

## Chapter 25

### **“I Looked Up and I Looked Down.” JFK, Mrs. D, and the Space of Citizenship<sup>1</sup>**

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Mrs. D had left the room. What exactly we were studying on that Friday afternoon, I cannot recall. With the shortened school week and Thanksgiving holiday coming up, I probably didn't give much thought to schoolwork at all. As a third-grader about to turn the corner on the third anniversary of coming to this country, I had already assimilated enough to know that this was the beginning of the holidays—a time when carols would be practiced in school as well as in church, and when the early birds, here and there, would already have feathered their homes with strings of lights. It was a time when cookies and candy of all shapes and colors seemed to come out of the paneled woodwork, and you didn't even have to push any buttons. All you had to do was be yourself. More than just a feast for the eyes, the holidays seasoned all my senses until by the 24<sup>th</sup> of December to be myself was more than I could stand. No, I don't recall exactly, but I'm sure I was looking ahead when Mrs. D came back.

The venerable Walter Cronkite of CBS announced President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death at 1:38 CST.<sup>2</sup> Again, my memory betrays me. Had we heard the news on the intercom from Uncle Walter himself, or did we hear it from the Principal? Was Mrs. D now telling us that our beloved President was dead, or was she telling us that we were going home early? I do not recall, for those are not the details that 45 years have grooved into my memory. What I remember is how Mrs. D looked, a look that has become for me a private touchstone both for a singular moment in American history and for a pivotal moment in my life as an immigrant adoptee.

I should probably tell you that I didn't much like Mrs. D. Playground taunting during those heady days of first and second grade had reinforced for me the notion that, in a social world hinged on the binary pivot of white and Indian, my mixed-race ancestry (Black-Korean) along with my adoptee status would often prove to be a difference that

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at John F. Kennedy: History, Memory, Legacy—An Interdisciplinary Conference, at the University of North Dakota, Sept. 25-27. I wish to thank J. Harley McIlrath, who read an earlier draft and made helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> In a Thursday, November 20, 2003, appearance on CBS's *The Early Show*, which would go on to do a live show from Dealey Plaza that Friday, Cronkite recalls delivering the following statement on that fateful day: “President Kennedy died at 1:00 p.m. Central standard time, 2 p.m. Eastern standard time, some 38 minutes ago.” See “Cronkite Remembers JFK,” at [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/20/earlyshow/main584646.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/20/earlyshow/main584646.shtml). According to the *Dallas Morning News*, Kennedy was shot at 12:30 and pronounced dead by Dr. William Kemp Clark at 1 p.m. CST. See *The Day JFK Died: Thirty Years Later: The Event that Changed a Generation/Dallas Morning News* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1993), 17, 24.

mattered just a little too much. I represented what the late French cultural theorist Rene Girard would call, in *The Scapegoat*, a “difference outside the system,” a difference that was threatening precisely because it exposed “the relativity ... fragility ... and ... mortality” of the dominant system defined most emphatically by the white/Indian binary.<sup>3</sup> Within that framework I was invariably, and sometimes problematically, an object of fascination. Set off against the larger framework of generations of racial animus, I had the capacity to unite, as in “he is different from us,” the “us” being Indian *and* white; or set within the contours of concepts of family patrolled by the Four Horsemen of biological determinism (Adenine, Thymine, Guanine and Cytosine), I could divide once again, as the awkward fact of my white family reinforced for both sides my radical deviation from their hand-me-down norms. Early on, I had to learn to negotiate both of these capacities, in and out of the classroom, even as, with help from my parents, I had to commit to the idea of mutability, of difference, within the system itself. That it would not *always* be like this nor was *everyone* treating me that way was their mantra. They were right, of course, but even so, there were moments when I wanted nothing more than to be lifted up, like Elijah, to another plane. But more, I wanted an assumption of innocence without the attendant hassles of being an exemplar, *for anyone*. Failing such divine uplift, and in a counter-blast of logic the brilliance of which was exceeded only by its circularity, I determined that since I was bound to be *a* center of attention, I would be *the* center of attention on my own terms. Lift-off, re-entry, crash landing: *enter Mrs. D.*

Mrs. D, you see, brooked no deviation from the protocols of decorum she laid down in her class. It was her way or the hallway. And her way cramped my style, a style I’d managed to nurture in the friendly chaos of first and second grade, each taught by attractive, single women, who, with ink still wet on their teaching certificates, were as inexperienced in their field as I in mine. Mrs. D, of course, was none of those things. And if I sagged a bit to think about the prospect of incubating for nine months beneath her withering stare, I have to wonder now how much these two young women, in measuring themselves against her no-nonsense and even-less-lipstick example, struggled to come to terms with what the next thirty years in this small rural town would be like.

