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A HERO TO MOST?: ELVIS, MYTH, AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

People spun tales, others listened spellbound. There was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the most chilling tale. We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story than we had been earlier. But there was a greater appreciation now. We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe. (DeLillo, 1985: 153)

F or a dead man, Elvis Presley is awfully noisy. His body may have failed him in 1977, but today his spirit, his image, and his myths do more than live on: they flourish, they thrive, they multiply. As the musical duo of Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper (1987) has observed, 'Elvis is everywhere', sneaking out of songs, movies, television shows, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, comic strips, comic books, greeting cards, T-shirts, poems, plays, novels, children's books, academic journals, university courses, art exhibits, home computer software, political campaigns, postage stamps, and innumerable other corners of the cultural terrain in ways that defy common-sense notions of how dead stars are supposed to behave. Elvis's current ubiquity is particularly noteworthy, not just because he 'refus[es] to go away' (Marcus, 1990b: 117), but because he keeps showing up in places where he seemingly doesn't belong.

What I want to argue in this essay is that Elvis's unusual second life is, to a large extent, made possible by the ways in which the myths surrounding his life and his career dovetail so easily with most of the major strands of cultural mythology in contemporary US society (though space forces me to limit my discussion here to the links between Elvis's image and myths of race). Pick a crucial site of cultural struggle in the US since World War II, and you will find that if Elvis isn't already a seemingly natural player in that struggle, then he and his myths can be – and often are – readily articulated to the specific mythological formation in question in a natural-seeming way.

This is not to say that Elvis is simply an empty signifier than can mean absolutely anything at all. On the contrary, what I want to argue here is that Elvis is an incredibly full signifier, one that is already intimately bound up with an entire range of important cultural mythologies. While there is a

certain Rorschach-like quality to Elvis and his myths,¹ Elvis is not (and never has been) a completely blank slate on to which fans and critics can simply write their own stories. As Linda Ray Pratt puts it, 'those who have argued that people projected onto Elvis anything they liked because his image was essentially vacuous are mistaken; if anything, the image is too rich in suggestion to be acknowledged fully or directly' (1979: 43). This emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of Elvis's mythology – that it is a multiplicity of myths, rather than a single myth writ large – is important, not only because 'no one myth is large enough to contain Elvis' (Marsh, 1982/92: xiii), but because this very plurality is itself a vital part of Elvis's mythology:

As myth, Elvis is different things for different people, though for most of his fans, there seemed to be a ready tolerance for and acceptance of others, especially other Elvisites, regardless of background or origin. In fact, the more diverse the background, the more it verified the universal validity of Elvis and what they thought he stood for and made them stand for. (Brock, 1979: 121)

To treat the mythological formation centered on Elvis as a singular myth, no matter how large or all-encompassing that myth is made out to be, is thus to oversimplify the phenomenon at hand, offering too elementary an answer to a highly complicated set of questions.

At the very least, Elvis's myths have long been articulated – and still are today – in significant and often contradictory ways to broader mythological formations surrounding race, gender, and class. Thus, we have the common mythical images of Elvis, not only as the 'white boy singin' the blues' who broke down the color barriers of pop music, but also as the white man who stole black culture and was crowned 'King' by a racist society for doing so; not only as the leather-clad, pelvis-swinging, rock 'n' roll embodiment of raw, masculine sexual energy, but also as the baby-faced, 'teddy bear' crooner of tender, romantic ballads for moon-eyed teenaged girls; not only as the hard-working country boy who went to the city and found fame and fortune beyond his wildest dreams, but also as the epitome of the masses' misguided respect for a transplanted redneck who wore his passion for schlock and tackiness like a badge of honor. The vast body of Elvis's mythology manages to contain all of these contradictory images and then some, as Elvis the 'all-purpose, economy-rate icon' (Guralnick, 1979: 143) has also been articulated to discursive struggles between high culture and low culture, youthfulness and adulthood, the country and the city, rebellion and conformity, North and South, the sacred and the secular, and so on. In fact, no topic whatsoever seems to be immune to Elvis's presence, as he has recently surfaced in discourses centered around such seemingly 'Elvis-proof' topics as the Gulf War,² the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe,³ and abortion.⁴ Potentially overarching all of these myths – and incorporating many of them within its realm – is that of Elvis as the embodiment of the American Dream (and thus, by extension, as the embodiment of America itself): a figure who simultaneously stands as a symbol for all that is most wonderful and all that is most horrible about that dream.⁵ Ultimately, it is

the combination of the diversity of broader cultural myths surrounding Elvis along with the seemingly paradoxical ways in which he is articulated to multiple and often contradictory inflections of those myths – not only today, but throughout his lifetime – that make him such a ubiquitous presence across the terrain of contemporary US culture. While other stars can be (and have been) articulated to a number of such myths (e.g., Marilyn Monroe and sexuality, James Dean and youthful rebellion), only Elvis manages to encompass (and be encompassed by) so many of them simultaneously.

