Madhu Krishnan

Beyond Tradition and Progress: Re-imagining Nigeria in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

I. Traditionalism and Development: The Problem of Representation in Contemporary Africa

In his 1976 book, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka calls attention to "a second epoch of colonization – this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems".[1] Soyinka, in this statement, calls attention to the difficult task of representation in postcolonial Africa, where traditional systems of knowledge have been replaced by the imposition of external values and epistemological categories. Operating through what Gayatri Spivak has called the "epistemic violence"[2] of the colonial encounter, Africa and African societies have been forced to re-imagine themselves through categories based in a Western episteme continuing the in tradition of what Frantz Fanon, speaking in 1959 in what would later be published in "On National Culture", called the first stage of national culture in the newly independent nation-state.[3] To combat this, Soyinka advises that "on the continent must come a reinstatement of the values authentic to that society, *modified only by the demands of the contemporary world*".[4] Thus, he expresses a not uncommonly-held belief that, in order to dismantle the discourses of colonial domination, Africa must return to its roots by seeking out the discourses of the pre-colonial past and reinstating their validity as methods of making sense of the world. Crucially, however, Soyinka sees this as a turn necessarily coupled with a view of the contemporary world, echoing Fanon's warnings against an unequivocal turn to tradition to find a mythic, ideal past.[5] Living with the irrevocable truth of the colonial encounter, a simple turn to the past, aping what has been referred to as "a nostalgia for lost origins",[6] could only result in a blind nativism and an easy dismissal of these discourses under the neo-colonialist view that "societies in which mythicoreligious ideas and social traditions play a significant role in intellectual culture must not … be rational or capable of 'philosophy'".[7] In order to give weight to its traditions, then, any return to an idealized African past must situate itself within the realities of postcoloniality in all its worldly effects.

The importance of navigating between the dual poles of traditionalism and Eurocentrism and the danger inherent to this difficult task cannot be overstated. Because of the immensity of the colonial encounter and the continuing traces of the unfinished process of decolonization, any imagination of the African continent and its nations which relies entirely on traditionalism would thus strip away the specificities of historicity while remaining "incapable of helping present Africans

[1] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), x.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 127.

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 158.

[4] Soyinka, *Myth*, x, emphasis added.

[5] Fanon, *Wretched*, 159.

[6] Spivak, *Critique*, 118.

[7] Peter Amato, "African Philosophy and Modernity", in Emmanuel Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1997), 76.

in their striving for control over their own destiny. By failing to take into account the great upheavals, such as colonialism, which occurred in recent times in the African universe, tradition of the ethnological kind is condemned to marginalization".[8] Similarly, a view of Africa which relies wholly on Eurocentric conceptions of development and progress would fall prey to a neo-colonialist stripping of culture and a removal of historicity from the continent. Bearing in mind this difficult negotiation, representations of Africa must work to overcome and subvert the grand narratives of pre-colonial idealism and neocolonial development in their realization. As Wendy Griswold states, no view of Africa can take the continent as static because "[t]raditional African communities … changed irrevocably under colonialism".[9] Any vision of the continent which denies these changes only serves to continue the suppression of liberatory discourses striving to true independence. Griswold goes on to note that, for a nation such as Nigeria, this is a particularly important and difficult task, as the nation itself was utterly fabricated and imagined through the colonial era and the lasting traces of an unfinished decolonization, a sentiment seen in Adéléke Adéèkó's claim that "the work of inventing [the Nigerian nation] … was never completed".[10] Thus, "[t]he idealized picture of the community before 'things fell apart' presents a distorted view to outsiders and to Nigerians" and diverts attention from the pressing issues facing postcolonial Nigerian society,[11] leading to the easy ascription of misapplied anthropological and ethnographic categories and a view which unfairly villainizes the notion of "fragmentation of the Nigerian national imaginary".[12] Derek Wright elucidates the intrinsic difficulty in any wholesale application of a totalizing discourse in his statement that, on the African continent, "[r]edress or relief for disillusionment is sought in Africanization, renascent communalism, democratic liberalism, and orature, and in alternating demystifications and curative mythologies of the African past. None of this … have proved be the 'open sesame' to the closed door of postcolonial dictatorship and the blocked path to genuine independence".[13] Instead, the recourse to assimilating discourses and epistemologies has been complicit with the continued subjugation of the continent under leadership with neocolonialist interests and the imperialism of global capitalist forces. Soyinka captures this notion in stating that the past "clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it",[14] indicating that any imagining of the continent must remain committed to its conflicting and competing contemporary discourses and the fragmentation therein. Instead of relying on traditionalist idealism, in implementing traditional motifs and mythologies in their work, writers and thinkers must maintain the notion that myth can both bear witness to the rupturing of colonialism and engage in a process of self-questioning, all while remaining situated within the material conditions of postcoloniality.