I know they struggled. My father was their minister, and my parents would occasionally invite them over for dinner. Long after we kids had excused ourselves from the table the grown-ups would still be talking. The young UCC minister and his wife, recently transplanted New Englanders, hunched over their coffee, commiserating with the freshly-minted teachers. *We preacher’s kids, we hear things.* But in fuming the dust that bedevils our past, we too often look only one way: it is always the young who are stunted; always the beautiful who are trapped; the banker’s daughter from Connecticut who bemoans the unbearable loneliness of dust rising from dirt roads.

What, then, of Mrs. D? She, too, had once been young and newly certified; she, too, was—well, she was *Mrs. D.* It occurs to me now that I know nothing of Mrs. D, and that in all these long years, I have reduced her to a series of looks that cut me to the quick and held me—hold me—in my place. Formidable, well-organized, and impersonal, she dispensed tough love as only a walking Bureau can, by dint of constant discipline and

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<sup>3</sup> See Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 21.

that hard, supervisory gaze. Even now, through the haze of those dust-covered years, I can still manage to hear her say, “No, it goes *there*.” Whether “it” was “Stephen, to your desk” or a comma in a sentence, there seemed a proper and permanent place for *everything*. It was depressing. But it wasn’t the *way* she looked at me that Friday afternoon that made such an impact on me. It was *how* she looked. She stood there as she always had, but now she struggled to keep her composure. Staring, she looked as if she, too, had been rifled, as if some hidden hand, unbidden, had reached inside of her and emptied her of all that was worth holding. And then, in front of us all, she broke down and cried.

In the historical record, it is, of course, no contest. The headline is obvious, if unduly triumphant: Kennedy Assassination Trumps Mrs. D’s Public Disclosure of an Inner Life. Indeed, we would no doubt quickly reach a consensus that the assassination *caused* Mrs. D to react in that way. But in the private world of gestures and tokens with which each of us measures the epochs of our lived experience, it was Mrs. D’s reaction that brought home the awful gravity of the news of the President’s death. As when a toddler falls down and then awaits adult reaction before registering an embarrassed “oops” or an anguished howl, we who were in that classroom likewise followed Mrs. D’s lead into grief and anguish. And if back then Mrs. D’s disciplinary gaze robbed me of my self-fashioned pose of the know-it-all lurking beneath the madcap antics of the class cut-up, and if back then that same gaze tethered me to my desk in ever tighter orbits, her breakdown now, as then, has given me a place on which to hang the hat of my citizenship.

Indeed, the psychological trauma of Kennedy’s death as manifested in Mrs. D’s demeanor was the single most important assimilative event in my life, even more so, in retrospect, than the naturalization ceremony I had undergone the previous winter. As of that moment—Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963—I knew, as did everyone else of my generation, exactly where I was. Such knowingness implies, for me, the primal scene of my Americanization, for I now shared something with each and every one of my classmates. In watching Mrs. D show me exactly what it *felt* like to be an American citizen, I was indubitably *there*, transfixed forever to my desk, and no amount of taunting on the playground could ever take that away.