For this reason, it is not terribly surprising that the facts one might use to describe Elvis as a man, as a musician, or as a historical figure are almost completely absent from the various sightings (discursive and otherwise) that constitute his current presence on the terrain of US culture. When Elvis appears today, it is largely as a mythical figure, a signifier whose significations are ultimately not connected to his life or his art. To borrow a phrase from novelist Don DeLillo, Elvis the man is merely 'the false character that follows the name around' (1985: 17). Elvis the myth, on the other hand, may be the perfect physical embodiment of Barthes' description of myth:

a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses. (1957: 133)

The contemporary Elvis *is* Barthes' speaking corpse, whose 'insidious, degraded survival' finds him 'ooz[ing] from the fissures of culture, voracious and blind, . . . engorged and bleeding dope' (Marcus, 1990b: 118). As Burt Kearns describes it in the pages of *Spin*:

As bureaucrats are trying to decide if Elvis Aron Presley *the man* has stood the test of time and deserves to be shrunk down to the size of a stamp, Elvis *the legend* has bulked up and got bigger than ever in 1988. It was as if someone rattled the flush handle one too many times and spewed all the embarrassing contents of *Elvis World* [Stern and Stern, 1987] up all over the seat, across the tabloids, and down respectable Main Street in a flood of news and merchandise. And as the muck rose, it overwhelmed the mortal we thought we knew, covering him, leaving him unrecognizable. . . . [In 1988] there were enough Elvises to go around for just about everybody. You had your Elvis as miniseries villain (thanks to Priscilla), Elvis as bestselling book, Elvis as MasterCard, Elvis as 900 phone number, Elvis as Las Vegas musical, Elvis as bedroom ghost haunting Priscilla's boyfriend, Elvis as victim of 'prescription medication', Elvis as E.T., Elvis as illegitimate father, Elvis as father-in-law, Elvis as granddaddy, Elvis as *religion*. . . . There was even Elvis as rock 'n' roller in 'Huh-huh-huh Hershey's' TV commercial. (1988: 72)

Kearns's throwaway line at the end of this list – made as if Elvis's appearance as a musician is sufficiently rare these days to provoke genuine surprise – is a

particularly telling observation, for if there is anything actually missing from the range of Elvis's recent appearances, it is the image of Elvis-as-artist. As Greil Marcus puts it,

In the face of the diffusion of Elvis as a myth, the concentration of Presley as a person who once did interesting things has become irrelevant; . . . up against the perversity and complexity of Elvis's myth, its infinite circularity, capable of turning any merely human attribute into a phantasm, Elvis Presley's physical presence in a song is redundant above all. (1991: 159)

To expand on Marcus's main point here, I would argue that Elvis the artist is largely invisible today because, no matter how compelling much of his music actually was (and still is), his impact on US culture was never exclusively musical. In the wake of his first flash of national success in 1956, an incredibly vast range of cultural practices – from fashions to hair styles, from attitudes towards authority to the very ways in which people walked and talked – were not merely transformed, they were torn apart and rebuilt from scratch. Rock critic Tom Smucker, for example, describes Elvis, not as the man who changed the face of popular music forever (or some such), but as 'the man whose [1956] TV appearance inspires my brother to threaten to wear *blue jeans to church*' (1979: 162). However important Elvis's music may have been, the relative absence of his music from his current cultural ubiquity may also reflect the fact that music's impact on its audiences often manifests itself in non-musical ways. Bruce Springsteen (1984) once sang that 'we learned more from a three minute record . . . than we ever learned in school'. As interesting as many of Elvis's records are, one of the reasons they play such a minor role in Elvis's strange posthumous career may very well be that what we learned from those records is more interesting still. Without trying to claim that Elvis's music doesn't matter, I would like to suggest that his myths may matter much more.

The late rock critic Lester Bangs once argued a similar point, claiming 'that rock'n'roll comes down to myth. There are no "facts"' (quoted in Frith, 1983: 271). In terms of historical accuracy, Bangs's statement is patently untrue. There *are* facts: that Elvis Presley scored his first national hit with 'Heartbreak Hotel' is not a myth, it's a matter of record. In terms of cultural impact, however, Bangs's seemingly illogical claim is actually quite accurate, as what people *believe* the facts to be – no matter how much such beliefs may conflict with the 'real' story – frequently matters more than the 'true' facts of the situation. And while most (and perhaps even all) myths are rooted in facts of some kind, the effectivity of any given myth cannot simply be reduced to a question of the veracity of the facts upon which it is based. Whatever the facts connected to a specific event may be, it is ultimately their articulation to and organization into mythological formations that renders them culturally significant.

To illustrate this point in a more concrete fashion, I want to examine three factual accounts of the same legend . . . or, perhaps more accurately, three legendary versions of the same facts:

Over and over I remember Sam [Phillips] saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.' (Sun Records co-manager Marion Keisker, quoted in Hopkins, 1971: 66)

Marion Keisker . . . recalled Sam Phillips saying repeatedly, 'If I could find a white boy who could sing like a nigger, I could make a million dollars.' (Goldman, 1981: 129)

If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars. (Sam Phillips, quoted in Choron and Oskam, 1991: 7)

These are the three principal variations of what is probably the most often repeated 'quotation' in the history of rock 'n' roll. The most obvious of the permutations wrought upon this story manifests itself in the difference between having 'the Negro sound and the Negro feel' and singing 'like a nigger', though discrepancies concerning the age and/or maturity of the hypothetical singer (is he a man or a boy?), his potential value to Sun Records owner Sam Phillips (is he worth a billion dollars or merely a cool million?), and the source of the quote (the subtle, yet significant, difference between whether Phillips said it or whether Keisker said Phillips said it) are present here as well. The singer who fulfilled Phillips's dreams, of course, was the young Elvis Presley, and while Phillips may never have made that billion (or even a million) dollars off of Elvis, his formula for success – marrying the largely white sounds of country music to the predominantly black sounds of rhythm 'n' blues – did ultimately bring him the fame and fortune he'd been seeking. Whether viewed from an aesthetic or a financial perspective, Sam Phillips's success is a matter of verifiable fact; whether he ever uttered any version of the now (in)famous words attributed to him, however, is a matter heavily shrouded in layers of myth.

