the hydrogen bomb, the idea of ruling the world was not outside the bounds of contemporary political thought.”⁴⁶ Reading this passage as evidence of an Atomic Faustus is compelling, because it combines the Faust legend of the novel’s subtitle with direct political concerns in a way that exposes the hidden motivations of knowledge as power. The connection between the Snake and the bomb invokes religious apocalypse, updated for a nuclear-anxious society.

The invocation of the Shadow as a marker for ambiguity and the breaking down of boundaries results in a politicized text that questions the binary assumptions of Kerouac’s Cold War milieu. Like Plath, Kerouac’s text surreptitiously challenges postwar discourse. The political nature of *Doctor Sax* was noticed by Kerouac’s friend Ginsberg as early as 1952. Discussing the myth part of the book in a letter to Kerouac, Ginsberg explains, “it is the real caviar of the whole book—so intelligent, so apt as metaphysical and *social* commentary, so *hip* and yet so public in reference. I don’t see why you can’t do more of that.”⁴⁷ Boundaries are made to be broken, and readings are always being undercut by other possibilities, including the author’s comments and intrusions. The shadowy world of *Doctor Sax* demonstrates the fallacy of trying to make binaries hold up in an instable postwar world.

“In Memory of Radio” and the Shadow of Race

Baraka, in his early collection of poems titled *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, draws on the shadowy presence of the crime fighter to question American racial conditions. *Preface* is often given short shrift by critics.⁴⁸ The African American poet wrote the book while living in New York’s Greenwich Village during the 1950s; thus, it has come to be seen as exemplifying Baraka’s Beat period, a time when, writing under his given name, LeRoi Jones, the young poet worked through the vexed connection between poetic form and existential commitment that occupied so many writers after World War II. More forgiving critics view this period as a time when Baraka championed the poetic imagination as an escape from burgeoning doubts about race in America. Other critics read this volume from beyond the divide in Baraka’s career, looking back at his Greenwich Village days from the vantage point of a later move to Harlem in order to critique Baraka’s *Preface* as an escape from social reality. In either case, Baraka’s first book of poetry is seen as anticipating the later poet whose movement into the political eclipsed his earlier work.

While these two critical tendencies are broadly accurate, they tend to miss the subtlety at play in Baraka's *Preface*. The shadows that appear throughout this volume reinforce the hesitant, searching tenor of many of these poems. Baraka's use of shadow imagery, including his several allusions to the figure of the Shadow and his tribute to the crime fighter in perhaps his most well-known poem from the collection, "In Memory of Radio," highlight the uncertainty that characterizes the transitional, Beat period of his career. Baraka was an avid fan of the Shadow, claiming in an interview that "what television is probably to little kids now—radio was to us then."⁴⁹ Yet several of the poems that make extensive use of shadow imagery drop out of later collections such as *Transbluesency* and *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. Baraka omitted several of these shadow poems from his later collections, which is a clue to the relevancy of this image particularly during the postwar period.

Baraka uses shadow imagery to comment on the difficulty in discovering unadulterated truth. In the poem "In Memory of Radio," Baraka sets up dichotomies only to challenge them. For Baraka, the interesting question is located not at the extremes but in the middle. By rehearsing the binaries that the Cold War fostered, Baraka highlights the difficulties inherent in choosing sides and creating meanings. In the end, *Preface* is about process, and shadows provide Baraka with a metaphor for this space between. This is precisely the reason for the continual anthologization of "In Memory of Radio"—it uses the ambiguity of the Shadow to capture the tensions inherent in the process of producing meaning that occupied Baraka during his Village days.