Such thoughts occurred while I was teaching in my college’s Washington DC program and were occasioned by an upcoming conference on JFK at the University of North Dakota for which I was preparing a paper. Needing something a bit more dependably genuine than my memory with which to anchor a point about Mrs. D that I wished to make, I called my wife back home and asked her to go through the stuff that my father’s second wife had sent shortly after he died. “I know my third grade report card is in there,” I said. “It might have something in it I can use.” Specifically, I was hoping to get some purchase on the daily class schedule so I could then make some kind of claim about what we were studying at the exact time when Mrs. D broke the news of Kennedy’s death. Sure enough, a few hours later my wife reported back, her mission accomplished. “I’m looking at the report card,” she said. “Subjects are listed, but there’s

no way to know when they were taught.” Perhaps sensing my disappointment, she blurted out, “Do you want the stuff on citizenship?” *Citizenship?* What stuff? “Well, there are a couple of paragraphs on the report card explaining what citizenship is and the rationale as to why they were focused on it. Apparently, you did pretty well,” she said, dawdling a bit over “apparently.” “You got check marks in all the right boxes.” If she was surprised, she had the good grace not to say so.

My search for the genuine had, in fact, turned out even better than I expected. I knew that JFK had concluded his convocation speech at University of North Dakota on Wednesday, Sept. 25, 1963, with a call to action on behalf of education and citizenship:

What we seek to advance, what we seek to develop in all of our colleges and universities, are educated men and women who can bear the burdens of responsible citizenship, who can make judgments about life as it is, and as it must be, and encourage the people to make those decisions which can bring not only prosperity and security, but happiness to the people of the United States and those who depend upon it.

What I did not know, or rather, what I had long forgotten, was that some 280 miles away in the northwestern part of the state, teachers the likes of Mrs. D were putting that call into action. While not as elegantly phrased as in Kennedy’s speech, my third grade report card nonetheless underscored that “citizenship can best be developed by participation in citizenship activities. In the school as well as in the home, the child is not only preparing for citizenship later, but he is practicing as a citizen now.” The report card goes on to suggest that the molding of good citizenship can only be done in tandem with ongoing efforts at home. “In marking the pupil on these traits,” it states, “we are giving you our opinion of his outstanding qualities, those in which he is strongest as well as those in which he needs most help from the home and the school. We invite your hearty cooperation in aiding your child in this development.” Next followed a list of “Habits and Attitudes Desirable for Good Citizenship”—“Carefulness; Co-operation; Courtesy; Dependability; Obedience; Health; Industry; Initiative; and Thrift”—virtues of which even the ever self-improving Jimmy Gatz, doomed soon to be Mr. Nobody from Nowhere, North Dakota, could be proud. If the report card was a way of “marking the pupils on these traits,” Mrs. D’s looks, far from being motivated purely out of sheer orneriness, were actually a way of marking these traits on her pupils.

I have chosen to focus on issues of citizenship primarily because as a naturalized citizen these issues have always been visible in ways they may not be for native-born Americans. I am, as they say, a citizen by virtue of consent; all of my classmates in Mrs. D’s class were citizens by descent. The Fourteenth Amendment makes no distinction between these two avenues of citizenship, since it declares that “[a]ll persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”<sup>4</sup> Well and good; but as Albion Tourgee explained in his brief on behalf of Homer Plessy, “[t]his provision of Section I

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<sup>4</sup> US Constitution Online, “US Constitution—Amendment 14”  
<<http://www.constitution.net/xconst.Am14.html>>

of the Fourteenth Amendment *creates* a new citizenship of the United States embracing *new* rights, privileges and immunities, derivable in a *new* manner, controlled by *new* authority, having a *new* scope and extent, depending on national authority for its existence and looking to national power for its preservation.”<sup>5</sup> And part of the newness, I daresay, is the focus on citizenship as birthright. That was the part I did not have, and even though by the third grade I was officially a citizen, I still felt that the distinction mattered, that *my* citizenship was supplemental to the real thing. Didn’t Article II of the Constitution underscore that very point when it made “natural born” citizenship an essential qualification for the Presidency?<sup>6</sup> And if I could not aspire to the highest office, then how could I be a fully-vested citizen? Such was my thought process then. And now, in view of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment as a new kind of citizenship to fit with the “new birth of freedom” that Lincoln had announced at Gettysburg, JFK’s assassination would be the genesis of my own symbolic rebirth as a citizen, not by means of consent but by way of geographic default.