When the 'if I could' quote is cited, it usually appears as it does in the third example above: without any reference whatsoever to Marion Keisker. In such instances, the statement is attributed directly to Sam Phillips, and Keisker's role as an intermediary is completely erased from the tale. Such an omission would be insignificant if Phillips's comments had been publicly recorded or if his version of the story supported Keisker's. On more than one occasion, however, Phillips has denied making any such statement (Marcus, 1981: 16n; Worth and Tamerius, 1988: 153n) and Keisker is the only source of direct evidence to the contrary. While there doesn't seem to be any reason to dispute Keisker's general credibility as a witness to the events that transpired at Sun Studios in the 1950s, it's important to remember that all versions of the 'if I could' statement are ultimately based on her recollection of conversations with Phillips that took place at least fifteen years prior to her interview with Elvis biographer Jerry Hopkins. However accurately Hopkins may have quoted Keisker, it is still fair to question how faithful her memory was to whatever Phillips may have said more than a decade and a half before, either about merging black and white musics or about making a fortune in the music business.

Ten years after Hopkins's *Elvis* (1971) first appeared, Albert Goldman published his 'tell-all' biography of Memphis's most famous export, also called *Elvis* (1981). That same year, Marcus wrote a scathing review of Goldman's book insisting that the version of the 'if I could' quote included therein (the second of the three examples) above was wildly inaccurate – perhaps even willfully so:

I picked up the phone and called Marion Keisker in Memphis (though Goldman claims to have based his book on more than 600 interviews, he never interviewed either Keisker or Phillips). I read her Goldman's version of Phillips's statement. This is what she said: 'UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES! What? I never *heard* Sam use the word "nigger" – *nothing* could be more out of character.' She paused, and came back. 'Never. Never – *never*. I don't believe Sam ever used that word in his life, and he certainly never used it to me.' (1981: 16)

The goal of Goldman's book, according to Marcus, is to 'altogether dismiss and condemn . . . not just Elvis Presley, but the white working-class South from which Presley came, and the pop world which emerged in Presley's wake', and Marcus's primary fear is that Goldman's version of the 'if I could' statement, coupled with his attempt to commit 'cultural genocide', will do immeasurable and unwarranted harm:

First, because his book will be the most widely read and widely consulted on Elvis Presley, his perversion of Sam Phillips's statement will replace the statement itself: it will be quoted in articles, reviews, among fans, and in other books, and it will defame the reputation of Sam Phillips. Second, because Goldman has placed a racist slur at the very founding point of rock & roll, and because (here and elsewhere) he makes racism seem ordinary, matter-of-fact, and obvious, he will contribute to the acceptance of racism among rock fans, who might otherwise learn a different lesson from an honest version of their history, and he will contribute to the growing fashionableness of racism among Americans of all sorts. (Marcus, 1981: 16)

Significantly, the strength of Marcus's argument against Goldman does *not* rest on unimpeachable factual evidence that Hopkins's account of the legend represents Phillips's true words (i.e., that Phillips said 'Negro' rather than 'nigger'); in fact, Marcus's rebuttal relies almost entirely on his conversation, not with Phillips (the quote's reputed source), but with Keisker (the quote's reputed witness). Marcus even goes so far as to acknowledge (although he relegates it to a footnote) that Hopkins's version of the story is subject to question as well, pointing out that 'Keisker recalls saying "a million" [and that] Phillips denies making the statement' (1981: 16n).⁶

This is not to claim that Marcus's argument has no factual basis whatsoever. As lawyer and Elvis fan Aaron Caplan argues, according to legal standards of what would constitute proof of the 'if I could' legend's truth in a hypothetical court case, Marcus's case against Goldman is firmly grounded in facts:

If Marion Keisker takes the stand and says, 'I heard Sam Phillips say X', it would be hearsay if used to prove that X was true or that we should believe X. But it is not hearsay if used to prove that Sam said it. On the contrary, it's considered the best evidence there is: a living, breathing eyewitness to the event. (Sam is also a living, breathing eyewitness to the event, one who recalls it differently. The jury has to decide who to believe. It could believe Sam, but it wouldn't have to.) (personal communication, 8 June 1992)

While I don't wish to dispute Caplan's argument that Keisker's statements (both to Marcus and to Hopkins) constitute factual evidence to support Marcus's case, the question still remains as to why Marcus chooses to give more credence to Keisker's 'testimony' than to Phillips's. Given that both Keisker and Phillips are 'living, breathing eyewitness[es] to the event' and that their memories of that event are mutually incompatible (Phillips, after all, disputes the claim that there ever *was* such an event), Marcus's argument is hardly an airtight confirmation of either Hopkins's or Keisker's stories. Judged by the standards Caplan outlines here, Marcus persuasively and convincingly undermines the credibility of Goldman's version of the story; nevertheless, because he leaves Phillips's denials uncontested, Marcus ultimately fails to demonstrate that either Keisker's or Hopkins's version of the story (e.g., that Phillips said anything resembling the 'if I could' statement whatsoever) is the truth.