Through the adoption of such an approach, then, contemporary writing may enable a view of Africa which eliminates the totalizing tendencies of any one discursive presentation of the African world, either as an idealized lost society or

[8] Jean Marie Makang, "Of the Good use of Tradition: Keeping the Critical Perspective in African Philosophy", in Emmanuel Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 327.

[9] Wendy Griswold, "The Writing on the Mud Wall: Nigerian Novels and the Imaginary Village", *American Sociological Review*, 57.6 (December 1992), 710.

[10] Adéléke Adéèkó, "Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination", *Global South*, 2.2 (Fall 2008), 12.

[11] Griswold, "Imaginary Village", 721.

[12] Adéèkó, "Power Shift", 12.

[13] Derek Wright, "African literature and post-independence disillusionment", in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, eds., *Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 808.

[14] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State", *Transition*, 31 (1967), 13.

as one striving towards a monolithic, Western-driven conception of development. While Soyinka, writing from the position of the immediate post-independence era, presents a singularly prescriptive notion of the writer and African society, in contemporary literary narrative, the re-imagining of Africa manifests itself in a multitude of forms and through a variety of co-existing discourses, reflecting the continent's disjointed transition into the current era. The past, rather than operating as a site of indulgence and escapism, may be recuperated through its critical function to serve as the foundation for an African imaginary that remains situated in the present. Through this distancing from the discrete categorical boundaries of Soyinka's time, contemporary writing instead can enact a more multifaceted and malleable picture of Africa and its nations.

In this paper, I will examine the way in which one narrative, Chris Abani's *GraceLand*,[15] does just this through its appropriation of mythology in the service of a radical re-imagination of the Nigerian postcolony. In *GraceLand*, the morphology of the indigenous Igbo *ogbanje* myth addresses the danger inherent in a turn to nativism by incorporating the normative values of another layer of contemporary mythology, that of the West as saviour. Fanon has claimed that "the intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, if he wants to be sincere with himself, chooses the negation of one of these two determinations. Usually, unwilling or unable to choose, these intellectuals collect all the historical determinations which have conditioned them and place themselves in a thoroughly 'universal perspective'".[16] Abani's narrative, I argue, sidesteps this self-defeating stance through the carefully mediated use of these two divergent discourses, ultimately subverting the very need for a 'national culture' in this respect. Because of its transformation of traditional mythology through the insertion of the driving forces of neo-imperial power, *GraceLand*'s recourse to myth, far from operating as a naïve folktale, serves to re-imagine Nigeria as the site of a complex network of discourses and displacements which are mutually irreducible and beyond the constraints of 'national' and totalizing discourses.

[15] Chris Abani, *GraceLand* (New York: Picador, 2004). Hereafter cited as *GL*.

[16] Fanon, *Wretched*, 155-156.

II. *GraceLand* and the Transformation of Traditional Igbo Mythology

Chris Abani's *GraceLand* is a novel which invites a mythological reading. Set out in two books, each of the narrative's twenty-nine chapters begins with two opposing statements on the Igbo kola nut ritual, one from traditional religious mythology and one from Western ethnographic anthropology. In each case, the two statements present oppositional views on the ceremonial presentation of the kola nut, highlighting the discontinuities between a traditionalist and an anthropological envisioning of Igbo society. Through the tension imbued by the regular occurrence of these conflicting views of tradition and ritual, *GraceLand* operates as a narrative both permeated by mythological significance and simultaneously sceptical of that very mythology. The coexistence of two planes of mythological thought, one traditional and one contemporary, serves to subvert the fabricated division between