Here, then, is an example that underscores my meaning: among the many media events in 2003 commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination was a show on MSNBC hosted by Chris Matthews entitled “JFK: The Day that Changed America.” The focus, however, wasn’t on America per se but rather on individual Americans—celebrities and politicians—who were interviewed about “where they were when they heard the news” (NYT 11/19/03). Fast forward five years, where, in preparation for an event commemorating, for all intents and purposes, the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination, I was slated to present an essay on a panel entitled, “Where were you when they shot my President?” Apparently, in relation to the day that changed America, we who were there, *somewhere*, are compelled to remember exactly where we were.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, then, place is of paramount importance. But I want to suggest that in asking and addressing the question of *placement* we are participating in something more than the collective articulation of a map of mourning. As elaborated by Michel de Certeau, the difference between *place* and *space* is fundamentally a difference between a static configuration and one that is actualized by “vectors” of desire. Place, he suggests, implies “an indication of stability,” a desire for univocality. On the other hand, space is “*practiced place*,” by which he means that space is the “effect” of human operators as they engage, reinforce, and undercut the static, statist—that is to say, “proper”—assumptions of a given place. “Space,” he goes on to say, “is like the word when it is

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by James Alan McPherson, “On Becoming an American Writer,” in *A Region Not Home: Reflections from Exile* (New York: Touchstone Books/ Simon and Schuster, 2001), 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> The relevant sentence reads, in part, “No person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of the Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President....” See US Constitution Online, “US Constitution—Article 2, Section 1”

<[http://www.constitution.net/xconst\\_A2Sec1.html](http://www.constitution.net/xconst_A2Sec1.html)>

<sup>7</sup>MSNBC’s “the Day that cChanged America” followed hard on the heels of a 2001 article by Evan Thomas in *Newsweek* on the impact of 9/11 on Americans. It, too, was entitled “The Day that Changed America.” The possibility that two distinctly different events separated by 38 years could share the same cultural value was brought home to the panelists with whom I shared the dais when an undergraduate in the audience, upon being asked what the Kennedy assassination meant to her, reminded us that for her generation the “where were you question” would no doubt always apply to 9/11.

spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization.”<sup>8</sup> One can thus understand the iconic query, “where were you when...,” as an attempt, then, to bring order and stability to an event that has been notoriously, perhaps even paradigmatically, resistant to such ordering. By locating us, the many, in our particular places at an acutely particular moment, we merge thereby the acts of personal memorialization and national commemoration: *et in arcadia ego* meets *e pluribus unum*. But as oft-repeated practice—what will we do, one wonders, when the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary rolls around?—as repeated practice, the roll call of places becomes the *space* of the Kennedy assassination, a space in which difference and deviation are as fundamental to it as are identity and affirmation.

Take, as an example, the path I took to get to Mrs. D’s classroom. Sure, I could have taken a ready-made network of streets and sidewalks, all articulating a series of right-angled turns that mapped the “proper” way to get to school. But if you could go back to my town then, or any town now, you will see worn in the grass—across vacant lots (behind my house); private lawns (the Hanson’s, say, although don’t tell my folks); and public commons (the field north of the High School)—a shortcut that traces a snaky hypotenuse in relation to the angles formed by sidewalks or streets. All of which suggests that there are folks enough who diverge from our planners’ paths to inscribe that deviation on the land itself. Indeed, so pervasive is this tactic that, much to the consternation of National Park Rangers, you will find them, here and there, even in that most carefully planned of all national places, the National Mall. Such a snake in the grass is defined by Lan Samantha Chang in *Home Ground* as a “desire path”—an alternative “route” that “people have chosen to take across an open place, making a human pattern upon the landscape.”<sup>9</sup> As such, you would be hard-pressed to find it on any official map.

The space of the Kennedy assassination is just such an open place, its topography crisscrossed by desire in patterns that are as recognizably human as the overpowering grief expressed on that long weekend of his funeral, or the Friday cheering of young schoolchildren in Dallas upon receiving the news that the President had been shot.<sup>10</sup> In such a space, the State’s official story, the Warren Commission Report, with its voluminous desire for the univocal acclamation of its single shooter theory, must forever answer to a thousand conspiracy theories, whether in books or on film, each with its multiple shooters in their particular places at that particular moment. “The more you investigate it,” says Robert Groden, himself the author of a JFK assassination exposé, “the farther away you seem to get.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps that is the tantalizing fate of those who would look for causes, or assign blame.