"In Memory of Radio" works by producing a series of binary divisions that the poem goes on to undermine. The figure of the Shadow is the driving motif that provides consistency to the poem. The first line asks simply enough, "Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?"⁵⁰ Baraka invokes not the Shadow but his quotidian alter ego and then proceeds to compare the "divinity" of this character to more ideologically suspect radio figures such as Oral Roberts, a fundamentalist faith healer; F. J. Sheen, a Catholic evangelist; and Goody Knight, a California governor from 1953–59 whom Baraka equates with Hitler. Thus, poets like Kerouac and the speaker enjoy the divinity of the Shadow and other more imaginative programs, while "the rest of you" listened to Kate Smith, a popular singer who immortalized the song "God Bless America" or, as the speaker claims, "something equally unattractive."⁵¹

Had Baraka stopped here, we would be left with a rather simplistic poem that contrasts the hipness of Beat poets like him and Kerouac with a "square" society concerned only with putting "linoleum in [their] living rooms."⁵² But Baraka goes on to problematize this adoration by drawing on the Shadow's famous tagline, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." Baraka tells his audience, "& Love is an evil word./Turn it backwards/see, see what I mean?"⁵³ Toward the end of the poem, the speaker emphatically repeats "O, yes he does" to let the reader know that the Shadow also is aware of Baraka's discovery.⁵⁴ The Shadow now knows more than he claims—besides

evil, he is privy to the love embedded within it. But what kind of love is this, and how does the Shadow know it?

To answer these questions, we must turn to the last line of the poem. "In Memory of Radio" hinges on these final lines: "An evil word it is,/This Love."⁵⁵ The demonstrative creates uncertainty here as we ponder to what exactly "This" refers. What makes this poem so complicated is that Baraka's relationship to his position as a poet is precisely what is under investigation. "This Love" might be referring to the act of poetry, or at least to a sort of imaginative play that goes beyond the worldly concerns that Baraka attacks in the poem. Thus, when Baraka exclaims "Saturday mornings we listened to *Red Lantern* & his under-sea folk./At 11, *Let's Pretend*!& we did/& I, the poet, still do, Thank God!", the reader realizes that it is the ability to pretend that sets Baraka, and Kerouac, apart.⁵⁶ The Shadow is divine in the sense that he transcends the material to arrive at the spiritual—his rewards are not profit but moral superiority of having done what is right. This divinity is possible because the Shadow has abilities that supersede the worldly and thus offer the listener the opportunity to imagine a new solution to the world's ills. But this divinity is conferred on him by his listeners—after all, he is an imaginative character whose power extends only as far as listeners are willing to pretend it exists.

Despite Baraka's faith in pretending, this insistency on the power of imagination is undermined by the hesitant tone of the poem. Baraka may contrast the "divinity of Lamont Cranston" with "the rest of you," but the speaker comes under self-critique as well. "What can I say?" the speaker asks, "Am I a sage or something?"⁵⁷ Such doubt casts suspicion on the speaker's pronouncements and comes off sounding a bit defensive and defeatist. After all, the speaker admits that when it comes to love, "I certainly wouldn't like to go out on that kind of limb."⁵⁸ It is precisely this hesitancy to engage the social world around him that a later Baraka will deplore when looking back on his Beat period in the Village. The Shadow may know, but in the end he remains helpless to do anything, except in the contained world of the radio airwaves.

The subtle irony of the speaker's stance is an important point often overlooked by critics. Henry C. Lacey, for example, endorses Denise Levertov's 1961 review that argued Baraka uses figures like the Shadow to create a space for the imagination. But Lacey goes a step further, claiming "the poem ends by returning to the point of departure. Again we are reminded of 'the divinity of Lamont Cranston,' a supernaturally gifted force for goodness and law in a spiritually impoverished world."⁵⁹ But such solutions are far too easy. We may have returned to the point of departure by the end of the poem, but that does not mean that this point is any clearer. The reading rests entirely on the unexamined claim of Cranston's divinity. The Shadow, however, is compromised. He can no longer be a force for goodness because he has been tainted by the evil that love brings. Baraka leaves us guessing as to why this has to be, but the somber ending of "In Memory of Radio" suggests that the Shadow is a spent force.