reason and intuition so critical to any system of domination and subordination, two allegedly discrete systems of thought which instead operate in tandem throughout the narrative. Functioning as what Mark Turner terms a "double scoped narrative",[17] *GraceLand* complicates the notion of mythology while creating a critical discourse on the process of mythologizing and its effects in contemporary postcolonial societies and, in the process, demonstrates Gikandi's claim that, for contemporary African literature, "the simultaneous existence of a modern and a traditional world could only be negotiated through works of imagination".[18] By imagining the continual coexistence of modern notions of reason with traditional mysticism, *GraceLand* presents a narrative which continually balances the dual realities and responsibilities of each presentation.

In the traditional Igbo mythico-religious conception of the world, existence is divided between three planes: the spirit world, inhabited before birth, the material world of human beings and the spirit world of the ancestors.[19] These three planes are not seen as discrete, but instead function together to create the world in total. Spirits may interact with human individuals and vice versa, as the dualist conception of mind and body is replaced with a more complicated, open system of thought. Under this system, the *ogbanje* refers to the spirit-child, bound to uphold a pact made to their companions in the spirit-world. Once born, these *ogbanje* children wish to quickly return to their spirit-companions and so desire to terminate their human lives. However, this directly violates the Igbo directive that every individual must live out a full life in accordance with their *chi*, or destiny-giving personal deity, and, as a result, the *ogbanje* child enters into a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The *ogbanje* is forced to exist in a liminal space that is neither entirely human nor entirely spirit but instead reflects the ambiguity of its divided existence.[20] In its traditional inception in Igbo society, the *ogbanje* story is used to explain the behaviour of individuals who are seen as strange, aloof or outside the norms of expected social behaviour. It is said that, because these individuals have divided loyalties in the spirit and human worlds, so their behaviour must betray conflict, reflecting the doubleness and paradox they embody.[21] More recently, the *ogbanje* myth has been used as a parable for the Nigerian postcolony itself, envisioning the nation as the spirit-child forced to continually reinvent itself.[22] While this application of the *ogbanje* myth minimizes the complexities of Nigerian national politics and presents a rather homogenous view of the society (which, given its ethnic divisions, is rather suspect), it nonetheless indicates the importance and wide application of the mythology in contemporary discourse.

Approaching *GraceLand*, the *ogbanje* myth provides one layer of meaning within the narrative and presents one possible lens through which to read it. Throughout the narrative, Elvis Oke, *GraceLand*'s 16-year-old protagonist, is represented through a series of dislocations and displacements, mimicking the birth-death-rebirth cycle of the *ogbanje* while highlighting the radical difference amongst Elvis's manifestations in each cycle. Over the course of these cycles, Elvis transforms from an idealistic rural boy, safely ensconced in his traditional world overseen by his mother and

[17] Mark Turner, "Double-scope Stories", in David Herman, ed., *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Stanford: CSLI Publication, 2003), 117-142; Mark Turner, "Compression and representation", *Language and Literature*, 15.1 (February 2006), 17-27.

[18] Simon Gikandi, "African literature and the colonial factor", in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, eds., *Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 382.

[19] Chigekwu Ogbuene, *The Concept of Man in Igbo Myths* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 5.

[20] Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Physical and Metaphysical Understanding", in Lee Brown, ed., *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108.

[21] For information on the *ogbanje*, see in particular Chinwe Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1986), 30-31, 60; also, for its doubleness and paradox, see Christopher Okonkwo, "A Critical Divination: Reading Sula as Ogbanje-Abiku", *African American Review,* 38.4 (Winter 2004), 653-654.