This is not to say that Marcus's critique of Goldman's book is somehow flawed because it fails to establish what Phillips really said. On the contrary, Marcus's arguments here are compelling,⁷ and the seriousness of the issues he raises should not be ignored or underestimated: even in the intolerant environment of the South in the early 1950s, there is a world of difference between calling someone 'a Negro' and calling them 'a nigger'. Ultimately, however, Goldman's revision of the story is offensive to Marcus, not so much because Goldman gets the facts wrong, but because his racist and defamatory version of the myth threatens to displace the version commonly accepted at the time. Marcus is not criticizing Goldman in order to defend or uncover The Truth; he is, instead, struggling over the nature of The Myth and, in the end, Marcus's argument is not about facts, but about the mythological formations to which those facts are articulated. Thus, what Phillips did or didn't really say is almost irrelevant (which is why it's reasonable to relegate such epistemological questions to the marginal space of a footnote); of infinitely greater significance is what people believe he said and the effects of such beliefs.⁸ For while a myth may be a complete fabrication with no basis whatsoever in 'the truth' (whatever that may be), it can, and generally will, still function as if it were true. This is, in fact, the very nature of myth; it 'has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification' (Barthes, 1957: 142). In spite of its artificiality, myth succeeds in passing itself off as a natural fact.

To underscore this last point, I want to turn briefly to another oft-quoted comment, one attributed to Elvis himself. Perhaps the most damning

account of the statement in question comes from V.S. Naipaul's *A Turn in the South*, which quotes an elderly black man from Nashville as saying, "To talk to Presley about blacks was like talking to Adolf Hitler about the Jews. You know what he said? "All I want from blacks is for them to buy my records and shine my shoes." That's in the record' (1989: 228). Now even in Hopkins's version of the 'if I could' quote, one can find traces of racism lurking in the cracks: while Sam Phillips's intentions may have been entirely honorable,⁹ his recognition that it would take a white performer to turn a profit selling records to a mainstream (i.e., white) audience points to institutionalized patterns of prejudice that permeated both the music industry and US culture in the 1950s. The 'shoe shine' statement, however, is nowhere near as subtle: its bigotry is too malicious to be passed off as mere ignorance, too forceful to be overlooked as an offhand slur. Even if Elvis was a firm believer in civil rights and racial equality, and even if it could be proven that he uttered these words in jest, the prejudice at the core of this statement is too sizable, and offered too unashamedly, to render invalid any such excuses one might try to offer for it. No one, however, can prove that Elvis intended these words as a joke, largely because no one seems able to prove that he said them at all.

In this respect, the 'shoe shine' myth has a lot in common with the 'if I could' myth: both are widely known, both have appeared in a variety of forms, and the facts behind both are difficult (if not impossible) to pin down. The parallels between the two stories, however, end here. While there are several variations on the 'if I could' statement, these are generally limited to the three versions presented above. The 'shoe shine' quote, on the other hand, never seems to appear the same way twice. For example, in contrast to the version of the statement offered by Naipaul's informant ('All I want from blacks is for them to buy my records and shine my shoes'), Marcus understands the statement to be, 'The only thing niggers are good for is to shine my shoes' (Heilman, 1992: 32); *Michigan Daily* columnist N.M. Zuberi reports the quote as, 'The only thing niggers can do for me is shine my shoes and buy my records' (1990: 8); comedian Eddie Murphy claims Elvis said, 'The only thing they [blacks] can do is shine my shoes and buy my records' (Lee, 1990: 34); and rock critic Dave Marsh says the alleged slur was, 'The only thing a nigger is good for is to shine my shoes' (1992: x). While the statement's general theme of contemptuous prejudice is consistent from one version to the next, the precise words that Elvis reportedly said vary an extraordinary amount for a statement that's 'in the record'.

In fact, the inconsistencies between the various versions of this statement can be partially attributed to the fact that there is no record into which this statement was ever placed: the only thing even remotely resembling a citation that seems to exist for these words is an offhand reference that Marcus makes to his first encounter with them in an unspecified issue of *Jet* 'a number of years ago' (Heilman, 1992: 32), though anecdotal evidence hints that the 'shoe shine' story was in circulation among certain segments of the African-American population as far back as the mid-1960s.¹⁰ In true folk-legend fashion, whatever mediation Elvis's statement would have to

have gone through in order to achieve its current notoriety has been thoroughly erased from the tale. Further compounding the difficulty in tracking down the 'shoe shine' quote is the absence of even an implied witness (e.g., a reporter, a fan, a member of Elvis's 'Memphis Mafia', etc.) in the anecdotes surrounding the statement. In the case of the 'if I could' quote, what Sam Phillips said to Marion Keisker back in 1952 (or whenever) may be a matter of contention, but what Keisker said to Jerry Hopkins is 'in the record': once upon a time, at least, tapes of the interviews Hopkins conducted for his book were available at the Memphis State University Library (Marcus, 1981: 16n) and could be used to verify the accuracy, if not of Keisker's quotation of Phillips, then of Hopkins's quotation of Keisker. No such fact-checking, however, seems possible with the 'shoe shine' quote, as none of the story's innumerable versions provide any clues as to whom Elvis was speaking with when (and if) he made this statement.

