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Review of *Making JFK Matter: Popular Memory and the Thirty-fifth President* By Paul H. Santa Cruz

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The ongoing contestation of public memory continues to be a subject of continuing theoretical interest and debate. This book, however, is not a place to look for or encounter theory development in studies of “collective” or “public” memory. While Santa Cruz acknowledges his thinking on these matters has been influenced by Pierre Nora’s notion of “lieu de mémoire” (i.e., “place of memory”), there is no serious attempt to outline that particular theoretical frame in detail nor for that matter any other theory-based explanation.

On the dust jacket of this volume historian James Giglio notes: “No book covers JFK’s popular memory as comprehensively as Paul Santa Cruz does.” While there may be a plausible case for supporting this claim, especially regarding historical scholarship, there have been a variety of engaged cultural scholars outside the disciplinary confines of history who have been mining JFK and cultural memory as subject matter for quite some time -- both in the form of scholarly books and journal articles. While Santa Cruz does cite and utilize sources such as Barbie Zelizer’s *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of American Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), there are some other book-length sources that might have been especially useful to the overall cause here, including but not limited to Thomas Brown’s *JFK: History of an Image* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) which argues that the Kennedy “image” was constructed by and for a variety of audiences each of whom had different ideologies and political interests and John Hellmann’s, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) a study that traced the forms and types of heroic cultural mythmaking associated with mass
consumer culture that helped shape the Kennedy persona both before and after his death. In addition, visual culture studies have been helpful in creating a more advanced and perspicacious lens for interpreting and understanding the construction and evolution of the JFK mythos. One prime example is David M. Lubin’s, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Lubin analyzes profitably iconic and fragmentary evidence of visual culture employing JFK’s assassination as a means of interrogating “the dialectic in postwar America between self-gratification and public obligation, between popular culture and history” (p. x). The utility of cultural analysis as a tool in the study of presidential discourse in particular can be ascertained in David Michael Ryfe’s, *Presidents in Culture: The Meaning of Presidential Communication* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). Ryfe offers a helpful example by proffering an analysis of discursive interactions between presidents, news media, and U.S. citizens. Ryfe underscores the fact that meaning is always contested in time and within a context and as such remains a multi-vocal, often agonistic enterprise.

Santa Cruz is also interested in interrogating “popular memory” as it relates to John F. Kennedy. In the Introduction, he defines popular memory as “the general, or prevailing, conceptions the American people have of President Kennedy” (p. 13). Three primary case studies serve as the staging ground for parsing out this goal. Chapters 1-3 include focus on the city of Dallas’s efforts in trying to memorialize JFK after his assassination, and the creation and two separate successive chapters on the uses of public memory as rhetorically inscribed by Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy, each of whom, Santa Cruz argues, had their own political agendas when invoking the slain president’s memory. In Chapter 4, Santa Cruz highlights what he labels “Other Sites of
Memory,” a potpourri of activities and establishments that include the Jackie Kennedy’s careful planning of the president’s funeral and her references to Camelot, Oliver Stone’s “JFK,” a film portrayal that reinforced a conspiracy themes associated with the Kennedy assassination, and the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, a site for creating, contesting, and extending public memory in multiple forms. Here again, Santa Cruz’s analysis might have been strengthened had he drawn theory from other disciplines. For example, Craig Dickenson, Carol Blair & Brian Ott, (eds). Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010) offers a collection of essays that may have been quite useful in parsing out specific aspects of the complex subjects tackled in this particular chapter. Nevertheless, all of the chapters discussed thus far, while a bit repetitive at times, offer a serviceable analysis and a fair-minded evaluation. Santa Cruz gives us much to cogitate over and identifies some intriguing threads.

In Chapter 5: “Observations,” Santa Cruz confronts the dilemma of between how history and historians have judged Kennedy’s presidency and legacy versus how JFK is regarded in “public memory”. Here the emphasis turns on the difference between style and substance -- or as others have put it --- between promise and performance. Here the historians and the extant public memory, of course, part ways. Kennedy thrived in setting an agenda in persuading us that a vision could be realized and in this chapter Santa Cruz refers to the inspirational initiatives Kennedy so ably led, such as demonstrating leadership in the space race and establishing the Peace Corps. In pursuing the goal of putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade, Kennedy made space “a vital national objective” (p. 269) and by appealing to youth and its idealism by asking them to join a national effort to serve the international community, JFK led a “new administration [that]
set about defining how citizens could act in the service of others” while simultaneously serving the nation (p. 279). Kennedy had a youthful vigor that lent government service a new vitality; he seized the day and brought us along by giving us renewed resolve in his vigorous invitation to citizen action. For Santa Cruz, this helps account for his sustained regard in public memory. But Santa Cruz cautions that overall we have “remembered the images [JFK] created of himself more than we have his actions” and such images “cannot and should not substitute for actual achievements” (p. 294). Maybe not, but certain pubic memories continue to inspire a nation and can provide the lifeblood of the selfless desire to make a transformational difference

In his Conclusion, Santa Cruz summarizes how and why public memory has trumped the historians’ more realistic assessment of the Kennedy presidency. The assassination squelched the promise of the Kennedy presidency but simultaneously opened a decades-long struggle over what might have been. While historians and others have critiqued JFK’s performance in office, no evaluation, it seems, can outshine the psychological yearning precipitated by a young president violently cut down in his prime leaving a nation to ponder its darkness and gather up its fragmented body politic.

Collective memory and its attendant mythical narratives serve pundits and politicians alike. More importantly, they shape and build a people and can serve to unify a nation. By interrogating how, and why, and under what circumstances Kennedy lore functions, folks like Santa Cruz build a narrative history of the collective by monitoring our hopes and aspirations, both soaring and benign, giving us a stereoscopic lens on both the ponderous and the pedestrian as well as selfless and the heroic. In essence, public memory helps us measure ourselves by its unique way of defining and emplacing the persons, places and events that give structure and meaning to an
eventful socio-political life. Any attempt to understand public memory is an attempt to appreciate the ongoing epideictic experience of the polis. The narrative that unfolds in Santa Cruz’s book is one we will continue to share and elaborate upon in our ongoing national imaginary.

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