[22] See, for example, Ato Quayson, "Looking Awry: Tropes of Disability in Postcolonial Writing", in David Goldberg and Ato Quayson, eds., *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 227 and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka's 'Ake' and Morrison's 'Beloved'", *African American Review*, 36.4 (Winter 2002), 667.

grandmother, to a hardened, solitary teenager involved in the criminal underworld of Lagos. His idealized image of his childhood is demolished, while his dream of fame and fortune as a dancer is reborn in the decidedly more realist dream of survival. Physically, Elvis disappears from his home and reappears, fundamentally changed, at several different climactic occasions in the narrative. Nowhere, however, is the enactment of the *ogbanje* myth in *GraceLand* more evident than at the narrative's conclusion, marking the final *ogbanje* cycle. Having progressed through several cycles of dislocation and return, Elvis, at the narrative's end, is portrayed as less and less able to cope with the realities of his life on the streets of Lagos. With his home in the slums destroyed by the government and having survived a price on his head and days of torture, the narrative makes it evident that Elvis will not persevere through indefinite homelessness and its attendant hunger and disease. In a last-minute miracle of salvation, Elvis is given a visa to America, somehow procured by his friend Redemption for a fantasized emigration Redemption will never embark upon. The narrative ends as Elvis waits in the airport for his flight to be called. Already, at this point, the staging of this conclusion reflects the ambivalence of the *ogbanje*. As a liminal space, the airport waiting lounge functions as a setting without a nation, neither technically in the country of departure nor in the land of destination; in the conditions of transnational migrancy and contemporary exile, it is a place that is simultaneously no place at all. By positioning its conclusion in this setting, the narrative structurally highlights its undecidability and instability.

Elvis, in this moment, is unable to articulate any emotions or rationale: "He wasn't sure how to feel. On the one hand, he had the opportunity to get away from his life. On the other, he felt like he was abandoning everything that meant anything to him. Oye, Efua, his father, the King, Redemption, Okon, Blessing, even Comfort" (*GL*, 318). Igbo mythology mandates a social view of the world where individuals exist not in a vacuum but through their society and as part of a social whole.[23] As part of a social fabric, the individual exists beyond his or her own skin through the existence and perpetuation of the family clan, emphasized through the belief in reincarnation within a family line. Elvis is explicitly shown as breaking this communal pact. He is aware that, by leaving Lagos, he will cut himself out of the traditional tapestry-like existence of the community, effectively enacting his own death therein, but continues nonetheless. Elvis, through this departure, embodies the desire of the *ogbanje* "to be allowed *just to be*, to occupy their own place in the universe's grand scheme of things, to live and perform fully and consistently that *atypical self*, no matter how aberrant or grievous others experience them to be",[24] in choosing escape, marking his desire to exist outside of dominant, pre-written master narratives of tradition and society.

[23] Ogbuene, *Concept of Man*, 135.

[24] Okonkwo, "Critical Divination", 657.

Elvis finds himself unable to rationalize his departure, despite his misgivings: "He knew that what he thought he was leaving behind wasn't much, and after all, his aunt Felicia was in America. No, what he was leaving had nothing to do with quantity; nor, in spite of Redemption's protestations, did it have to do with quality. This was something else, something essential" (*GL*, 318-319). Neither qualitative

nor quantitative evaluations can provide a justification for his departure. It is simply, as the narrative says, something essential in his being which does not allow him to stay and instead compels him to leave. For the *ogbanje*, societal norms serve as a constraint; in place of societal standards which dictate that life progress through set stages in line with a community of values, the *ogbanje* operates as a singular aberration, choosing to reject the demands of socially-driven destinies. Despite his awareness of the comparatively difficult material conditions of Nigerian society, for Elvis, his atypical desire to leave is unarticulated and beyond the possibilities of description, rendered, as it is, undecidable. Instead, he must face the fundamental qualities of his character and follow his need to depart from his home indefinitely.

The novel ends as Elvis, by the assumed name on his visa, is called to his boarding gate: "'Redemption,' the airline clerk called. Elvis, still unfamiliar with his new name, did not respond. 'Redemption!' the clerk called louder. Elvis stepped forward and spoke. 'Yes, this is Redemption'" (*GL*, 321). The narrative closes with this excerpt and, by withholding any scene of Elvis in transit or in America, its ability to reorient Elvis's existence in this new setting is left ambiguous. Instead, his textual existence is suspended; as an entity, Elvis is left in a middle ground. Elvis is gone; instead, he is reborn in Redemption, an acknowledgement of the power, through the act of naming, of reinscription. With this ending, the narrative demonstrates the impossibility of giving closure to Elvis's uncontainable existence, where, as an *ogbanje*, Elvis is finally represented as neither here nor there, condemned to ambivalence. The ambiguity of this ending further hails back to Nigeria's tradition of popular literature, a genre which, as Stephanie Newell writes, forsakes closure in its endings, instead "structurally testifying to [its] own inability to construct interpretive frames around the world"[25] and situating itself as a narrative reflective of popular existence in the Nigerian postcolony. With its similarly inconclusive ending, *GraceLand* motions towards the inability of mythology, as a governing framework, to bring conclusive order to its world and situates itself within a popular tradition which reflects the interests and anxieties of its society.