That parenthetical 'if' deserves closer attention. Zuberi flatly claims that 'there's no evidence to prove Elvis ever said this' (1990: 8), though the only evidence he offers that Elvis didn't utter these words is his own faith in Elvis's sterling character and a refutation of the closely related myth that Elvis's fame and fortune came about through his 'theft' of the blues. According to Marcus, rock critic and Elvis biographer Peter Guralnick 'wasted six weeks trying to track this statement down and find out if he could make a chain going back to Elvis, and he wasn't able to' (Heilman, 1992: 32); Guralnick ultimately concluded that, if Elvis really said such a thing, 'it would have been unlikely and out of character' (Marcus, 1992: 4). Perhaps the most convincing refutation of the 'shoe shine' myth, however, comes from Dave Marsh. While acknowledging the impossibility of proving that Elvis never said these words, Marsh offers a plausible – if admittedly circumstantial – argument to justify his own belief in Elvis's innocence of the thought crime in question:

Whatever we can *prove*, there is plenty of reason to doubt that Elvis ever said such a thing. . . . The Million Dollar Quartet sessions, which catch him completely off guard (none of the musicians knew the tape was running), find Elvis telling a tale about being in Las Vegas and hearing a black singer with Billy Ward's Dominoes – Jackie Wilson, it turns out – who completely outdoes him on 'Don't Be Cruel'. Elvis never uses the word 'nigger' here; he refers to Wilson at first just as a 'guy', then, in passing, as 'a coloured guy'. . . . [Elvis] is not uncritical – on the other Elvis numbers [Wilson] does, the guy 'tries too hard' but Elvis readily acknowledges that he's been beaten at his own game. The man who uttered the judgment of black people contained in the fable could never have made any such admission. Not in 1957, and not today. (Marsh, 1992: x)

Marcus, however, is not entirely convinced that the 'shoe shine' quote is spurious, nor is he as willing as Marsh is to dismiss these words as something that can or should be ignored:

It's very possible [Elvis] could have said that. But there doesn't seem to be any evidence at all that he did. On the other hand, there are a lot of

people who believe it. Believe me, Vernon Reid [of Living Colour] has heard that story. Spike Lee has heard that story. Chuck D [of Public Enemy] has heard that story. I don't criticize them for believing it, because that's a big thing. That's a big rock to get over. (Heilman, 1992: 32)

It would be easy to conclude from Marcus's comments here that his position on Elvis and racial politics has undergone a dramatic shift from his Goldman-bashing days. Where once he had argued passionately against a racist version of rock 'n' roll's history, here he seems to back away from the fray altogether, accepting a racist slur attributed to Elvis as a story against which it would be pointless to argue. Where once he was willing to fight over the myths he (like Bangs) saw at the heart of rock 'n' roll in order to transform them into what he felt to be a better story, here he seems willing (albeit reluctantly) to allow the very same sort of bigotry he railed against a decade before to be added to the accepted canon of Elvis legends.

Such an interpretation of Marcus's words, however, overlooks some important consistencies between his discussions of the 'if I could' and 'shoe shine' legends, consistencies that reflect a more theoretically stable position than that suggested above. In both cases, Marcus's argument is centered, not around facts (e.g., what Phillips or Presley really said), but around myths (e.g., what people believe Phillips or Presley really said), as he recognizes that the facts, whatever they may actually be, are inadequate weapons against the myths that he wishes to displace. In making such a case, Marcus unconsciously rephrases an older argument about myth made by Barthes:

It is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. (Barthes, 1957: 135)

Marcus's discussion of the 'shoe shine' myth recognizes the virtual impossibility of vanquishing myth that Barthes describes here: even if one could establish beyond all reasonable doubt that Elvis never uttered that damning sentence, such proof would not suffice to undermine (much less negate) the widespread mythological image of Elvis-as-racist, if for no other reason than that this myth ultimately rests on a broader base of facts (and other myths) than just a single statement. As *Village Voice* writer Joe Wood argues, 'It doesn't even matter if Elvis made that ignorant statement about colored people and shoe-shining because the icon, not Elvis the man, is the Elvis we all know' (1991: 10).

Similarly, as Barthes' discussion of myth would suggest, Marcus's most effective weapon against Goldman's distortion of the 'if I could' quote is not factual (e.g., what Phillips really said), it's mythical (e.g., the legend of what Phillips 'really' said, as told by Keisker and Hopkins). Even here, however, Marcus implicitly acknowledges that his struggle over the nature of the myth is doomed to fail, as his discussion of the impact of Goldman's book is filled, not with tentative and conditional statements describing the book's *possible*

effects (e.g., 'it *might* be quoted', 'it *could* defame', 'he *may* contribute', etc.), but with straightforwardly declarative statements explaining the book's *inevitable* effects (e.g., 'it *will* be quoted', 'it *will* defame', 'he *will* contribute', etc.). While Marcus consciously and deliberately attempts to reshape the myth, he nevertheless implicitly assumes, not only that he is powerless to beat the fable Goldman concocts, but that what little he can do to minimize that fable's damage depends on his use, not of better facts, but of better myths.