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<sup>8</sup> Michel de Certeau, “Spatial Stories,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 1988), 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, eds. Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), 104.

<sup>10</sup> This latter was a point recalled, and affirmed, during the discussion following our panel’s presentations.

<sup>11</sup> *The Day JFK Died*, 108.

Consider, in light of that last comment, that at one time “cause” and “blame” meant the same thing. “[C]ause’ does not, as [we] might expect, mean originally an earlier event, nor yet an explanation,” writes philosopher Mary Midgley. “It originally means in Latin simply ‘blame’ or ‘lawsuit.’”<sup>12</sup> Whether state-sanctioned and state affirming, as in the case of the Warren Report, or whether daring to place the blame on various members in various agencies of the State itself, as in theories put forward by James Fetzer and others,<sup>13</sup> all of these endeavors monumentalize an event the contours of which (those vectors of desire I spoke of earlier) seem beyond the reach not only of concordance but also of reparation. Taken together, such disparate projects embody the actual variance imbedded in the word “monument” itself. According to Charles Griswold, the word “derives from the Latin *monere*, which means not just ‘to remind’ but also ‘to admonish,’ ‘warn,’ ‘advise,’ [and] ‘instruct.’”<sup>14</sup> In building a monument to a particular cause, then, one is necessarily confronted by a congeries of possibilities, many of which are at cross-purposes with a single, univocal meaning. “Let the word go forth” may, indeed, be written in stone, as at the Kennedy gravesite, but who will control it, and how will they do that?

In responding to the question of where I was when JFK was killed, I had thought to leave aspects of control, of finger pointing, to others. There are enough of them, replete with their angles of entry and of exit. In the end, the dust that needs to be settled just seems to make more dust, and I wanted to be no nearer or farther away than the place where I actually was on that day, at that moment. For the simple fact of my having a place, anchored so acutely in my memory by the pathos of Mrs. D’s response, becomes for me a desire path to citizenship as birthright. But in choosing that path, I turn out not to have been blameless after all.

If the space of JFK’s death is an open space, the place of his burial, like most commemorative sites, limits our engagement with it.<sup>15</sup> In order to get there, one has to walk from the main entrance at Arlington Cemetery and head west-southwest, up toward the Custis-Lee mansion, which is what I did on a brilliant September afternoon in search once more of the genuine. After the dizzying uplift of the monuments and memorials of

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (London/Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, was a featured speaker at the 2008 “JFK: History, Memory, Legacy Conference” commemorating the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of JFK’s 1963 visit to the University of North Dakota. His theory, as I understand it, implicates, among others, LBJ, J. Edgar Hoover, and the CIA. See his *Assassination Science and the Language of Proof: Experts Speak Out on the Death of JFK* (Chicago: Catfeet Press, 1998), esp. 348, and his paper in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Griswold, Stephen S. Griswold, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 12, n. 4 (Summer, 1986), 691.

<sup>15</sup> Just how limited we are in engaging the place of the burial was brought home to me on my second visit when one of the security personnel guarding the site told a barefoot adolescent lad lounging casually on the marble wall to “get off the wall, and put some shoes on.” “Stentorian” hardly does justice to the tone of that voice as it cut through the low-decibel murmur of visitors milling around the site. We all snapped to attention. In addition to proper modes of (ad)dress, access to certain places within the burial site are blocked off as well. On both of my visits, a velvet-covered chain prevented access to the western edge of the gravesite, leaving visitors to view the graves from the east, north, or south.

the National Mall, it was something of a relief to see so much at eye level; or, as with the row upon row of white crosses, to have to look down.