The imagination is lauded, but not without an uncanny awareness that it also is suspicious.⁶⁰

The final line could also be referring to the love that Baraka has for the Shadow. In the rest of the volume, Baraka continually looks back on his youth with a wistful sense of regret. Might not “This Love” be love for the past? The title “In Memory of Radio” sounds like a eulogy, a lament for the loss of something sacred and dear. An examination of the rest of Baraka’s volume reveals that the theme of nostalgia runs through many of his other poems. Shadows figure as a sign of loss; they are traces that can only gesture to an earlier completeness. In his poem “Turncoat,” Baraka uses the figure of the shadow to highlight the gap between the speaker’s present and past self. Employing the character of the Shadow, the speaker declares, “I move slowly. My cape spread stiff & pressing cautiously/in the first night wind off the Hudson. I glide down/onto my own roof, peering in at the pitiful shadow of myself.”⁶¹ Shadows are a fitting metaphor for the return to the past because, like nostalgia, one must imagine that past again to make it real. The speaker is a turncoat, a double agent who sells out his present self in order to love his former one in an act of imagination: “I dream long bays & towers ... & soft steps on moist sand./I become them, sometimes. Pure flight. Pure fantasy.”⁶² Here, the Shadow’s divinity consists in the exalted place he occupies in the younger generation’s minds.

But if “This Love” refers to the nostalgia for the past, why does Baraka label it “evol”? Perhaps one reason that this love is “evol” is that it represents a misplaced love for the oppressor. In “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” shadows take on social connotations as Baraka deploys the racist term “shade” when describing his sister—she “hates loud shades.”⁶³ Here, the shadow becomes a metaphor for an undesirable darkness associated with African Americans. As Baraka mockingly admonishes in the beginning of the poem and later repeats, “Beware the evil sun .../turn you black.”⁶⁴ Black has yet to become beautiful; rather, it is something to be avoided. If we read “In Memory of Radio” in the context of this poem, an interesting tension emerges. Like a white hipster going uptown for an evening in Harlem, Cranston, the rich man about town, transforms himself into a “shade” called the Shadow as nighttime approaches. If we assume that “This Love” might be referring to Baraka’s boyhood love for the Shadow, it could well signify a burgeoning awareness of the cultural terms through which Baraka has been forced to view race in America. As racial consciousness grows and Jones becomes Baraka, he realizes that much of what he has come to love has been shaped by a white world. In the end, Baraka trades the white hipsters infatuated with African American jazz culture for his fellow African Americans. His love for the Shadow is “evol” because it too is backward—a love for a savior coming from the very world that is excluding him.

This is certainly the view of critic Lloyd W. Brown. Brown, who reads Baraka’s *Preface* as an attack on the T. S. Eliot-like wasteland that Baraka experiences in postwar America. Discussing the comic heroes that people Baraka’s collection, Brown states “Baraka’s comic-strip heroes embody the

real corruptions ... that are endemic to America as wasteland.”⁶⁵ Brown traces such negative characteristics back to the issue of race in America. Looking specifically at Superman and the Lone Ranger, Brown argues convincingly that these characters are embroiled in a racial politics that seeks to champion white supremacy at the cost of racial integration and tolerance.

While Brown is certainly correct in implicating such figures of seeming goodness in the long history of American racial intolerance, he does not always make a convincing argument that Baraka’s treatment of these comic heroes is offered in the same critical vein. When Baraka deplores the loss of his “Captain Midnight Decoder,” for example, is this a rejection of the dominant world such characters represent or simply a nostalgic look back at lost youth?⁶⁶ Baraka’s is an ambiguous message. Brown says as much: “Generally when Baraka examines the ‘all-American’ innocence connoted by comic-strip heroes he concludes that here too the image of innocence might be ambiguous, even deceptive.”⁶⁷ It is the uncertainty of how to respond to such popular culture figures that is under consideration in Baraka’s *Preface*. And when it comes to an ambiguous figure like the Shadow, things become even more complicated.