In the end, then, facts matter only because they can be (and generally are) articulated to larger mythological formations. More to the point, which facts matter (and how they matter) ultimately depends more on the nature of the myths they are bound up with than on the facts themselves. To return to the example I used earlier, even a fact as seemingly straightforward as 'Elvis had his first national hit with "Heartbreak Hotel"' is significant only because it has been stitched into larger mythological narratives – myths concerning Elvis's career, the birth of rock 'n' roll, the rise of teenagers as an increasingly important market for commodity consumption, the appropriation of black music and culture by white musicians and entrepreneurs, the conflict between high culture and popular culture, and so on – so that ultimately the precise way in which this fact matters varies according to the demands of the myth(s) to which it is articulated in a particular context. Outside of such narratives, however, this fact is little more than the answer to a hypothetical trivia question: it may be true, but it is not terribly significant.

As the above discussion of the 'if I could' and 'shoe shine' myths implies, the history of mythological connections between Elvis and discourses on race is a long one, dating back as far as Elvis's first commercial releases for Sun Records in the mid-1950s and continuing more than fifteen years after his death into the present day. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this history is characterized by a seamless progression of causal links between the myths of the past and those of the present. 'The entanglement of now and then', after all, 'is fundamentally a mystery' (Marcus, 1989: 23), and the path from the intertwined myths of Elvis and race as they existed in the 1950s to the analogous relationship between those mythological formations today is marked by fragmentation and non-dialectical ruptures as often as it is by continuity and simple evolutionary connections.

Such discontinuity stems in part from the ways in which myth frequently works to create and sustain a fictional vision of the past, one that ultimately serves to limit and shape both the ways in which people understand the world they currently inhabit as well as the possibilities they can imagine for their future. Thus, for example, Marsh interprets the 'shoe shine' myth, not as a historical example of past racial prejudice, but as a barometer of current racial tensions in the US and a potential indicator of what the future may hold for black/white relations:

The ['shoe shine'] fable is held as gospel by some of the finest contemporary black musicians, including Vernon Reid of Living Colour and Public Enemy's Chuck D. . . . It's a significant symbolic switch, from

James Brown, the most revered soul musician, who boasted of his personal closeness to Elvis, to Chuck D, the most respected leader of the hip-hop movement, who disdains any worth Elvis might possess at all. Part of it has to do with the depths of racism to which America has once again descended and the genuine need for black artists to create and sustain a separatist cultural mythology. Elvis was a figure of integration and that figure must now be destroyed or at least diminished. . . . On a symbolic scale, this claim that Elvis was nothing but a Klansman in blue suede shoes may be the greatest Elvis-related tragedy of all. For if Elvis, as I say at the end of this book, was the sort of indispensable cultural pioneer who made the only kind of map we can trust, what does it mean when pioneers of a later generation have to willfully torch that map? (1992: xi)

Marsh's comments here bear closer examination, but before I can address his argument in a productive and meaningful fashion, it is necessary to take a closer look at some of the recent articulations between Elvis's mythology and racial politics, including the specific musical rejections of Elvis's legacy that disturb Marsh: Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' (1989) and Living Colour's 'Elvis Is Dead' (1990).

'Fight the Power' is nothing less than a call to arms, made by the most outspoken and militant rap group in contemporary popular music, against the ideas, institutions, and practices that maintain the political, social, economic, and cultural inequalities between whites and blacks in the US today. The song served as the musical centerpiece of *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee's critically acclaimed film depicting twenty-four hours of racial tension in a predominantly black Brooklyn neighborhood, and it subsequently appeared on Public Enemy's best-selling album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. 'Fight the Power' is probably the most widely known and recognized of all of Public Enemy's songs,¹¹ and its most frequently quoted lyrics are undoubtedly those concerning Elvis: 'Elvis was a hero to most/But he never meant shit to me/He's straight up racist/That sucker was simple and plain/Motherfuck him and John Wayne.' This unequivocal rejection of Elvis and all that he stands for is more than a simple expression of Chuck D's distaste for Elvis's particular brand of rock 'n' roll, as there's much more at stake here than mere differences in musical taste. For Public Enemy, Elvis symbolizes more than four hundred years of redneck racism and thus neither deserves nor receives the tiniest shred of respect from the band. Underscoring this particular stance on the racial politics of Elvis is Lee's use of 'Fight the Power' in *Do the Right Thing*. The verse containing Public Enemy's musical assault on Elvis is the 'goddamn noise' blaring from Radio Raheem's boom box at the climactic moment when he and Buggin' Out enter Sal's Pizzeria to shut it down, and Lee's choice of this verse as the first salvo in this pivotal confrontation works to emphasize and reaffirm Public Enemy's claims regarding Elvis's racism, turning the group's wholly unsympathetic condemnation of Elvis into a revolutionary motto for black America to rally around.