The gravesite, finished in 1967, has an elegant simplicity that underscores the selected phrases from the Inaugural Address etched into the marble set in a semicircle along its northeastern edge. As intimated earlier, “Let the word go forth” is how the inscription begins, and the marble itself is canted outward at an angle amenable to reading, or, perhaps, to ushering such travels along. For in articulating a border that defines one edge of the site, the wall also seems to project the words beyond the boundary of the site itself. The actual grave, southwest in relation to the wall, is overlaid with blocks of pinkish-red Cape Cod granite, their geographic dislocation holding fast to the tacit assumption that when the dead “belong to the people,” as the President’s widow had declared of her assassinated husband, “home” has to come to them. Indeed, with the exception of the eternal flame, the gravesite is explicitly “designed to recall a natural Massachusetts field setting.”<sup>16</sup> Thus the granite paving stones and the four tablets marking the family members buried therein—the two-day old Patrick, the President, Jackie, and an unnamed “Daughter”—are interlaced by clover and sedum, a living mortar for their eternal rest, at “home” in Arlington, Virginia.

Above, or west, of the grave-markers, the eternal flame is situated in the center of a round tablet that may or may not invoke the Round Table so famously a part of the legend of Camelot. As the tablet is cracked from 12 to 6, the hands of our eternal flame are seemingly fixed at 12:30, the time of the shooting in Dallas. But the flame itself belies such fixture with its incessant, lively flickering, always and never in the nick of time. It is hard in such a place not to think of opportunities lost.

Above me, I imagine Robert E. Lee stalking the vista before him, loving, if wistfully, the soldier’s eternal dream of high ground.<sup>17</sup> Turning around, with passages from the Inaugural curving round me, I can clearly see the Lincoln Memorial, bringing home the fact that so much of JFK, in death as in life, was strategically aligned with the symbolic apparatus that is our national memory of Lincoln.<sup>18</sup> Lee has the high ground

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<sup>16</sup> For the quote about the President “belonging to the people,” and the design implications imbedded in the interrelationship between the Cape Cod granite and the clover and sedum, see Sheridan Alexander, “The John F. Kennedy Eternal Flame,” “Arlington National Cemetery,” *About.Com: Washington, DC Travel* <[http://godc.about.com/od/monumentsusgovernment/ss/arlington\\_6.htm](http://godc.about.com/od/monumentsusgovernment/ss/arlington_6.htm)>

<sup>17</sup> Lee, of course, is not buried there. But Lee, who is buried alongside his wife, Mary Anna Custis, at Washington and Lee University, was consumed by the thought that one likely consequence of the Civil War would be the loss of the Custis estate, of which he was legal custodian. He wrote as much in a letter to his wife, saying, “It is better to make up our minds to a general loss. They cannot take away the memories of the spot, and the memories of those that to us rendered it sacred. That will remain to us as long as life will last, and that we can preserve.” I think it is safe to say that Arlington House is where their “hearts turned ever” long after the war. See “Arlington House (The Custis-Lee Mansion) Arlington National Cemetery” at <http://arlingtoncemetery.net/arlhouse.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> This alignment is underscored by major allusions and references to Lincoln’s speeches in Kennedy’s own speeches, as well as the fact that Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy requested that the President’s funeral be modeled after the “ceremonies rendered for Lincoln.” See the Arlington National Cemetery website, “Visitor Information, Monuments and Memorials, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy,” [http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/visitor\\_information/JFK.html](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/visitor_information/JFK.html).

behind me, but in looking down across the Arlington Memorial Bridge at the Lincoln Memorial, I cannot help but think of the higher ground embodied in the Gettysburg address and in the unimaginable suffering of untold thousands on both sides who ushered in that new birth of freedom inscribed most emphatically in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments.

But the words I think about in that moment are not the clarion call to citizenship as national service so famously invoked in Kennedy's Inaugural Address. No, the words I have in mind are from the nomination acceptance speech given in Los Angeles, on July 15, 1960. "I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier," he tells his fellow Democrats. He then articulates his vision of the New Frontier, a vision that begins with an admonition against the complacencies of nostalgia attendant on feelings of belatedness in relation to the "old" frontier: "Today some would say that those struggles are all over--that all the horizons have been explored--that all the battles have been won--that there is no longer an American frontier. But I trust that no one in this vast assemblage will agree with those sentiments. For the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won--and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier--the frontier of the 1960's—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." Pulling his audience ever forward, Kennedy then reminds them what is at stake, here and now:

For the harsh facts of the matter are that we stand on this frontier at a turning point in history. We must prove all over again whether this nation—or any nation so conceived—can long endure; whether our society—with its freedom of choice, its breadth of opportunity, its range of alternatives, can compete with the single-minded advance of the Communist system.<sup>19</sup>

For all its forward propulsion, the New Frontier borrowed key phrases from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, as in "whether this nation...or any nation so conceived...can long endure." Such borrowing reinforced, however subtly, the notion that Kennedy's New Frontier, like Lincoln's "new birth of freedom," would always already be haunted by an irrecoverable sense of loss incurred by violence. In seeking to regenerate America by way of the frontier myth, Kennedy implicitly invoked the violence that lies at the heart of the cultural logic of the myth of the frontier, violence that had traditionally been perceived as "a morally justifying action," most often visited, to brutal consequences, against Native Americans. And now, in 1960, the frontier was being invoked on behalf of "heroic engagement with Communism."<sup>20</sup> But Richard Slotkin, the

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<sup>19</sup> *Let the Word Go Forth: The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, selected and with an introduction by Theodore C. Sorensen (New York: Delacorte Press/Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1988), 101.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 3, emphasis in original. The logic of which I speak is imbedded in various narratives in various genres, beginning with 17<sup>th</sup> century captivity narratives and propelled into the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Frederick Jackson Turner in his seminal 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." These narratives revolve around a core in which, as Slotkin explains, is "represented" the "redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing a scenario of

critic behind the logic of that myth from whom I have been citing, was regrettably belated in relation to Kennedy; and having read Slotkin years after the advent of the New Frontier, I, too, am haunted by loss. For in locating within the context of the assassination the affective agency of my own regeneration as a citizen, am I not complicit in that very logic? When all was said and done, what could be more stereotypically American than to become American through the agency of violence? There it was: achieving at last what I yearned for, it comes to me now as cracked as the tablet at Kennedy's gravesite. How were we to know, begins my meek defense, that instead of dancing the twist to the infectious beat of the New Frontier, we should have been busy looking for the bodies, or for the conspiracy?

What I do know is that the fact of the redoubtable Mrs. D breaking down in front of me was a sign of how significant that November moment was. I also know that it was a harbinger of the piece, or pieces, that we would all be missing for the rest of our lives. For my generation, a generation shaped, as Tom Brokaw has recently suggested, by the imperative of booms—sonic, nuclear, space-race, assassinations—the specter of John Fitzgerald Kennedy hangs over each of us like a subjunctive mood that just won't go away.<sup>21</sup> The certitude of where we were is constantly undercut, here and now, by *what if*. But if, in articulating a nation's worth of places, we are able, more or less, to probe what was, don't we owe those folks who helped us get through it something more than an eternal return to loss?

I had not intended a mash note to Mrs. D when I started. As I said, I never much cared for her. But the more I think back on that moment, the greater is my appreciation for what she gave me. Sure, the State-sanctioned catechism of Mercury space flights broadcast over the intercom compelled a looking up; and since I couldn't be President, lord knows I aspired to the higher office of the astronaut, each orbit tethering me ever more fiercely to a longing to be a part of what Kennedy had called, in reference to the race to the moon, "the most hazardous and dangerous and the greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked."<sup>22</sup> But when the dust had settled, and the boosters had all fallen away, it was the lesser and more important catechism of American citizenship taught to me by Mrs. D, as well the exposure of the awful burden of her—of *our*—deep investment in the promise of the New Frontier, which compelled a looking down. For down here, *here*, in those places where we were forever and in those places where we are now, is where space is practiced. Can there be a better place in which to confront the causes, assess the blame, and, if we are lucky, affirm the pleasures of all the desire paths we took to get from there to here?

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separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (12).

<sup>21</sup> For Brokaw, President Kennedy's assassination is epochal, as, for him, Nov. 22, 1963 "was, in effect, the beginning of what we now call the Sixties" (See *Boom! Talking about the Sixties: What Happened, How it Shaped Today, Lessons for Tomorrow* (New York: Random House), 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Let the Word Go Forth*, 180, from a speech delivered at Rice University, Sept. 12, 1962.