As the analysis thus far has indicated, *GraceLand* is not, however, a straightforward retelling of the *ogbanje* myth. Throughout its course, the narrative plays with the traditional elements of this myth, transforming them through the process Vladimir Propp, in his pioneering study of folktales, has termed "externally motivated substitution".[26] Elvis, as *ogbanje*, does not die in the physical sense; instead he disappears to a new land. Nor is Elvis reborn; instead, his character shifts through a series of manifestations and is ultimately left ambiguous. Elvis-as-*ogbanje* is not, by any means, directly analogous with the traditional myth. Rather, the *ogbanje* in *GraceLand* mirrors the historicity of its postcolonial setting, reflecting Eze's remark that "modern African writings operate on several other historical levels. On one level, the traditions one presumably writes about … is experienced by the writer as alive …. But on another level, the writer also knows that the tradition in question has been damaged and transformed in an irreversible manner".[27] In shifting the elements of the traditional myth, *GraceLand*, as a narrative, reflects the changed

[25] Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106.

[26] Vladimir Propp, "Fairy-Tale Transformations", in Brian Richardson, ed., *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 86-87.

[27] Emmanuel Eze, "Language and Time in Postcolonial Experience", *Research in African Literatures*, 39.1 (Spring 2008), 26.

and dynamic society it springs from. As a modern *ogbanje*, Elvis's narrative progress operates within the conditions of postcoloniality as well as traditional mythology, functioning beyond the sphere of an easy nativism in order to engage with the complexities of identity-formation and communal belonging in contemporary Nigerian society.

III. The Mythology of Migrancy and the American Dream

Most critically, *GraceLand* transforms the site of the *ogbanje's* split allegiances through substitution. Rather than develop as a struggle between loyalties and ties in the human world and the spirit world, the narrative of *GraceLand* stages the conflict of the *ogbanje* as one between a desire for an idealized indigenous homeland and a desire for the chance at prosperity promised in the mythical West, represented in the narrative by America. Throughout the novel, *GraceLand* is peppered with references to another form of mythology, that of the American dream and the myth of postcolonial progress through migration. Elvis, like his companions, indulges in occasional fantasies of success and fame in America and references to American popular culture, particularly through Hollywood cinema, are on par with references to African media within the narrative. For some critics, in fact, *GraceLand* is most powerfully read as a statement of postcolonial development through migrancy and the transnational circulation of Western commodity culture, where "America rescues the narrative and its protagonist when Elvis runs out of escape outlets from the confining destinies that beset him in Lagos".[28] In this view, the narrative's promise may only be fulfilled through the invocation of the West and its epistemic values, subsumed under the mythological discourse of salvation through emigration and the irredeemable stagnation of the postcolonial nation-state. The novel's conclusion, seen as such, shifts from a staging of indigenous mythology to a staging of exile and asylum, leading to a tendency to read the narrative entirely through the lens of Western-driven developmental progress.

[28] Adéèkó, "Power Shift", 16.

Because the narrative also functions through its transformed indigenous mythology, however, it fails to allow such an uncritical view of America and the resulting adaptation of a totalizing discourse of neo-colonialist progress. This is particularly evidenced by Elvis's own ambiguity towards America and the supposed grace it would bring him. Early in the narrative, Elvis begins to ruminate on his feelings towards the country: "He mused over his mixed feelings. His fascination with movies and Elvis Presley aside, he wasn't really sure he liked America. Now that the people he cared about were going there, he felt more ambivalent than ever" (*GL*, 55-56). For Elvis, America is not simply the place of dreams, idealized, as Albert Memmi discusses with reference to the youth of North Africa, as a utopia of maximum possibility.[29] While Memmi presents a straightforward picture of yearning and certainty that in the Western metropole, happiness and prosperity will be found, Abani's Elvis presents a much more complicated picture. America is