A little more than a year after the initial release of 'Fight the Power', the

hard rock group Living Colour added their voices to the conversation with 'Elvis Is Dead'. Self-consciously quoting Public Enemy, the band proclaims that 'Elvis was a hero to most', but then finishes Chuck D's original couplet with a more generous interpretation of Elvis's racial politics: 'But that's beside the point/A Black man taught him how to sing/And then he was crowned King.' While this is certainly not an adulatory whitewash of Elvis's image (the song underscores its slam at Elvis's mythical status by concluding – in deliberate contrast to Paul Simon's 'Graceland' (1986) and its vision of all-embracing acceptance – that 'I've got a reason to believe/We all *won't* be received at Graceland'), it is also not the unequivocal rejection of Elvis that Public Enemy calls for.

If nothing else, Living Colour grants that Elvis had a certain measure of talent (even if he acquired that by imitating black musicians), and the accusations of racism the band levels here are directed less at Elvis than at his fans (i.e., those who crowned him). The band's point is not that Elvis doesn't deserve any respect whatsoever, but that his coronation as 'The King' works to overshadow the important contributions made by other artists – particularly blacks – to the birth and development of rock 'n' roll. As guitarist Vernon Reid told *Rolling Stone* in 1990, 'it's not enough for the powers that be to love Elvis, for him to be *their* king of rock & roll. Elvis has to be the king of rock & roll for everybody. And that is something I cannot swallow' (Fricke, 1990: 56). Reid expanded on this argument to *Spin* that same year, claiming that 'Elvis was great at the beginning . . . but the crown thing is something else. If he's the King of rock 'n' roll, who is Fats Domino? The court jester?' (Jones, 1990: 94). James Bernard, associate editor of *The Source* (a New York-based rap newsletter), offers a similar interpretation both of 'Elvis Is Dead' and of Living Colour's position on Elvis and racial politics:

Yes, [Elvis] was a great performer but let's not cheapen his contribution with these tabloid-fueled cults. The real Elvis was lonely, drugged and obese, and not many of us even knew until fame killed him. With [lead singer] Corey [Glover]'s James Brown imitation, Little Richard's rap and Maceo [Parker]'s cameo, Living Colour points to other legends who should be just as large – and are still living. (1990: 2)

Neither Reid nor Bernard accept the notion that it's proper to call Elvis 'The King' while artists possessing equal, and probably greater, musical talent (e.g., Little Richard, James Brown, etc.) are treated as lesser figures in the rock 'n' roll pantheon, but both also point the finger of blame for such injustices away from Elvis, implicitly arguing that those who built a pedestal only big enough for one (white) artist and then placed Elvis upon it deserve the brunt of the scorn.

Living Colour's position on Elvis is further complicated by their own status as a group of four black men playing a style of music (hard rock) typically seen to be the exclusive province of white artists. As Marcus describes it, Living Colour is 'a black rock 'n' roll band bent on smashing the same racial barriers Elvis once smashed, the same racial barriers that had

reformed around him' (1991: 187). Elvis's initial success in the 1950s helped to integrate the previously segregated world of US popular music, making rock 'n' roll something socially acceptable for both blacks and white to play and enjoy. But this (relatively) peaceful and harmonious mingling of black and white cultures didn't last. The sounds that had been attacked by some in the 1950s as 'nigger music' had, by the 1970s (and possibly sooner, depending on which version of popular music history one believes), become primarily music made by and for whites: a resegregation of the musical terrain that has remained largely unchallenged ever since.¹²

Seen in this context, Living Colour's career has been marked by struggles for acceptance and respect above and beyond those normally faced by up-and-coming artists. The band explained some of the additional problems they've had to face to *Spin* in 1990:

[Bass player Muzz] Skillings: Whenever we did a load-in, right before a soundcheck, without fail . . . somebody would come up to us and say 'Are you guys a rap band?'

[Drummer William] Calhoun: No.

Skillings: 'You guys are a funk band?'

Calhoun: No.

Skillings: 'A dance band?' They'd go down the list: jazz, reggae, calypso. They'd list every conceivable thing before they'd say rock. In fact, they never said rock.

[. . .]

Calhoun: People ask us, 'Why are you playing rock 'n' roll?' I never read an article on George Michael asking him why he was singing R&B. A lot of press we get is as 'Black Rock'; 'Black Band Brings Down Barriers.' Why can't we just be a rock band? Why can't we just be Living Colour? (Jones, 1990: 50, 94)

Bernard is possibly even more incensed than the band over the incredulity that regularly greets the notion that black musicians might actually want to play rock (not to mention the idea that they could do so successfully):

I'm not one for colorblindness – the worst thing anyone has ever said to me is that 'I don't think of you as Black, you're so *normal*.' But with Living Colour, the title 'Black rockers' has *not* been offered by the rock press to acknowledge and honor the heritage of popular music, including rock. Instead, it's a slur – used, intentionally or not, to shelve them and mute their potential impact as artists and thinkers. The reality is that they rock harder, with more passion and ability, embracing more musical styles more deftly than any other band in the post-Zeppelin era. (1990: 2)

Thus, Living Colour's criticism of 'the crown thing' is not merely that a white man has been accorded respect and honors that have systematically been denied to equally deserving black musicians, but that Elvis's coronation has been accompanied by, and implicitly helped to reinforce, the resegregation of the musical world into neat and (supposedly) mutually exclusive racial categories.