What ultimately redeems the Shadow is that he too seems to know this evil. The question we need to ask is whether Baraka is directing this attack on his love for the Shadow, or for “Radio” as a whole, as the title suggests. Thus, there seems to be a difference. The Shadow knows the evil lurking in the airwaves, but is he aware of his complicity in the medium? That question is unanswerable given the parameters of the poem. Thus, we do not finally know whether Baraka is castigating “Radio” or just certain figures in it. There is something evil about the Shadow, and his motives and methods are open to criticism. Yet there is also something alluring about him. Baraka cannot reject him, because he is already a part of his identity, as a poem like “Turncoat” makes clear. But Baraka cannot embrace him either. His burgeoning racial consciousness makes it impossible—the Shadow, despite his heroism, is the product of an American popular culture that, by the early 1960s, Baraka was distancing himself from daily. The Shadow thus remains an enigma, a cipher through which to read his own existential, and hence racial, condition.

The Shadow’s real contribution, his divinity, is his ability to unsettle his listeners and keep them guessing. This is precisely what Baraka learned from his radio hero; thus, the ambiguous ending to “In Memory of Radio” is a fitting tribute to the ambiguous character that inspired it. Baraka’s poem is not simply a celebration of the powers of imagination. The critique of such naïve beliefs in pretending that Baraka offers undermines any such straightforward notion. But neither is the poem a wholesale attack on the middle-class white culture that produced the Shadow. Kerouac might be part of the Beat problem of political inaction, but he is also a friend who shares similar inclinations developed from a similar milieu—and thus acceptance or rejection is not so easy for Baraka. The power of the poem, its constant anthologization, rests on its ability to balance itself between these two tendencies, which is precisely what makes

it emblematic of Baraka's *Preface*. "In Memory of Radio" represents a working through of positions, a pause at the midway point between imagination and action that places the reader in the same difficult position as the poet—forced to make a choice.

The Shadow, a product of earlier cultural logics, nevertheless became an apt symbol for capturing the anxieties and uncertainties of the Cold War age. Like the dark spaces he inhabits, this crime fighter exists on that thin line between fascination and fear. Plath, Kerouac, and Baraka all found this shifting border a useful metaphor for that moment of epiphany when childhood innocence gives way to adult understanding. But given that all of these accounts were penned under another shadow—the shadow of the Cold War—they necessarily disclose the social, as well as the personal. The uncertainty that shadows present are unstable, which is precisely what makes them so attractive. In an era that posited truth as a binary choice between light and darkness, the Shadow was a useful site for deconstructing the Manichaeian rhetoric of the Cold War.

Notes

1. A discussion of the role of comic book superheroes in U.S. culture is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the treatment of the Shadow as a theme for serious literature that Plath, Kerouac, and Baraka undertook was part of a larger turn toward the abandonment of the "high" versus "low" culture distinction that occurred in the 1950s and became especially pronounced in the 1960s in the work of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, among others.

For an overview of the appearance, reception, and distribution of comic books from their beginnings up to the 1990s, see Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

2. Walter B. Gibson, "The Chinese Disks," in *Two Classic Adventures of the Shadow* (Encinitas, CA: Nostalgia Ventures, 2006).

3. Ann Charters, "'True-Story' Novels as Autobiography: The Influence of *The Shadow* on Jack Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*," in *Writing Lives: American Biography and Autobiography*, edited by Hans Bak and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998): 98.

4. Walter B. Gibson, "The Red Blot," in *Two Classic Adventures of the Shadow* (Encinitas, CA: Nostalgia Ventures, 2006): 62.

5. "The Chinese Disks," 30, 33, 65.

6. Jim Cox, *Radio Crime Fighters: Over 300 Programs from the Golden Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002): 224.

7. "Murder with Music," in *The Shadow: Radio's Greatest Man of Mystery* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Radio Spirits, 2006).

8. "Death Stalks the Shadow," in *The Shadow: Radio's Greatest Man of Mystery* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Radio Spirits, 2006).