[29] Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), 70.

not a guarantor of success; it is simply another, different place, where its mythological status, as land of opportunity, is questioned. For Elvis, America may be seen as the cause of Nigeria's economic and postcolonial ills (*GL*, 280) and as complicit in neo-imperialist global domination. It is a place which is taking his loved ones from him (*GL* ,165-168), reducing his already fractured family unit to none. America, for Elvis, while a pleasant dream, would in reality change nothing: "What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different? Stupid, he thought. If Redemption knew about this, he would say Elvis was suffering from colonial mentality" (*GL*, 78). By holding America at a critical distance, the narrative complicates any attempts to read its conclusion as a wholesale validation of migrancy and progress through the assimilation of American value systems. Instead, Elvis's ultimate departure must be read, at least in part, as part of his trajectory as *ogbanje*, leaving the status of his final journey both uncertain and ambivalent. America is not salvation: it is just a place and another gamble. Elvis is not guaranteed happiness and, in fact, his actual chances are low. The American myth must contend with the discourse of the *ogbanje*, transforming America into another liminal space while simultaneously complicating the trajectory of the *ogbanje* through its implication with colonial mentalities and discourses of global inequality.

IV. Double-scoped Stories and Emergent Spaces of Existence

GraceLand, by filtering the traditional myth of the *ogbanje* through this second layer of mythology, unsettles the mythology to its foundations and disallows a simplistic view of the narrative as grounded in traditionalist values. The use of the *ogbanje* myths shifts from what could be seen as an attempt to recuperate the traditional notions of the past or idealize a society forever altered by colonialism to a commentary on the fragmentation of individuals and communities in the postcolonial era and a questioning of the drive to development through the wholesale embrace of neo-liberal values. Neither the nativism of a turn to traditional mythology nor a press towards the West for salvation may be sustained in the narrative, which enacts the contradictions implicit in both views. Instead, the narrative operates as a palimpsest containing the traces of both epistemological views. Snead claims that, regardless of "their hesitancy about coming to terms with the specificity of African literature, few western readers seem unwilling to talk about its 'universality'. The new critical valorization of 'universal appeal' … is frequently applied to African works… even though the word 'universality' seems often to function as a code word meaning 'comprehensibility for the European reader'".[30] Through its re-imagining of Nigeria through the dual lenses of traditional and contemporary mythologies, *GraceLand* disallows the easy 'universals' of the metropole and forces a reckoning with the historicity of the nation. Any universal within the narrative must come to terms with the specificity of its positioning in Nigerian society. The narrative does this through the simultaneous activation of two layers of irreconcilable mythology, both of which hearken beyond the boundaries of the text as a "doubled-

[30] James Snead, "European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed", in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 237.

scoped narrative", or one which, by utilizing two or more distinct master plots in tandem, emerges as a unique, third narrative space. In his theorization of the double-scoped narrative, Mark Turner calls it "a great mental leap" where readers "connect two stories that should be kept absolutely apart, and … blend them to make a third story". These stories become "the source of our creativity and knowledge" because it is in these spaces that narrative may re-imagine tradition and prescribed master plots.[31] In contrast to the broader notion of hybridity so often used in postcolonial criticism, *GraceLand*'s use of a double-scoped narrative maintains the subjectivity of its stances and the specificity of its historical situation, creating a blended space in which the double-articulations of individual and communal meaning work to create an environment in which conflicting identities may continue to flourish and alternative paths to progress and personal fulfilment are authenticated. Turner states that "[f]ar from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination. The resulting blends can turn out to be highly creative",[32] emphasizing that, in contrast to a vague notion of hybridity, the specific selection of oppositional elements in a double-scoped blend are what allow the narrative to emerge in a space where dynamically constructed meanings may proliferate. Throughout, the narrative operates on an affective level as a double-scoped critique of the very notion of mythologizing as it stands in the condition of postcoloniality, doing so through the interaction of two irreconcilable and irreducible layers of mythologizing, each of which questions the epistemological value of the other.

[31] Turner, "Double-Scoped", 119 and 133.

