

Spring 2006

James Hopgood's *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground* (book review)

Samantha Barbas

University at Buffalo School of Law, sbarbas@buffalo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/book_reviews



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Samantha Barbas, *James Hopgood's The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground* (book review), 29 *Biography* 354 (2006).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/book_reviews/3

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact law scholar@buffalo.edu.

James Hopgood, ed. *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005. 256 pp. ISBN 0-8173-5179-5, \$29.95.

Somewhere in the US, fans are tending to living room shrines built in honor of Elvis Presley. Self-described “Deaners” are planning trips to the Indiana hometown of idol James Dean. In Cuba, devotees of Che Guevara travel along a well-worn pilgrimage path, the “Way of Che.” Call it cultism, idol worship, or even a form of religious observance—men and women throughout the world are engaged in modern updates of the age-old process of making saints.

A new anthology of essays, *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, analyzes and theorizes the social functions and cultural politics of making, publicizing, and worshiping both historical and modern-day “saints.” Though the essays cover a diverse, even eclectic range of idols—from Mexican folk saints to Thai kings to American pop singers—and acts of “worship” range from attending rock concerts to collecting memorabilia, they suggest one consistent, enduring dynamic that cuts across time and region. Political and cultural institutions may try and foist idols on the public, but such efforts inevitably fail if the “saint” does not resonate with popular values and collective social experience. Idols fulfill spiritual, emotional, or social functions for their worshipers, modeling culturally desirable traits, suggesting or inspiring connection to a higher power, and symbolically mediating tensions in times of social change.

Saint making is a fundamentally popular process, the authors suggest; it can also be viewed as religious. Despite both popular and scholarly resistance to labeling modern fandom as a religious practice, as popular culture scholar Erika Doss suggests in her essay “Popular Culture Canonization: Elvis as Saint and Savior,” even Elvis fans, in their appropriation and use of the singer’s image to address spiritual issues and create spiritual community, are

participating in “one strong historical form of American religiosity” (155). In fact, as anthropologist June Macklin writes in her piece on “Saints and Near Saints in Transition,” the proliferation of celebrity cultures in modern times may be a response to popular skepticism of organized religion. In an atomized, therapeutically-oriented modern culture, particularly in the United States, celebrity “saints” fulfill practical, secular purposes—serving as role models, offering life advice—while their larger than life images and heroic life stories, often filled with themes of suffering, sacrifice, and triumph over adversity, provide, in a sense, connections to universal truths and transcendent realities.

The contributors, primarily from the field of anthropology, address a wide array of themes and questions, some more thoroughly than others. Why are some individuals selected for “sainthood”? How are they legitimized and popularized? What do devotees seek from their worship? In one of the most interesting pieces in the collection, “Desperately Seeking *Something*: Che Guevara as Secular Saint,” anthropologist Phyllis Passariello analyzes the function of a single, widely reproduced image of Che Guevara—the famous “Korda” photograph of the leader with his “gaze fixed on some distant horizon and hair flowing out from beneath his army beret”—in the making of Che as a “culture hero” and “secular saint” (82). Passariello argues that the ubiquitous image has been used “not only to display devotion but also to legitimize and actually generate and intensify devotion” (87). The photograph, which transformed Che Guevara from “iconoclast to icon” and seems to powerfully mesmerize devotees, has become “real with a life of its own” (89). The image is perhaps more venerated than the man himself.

But why Che Guevara as a popular saint? Or for that matter, why Elvis? Doss suggests that Elvis’s hero status stems from his multifaceted image, which fans have imbued with many meanings, but does not elaborate on what those meanings might be. Hopgood takes up this question of popular appeal and audience identification in his essay comparing the respective “sainthoods” of the early twentieth century Mexican curer and folk saint Jose Fidencio and American actor James Dean. Despite the very different cultural contexts in which they lived, both men served similar functions in their societies, bridging tradition and modernity in times of social change. Like Doss, Hopgood does not discuss which social tensions these men may have mediated, nor the multiple ways that their media images may have been received and appropriated by their followers. Both Doss and Hopgood allude to the possible sexual ambiguity of Dean, Fidencio, and Presley as potential reasons for their idolization—part of their appeal may lie in their rejection or subversion of normative gender ideals.

Most of the idols under discussion are male, and one wonders whether this is merely coincidence or perhaps a deeper commentary on the gendering of sainthood and celebrity. Certainly, in modern times there is no shortage of women celebrities; however, we may be less likely to make “culture heroines” than “culture heroes.” The collection would be greatly enhanced by a more explicitly gendered analysis. Are female “saints” venerated in different ways? Are idols more likely to attract followers of the same sex, or the opposite sex? My own work on media stardom in the modern US has suggested that because celebrity fandom has itself been gendered in contemporary culture—feminized and thereby trivialized—men and women participate in fan cultures and “star worship” in very different ways.

Taken together, the essays present a compelling (albeit somewhat disjointed) discussion of how image, ritual, and popular desire have been used to memorialize and validate popular icons, heroes, and celebrities. The case studies detail the influence of the mass media, individual photographers and artists, the state, religious institutions, and fans in “making saints.” Perhaps one of the most interesting and revealing pieces in the collection, however, analyzes the “unmaking” of a saint. Gillian Newell illustrates the efforts of Chicano activists and academics to resurrect the memory of nineteenth century Mexican folk healer and popular heroine Teresa Urrea to “construct a specific social memory for an emerging Chicano ideology” (90). However, because the attempts were limited largely to academic and literary treatments, her image remained disconnected from popular values and public memory, and she was never widely accepted; her legacy lives only in libraries and archives. An idol was not born, but stillborn.

Though the collection is weighted towards the twentieth century, the pieces suggest clearly that despite vast changes in the cultural, political, and technical apparatuses of idol making, and widely divergent cultural contexts, what unites all saint worship is a common human impulse to seek meaning and validation from figures larger than life. Many of the authors discuss the importance of physical proximity and contact to the rites of devotion; as a means of humanizing their idols and enhancing feelings of intimacy, devotees, through pilgrimage and the veneration of “sacred” objects, share with both their idols and fellow worshipers a common tactile experience and sense of place. In our postmodern, globalizing age of virtual experiences and simulated realities, one wonders how these forms and impulses might change.

While it may be too specialized for undergraduate courses, and too ambitious in its treatment of divergent times, contexts, and subjects, the book offers thought-provoking insights and raises important questions that compel further examination. The collection will be an asset to scholars working in a

range of disciplines—media and popular culture studies, anthropology, sociology, religion, and folklore—and a fascinating read for anyone interested in the dynamics of celebrity and idol creation, the politics of media and image consumption, and the function of venerated others in the creation of modern values and selves.

Samantha Barbas