9. Sylvia Plath, "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979): 272.

10. *Ibid.*, 272.

11. *Ibid.*, 273.

12. *Ibid.*, 274.

13. *Ibid.*, 274.

14. *Ibid.*, 274.

15. *Ibid.*, 275.

16. *Ibid.*, 275.

17. *Ibid.*, 275.

18. *Ibid.*, 275.

19. Sylvia Plath, "The Shadow," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979): 144.

20. *Ibid.*, 146-47.

21. *Ibid.*, 147.

22. *Ibid.*, 147.

23. *Ibid.*, 147.

24. *Ibid.*, 147.

25. Ibid., 148.
26. Ibid., 149.
27. Ibid., 149.
28. Ibid., 150.
29. Ibid., 149.
30. Ibid., 150.
31. Ibid., 150.
32. Luke Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 112.
33. "The Shadow," 151.
34. Ibid., 151.
35. Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters, 1940–1956*, edited by Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1995): 355.
36. Jack Kerouac, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987): 199.
37. Ibid., 88.
38. Ibid., 76.
39. Ibid., 91.
40. Ibid., 202.
41. Ibid., 236.
42. Ibid., 228.
43. Ibid., 232.
44. Ibid., 242.
45. Ibid., 241.
46. Fiona Paton, "Reconceiving Kerouac: Why We Should Teach *Doctor Sax*," in *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays*, edited by Kostas Myrsiades (New York: Peter Lang, 2002): 147.
47. Allen Ginsberg, *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*, edited by Bill Morgan and David Stanford (New York: Viking Press, 2010): 182.
48. In his important work *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), William J. Harris draws a sharp divide between Baraka's first collection and his subsequent work, stating, "Although the title *Hard Facts* only applies to one of Baraka's books, it suggests the direction of all his poetry after *Preface*. He wanted an art of hard facts that would expose the evils of money, power, and luxury and would drive the black sane, that is, into political action" (94). In contrast to these "hard facts," Harris sees poems like "In Memory of Radio" as flights into "imagination" (50) rather than into reality. Jerry Gafio Watts discusses Baraka's lack of political commitment in *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), bypassing "In Memory of Radio" altogether and concluding that "a bohemian, Jones was much more interested in the deviance of personal identity and the psychic costs" (51). Werner Sollors suggests in *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) that despite claims that Baraka abandons the earlier style of his *Preface*, such "interpretations do not go far enough in explaining Baraka's pervasive use of popular mythology, both in his early poetry and in his literature of Black nationalism and Maoism" (53).
49. Amiri Baraka, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Edited by Charlie Reilly (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 183.
50. Amiri Baraka, "In Memory of Radio," in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (New York: Totem Press and Corinth Books, 1961): 12.
51. Ibid., 12.
52. Ibid., 12.
53. Ibid., 12.
54. Ibid., 13.
55. Ibid., 13.
56. Ibid., 12.
57. Ibid., 12.
58. Ibid., 12.
59. Henry C. Lacey, *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones)* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1981): 10-12.
60. There are other possibilities. Lacey reads this first line as evidence of camp. Baraka was influenced by the New York School, and the use of such an exalted word like "divinity" to describe a radio character is reminiscent of Frank O'Hara's overenthusiastic tribute to movie stars like Lana Turner. But to read this line as camp is to denude the poem of its power, to strip away the realization that the final lines work so hard to create.
61. Amiri Baraka, "Turncoat," in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (New York: Totem Press and Corinth Books, 1961): 26.
62. Ibid., 26.
63. Amiri Baraka, "Hymn for Lanie Poo," in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (New York: Totem Press and Corinth Books, 1961): 11.

64. Ibid., 6.
65. Lloyd W. Brown, *Amiri Baraka* (Boston: Twayne, 1980): 111.
66. Amiri Baraka, "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (New York: Totem Press and Corinth Books, 1961): 17.
67. Brown, 109.