[32] Turner, "Compression", 19.

GraceLand enacts this critical and transformative function of myth to foreground the very opacity of mythologizing as a process, most explicitly through the character of the King of the Beggars. In the narrative, the King serves as the voice of traditionalism. The King constantly questions Elvis's drive to success through material gain and his easy adoption of American cultural standards for happiness and survival. The King urges Elvis to remain connected to his lost idealism when confronting the nation, presenting a view of Nigeria as victim of American neo-colonial policies. Eventually the King dies what is perceived as a heroic death in a showdown with a corrupt government official, implicitly positioned as the embodiment of the neocolonialist policies of post-independence Africa. After his death, Elvis begins to question the validity of the King's stance: "[Elvis] had come to terms with the King's death; but he hadn't come to terms, and probably never would, with the way the King had been deified. He was spoken of with a deeply profound reverence, and the appendage 'Blessings be upon his name,' usually reserved for prophets in Islam, was being used whenever his name was invoked" (*GL*, 310). The King, deified by his community, is exposed in the narrative as having been motivated by a personal revenge quest, cheapening his martyrdom. More troublingly, the uncritical view of the King-as-culture-hero disallows the complexity of his desire for justice and flattens his engagement with the people to a caricature of itself. Through Elvis's critical stance against the mythologizing of the King, *GraceLand* makes explicit the questioning of myth noted as critical to any

hope of a liberatory future.[33] The King's deification takes on another level, as a warning against the duplicity of mythology and the danger of blind dogmatism therein.

V. Conclusions: Towards an Open Future

In his reading of *GraceLand*, Obi Nwakanma refers to Elvis's flight to America as marking a tendency, in contemporary Nigerian literature, "to question, as a result of disillusionment, the value of nation and national belonging".[34] Yet the narrative, as double-scoped, complicates the issue beyond national belonging as a binary marker. Communal belonging is both questioned and confirmed; traditions are respected while simultaneously displaced. No statement wholeheartedly supporting any totalizing discourse may be maintained; instead, the narrative demands a consistently dynamic negotiation and re-imagination of meaning throughout its course. As such, *GraceLand* serves as an emergent space for narrating the postcolony, free from the nostalgia of nativism implied in the return to indigenous mythology and the attendant yearning for lost origins as well as from the contemporary view of the West as saviour and economic and social development as the mythological slayer of ills. In its structure, the narrative answers back to the inherent contradiction of postcolonial narrative which, as Elleke Boehmer has noted, "cannot bring what it promises: a completely united and unifying history, an absolute unity with the national body. To conceptualize that fusion demands self-division. In effect, to transfigure body into narrative, to escape from being only a figure in another's text, is to effect a break in the self".[35] In *GraceLand*, the use of mythology elicits this uneasy unity in fragmentation through the organization of the narrative as inherently split within itself, expressing the capacity of narrative to make impossible meanings accessible while navigating what Òlakunle George has referred to as the difficult task of all African writers, "the need to speak of and for a collective identity and destiny, from within an enunciatory space that is exterior to that identity".[36] Caught in the tension between a deified past, on the one hand, and the neo-colonialism of the West-as-salvation, *GraceLand* chooses neither and both, simultaneously, an impossible position somehow made possible through the narrative structure, and as such, legitimizes the possibilities and necessity of transgressive identifications within postcolonial societies. Through the use of a simultaneously activated double-scoped narrative, *GraceLand* subverts the demand for a single 'national culture' and presents a new imagining of Africa as unchained from the oppressive dictates of mythology and the domination of culture heroes and folk heroes. At the same time, Africa is also imagined as no longer at ease with neo-liberal mythologies of development; instead the narrative functions as a re-imagining of Africa that is both traditional and contemporary, yet neither uncritically.

[33] Isidore Okpewho, "Home, Exile, and the Space In Between", *Research in African Literatures*, 37.2 (Summer 2006), 69.

[34] Obi Nwakanma, "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel", *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2 (Summer 2008), 13.

[35] Elleke Boehmer, "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.3 (Spring 1993), 274.

[36] Òlakunle George, "The 'Native' Missionary, the African Novel, and In-between", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 36.1 (Autumn 2002), 18.