Joe Wood's interpretation of Elvis's coronation takes the argument made

by Living Colour a step further, implying that Elvis could only have been named 'The King' by a culture steeped in racism and prejudice. While acknowledging that Elvis – especially in his early days – was a great artist, Wood argues that 'Elvis's crowning wouldn't have made any sense if black performers had been as salable as he.' Elvis is called 'The King of Rock 'n' Roll', however, not because of his talent, but

because he consumed black music and lived. He 'mastered' it, giving white folk 'license' to rock, by making a basically black form of popular music 'accessible' to many whites. Making it beaucoup salable. . . . Way past those first few records when his music was any good, Elvis kept generating big bucks and attention – already an icon of chauvinistic white culture consumption. . . . Which makes him the Greatest in a long line of White American Consumers. Dust off those Paul Whiteman (the King of Jazz) records, or listen to Benny Goodman's (the King of Swing) watered swing, and you'll catch a drift of the tradition of the drift. (1991: 10)

The flip side of Wood's point, however, is perhaps the more crucial one: that the unsaleability of black musicians stems less from a fear of what black music would do to white audiences (though there is still more than enough of this brand of prejudice to go around) than from the failure of whites to recognize blacks as consumers of culture:

Fear of the black consumer: then, as now, black artists – culture consumers who took in stuff and made it theirs, and expressed it – did not really exist in the popular imagination. Chuck Berry as 'the black artist who took in country music' did not exist. Neither did cultural literates Howling Wolf, or Fats Domino, or Bo Diddley. . . . Instead, their stuff – a blues-based performance music informed by myriad American influences – was seen as 'natural black stuff' and not African-American art, or American art, as Presley's rock and roll would be. Not American art worthy of mainstream attention (Chuck D. an American poet? Hah!) (1991: 10)

What is particularly striking about Wood's argument is the prominent role he gives to Elvis in an article that ostensibly has nothing whatsoever to do with either Elvis or rock 'n' roll. The piece's title ('Who says a white band can't play rap?') and the accompanying photo both indicate that the story's *raison d'être* is a white rap group called the Young Black Teenagers . . . and yet Wood doesn't even mention the YBTs until more than halfway through the article, instead choosing to write an Elvis-centered 'introduction' that's longer than the rest of the piece. On the one hand, the connections that Woods makes between Elvis and the Young Black Teenagers are very natural: there's a powerful, commonsensical link between the racial politics of five white boys rapping in the 1990s and 'a white man with the Negro sound and the Negro feel' in the 1950s. On the other hand, however, such 'natural' connections are entirely mythical, as there's no obligatory reason to mention Elvis at all here, much less any need for him to dominate the article as thoroughly as he does. Elvis, after all, died before rap was born and

probably before most of the Young Black Teenagers were out of diapers, and yet here he is anyway, appearing as nothing less than *the* grand metaphor for the racial (and racist) politics of US popular music. In the end, then, Wood's discussion of Elvis is actually not about Elvis as much as it is about questions of race and culture (and the relationships between the two) in the US since World War II.

Buried not very far below the surface of all these debates over Elvis and racial politics is the old argument that the so-called 'birth of rock 'n' roll' in the 1950s was actually no such thing at all. Instead, rock 'n' roll came about when various white musicians and entrepreneurs began playing and recording an authentically black music (i.e., rhythm 'n' blues), all too often 'watering it down' (i.e., smoothing out its 'rough' edges) in the process. Calling the music 'rock 'n' roll' simultaneously worked to erase the connotations of blackness associated with the 'rhythm 'n' blues' label and to create the fiction that white musicians had, in fact, invented this 'new' music themselves. In this way, scores, perhaps even hundreds, of white artists, promoters, and record label executives rode to vast fame and fortune on the backs of black singers, songwriters, musicians, and businesspeople without similar rewards accruing to the music's true creators.

Or so the story goes. My goal here is not to discredit this myth altogether: one need only compare Pat Boone's pedestrian version of 'Tutti Frutti' (1956) to Little Richard's rollicking original (1956) – noting that Boone's record outsold and outcharted Little Richard's – to see that there is more than a little validity to such claims. That Little Richard, and not Pat Boone, is today widely regarded as one of the founding figures of rock 'n' roll does not erase the fact that the history of popular music is littered with tales of racial injustice. While Little Richard doesn't seem to bear Pat Boone any particular malice today,¹³ the fact that rock 'n' roll history has been kinder to him than to Boone gives Richard the luxury to be so generous. Other black artists of the 1950s who saw white cover versions of their records outsell theirs have generally not been so fortunate, and tales of such artists being 'found' years later, living in squalor and obscurity while the white musicians who had 'borrowed' their music became rich and famous, are sufficiently common to have become one of the standard clichés of rock 'n' roll history. More crucially, Little Richard's public statements of gratitude towards Pat Boone and Elvis for 'opening the door' so that his music could be heard and appreciated by white audiences¹⁴ are counterbalanced by his recognition that racism *did* play an important role in shaping the careers of rock 'n' roll's pioneers. 'I think that Elvis was more acceptable being white back in that period', Little Richard told *Rolling Stone* in 1990:

I believe that if Elvis had been black, he wouldn't have been as big as he was. If I was white, do you know how huge I'd be? If I was white, I'd be able to sit on top of the White House! A lot of things they would do for Elvis and Pat Boone, they wouldn't do for me. (Puterbaugh, 1990: 126)

A 1991 episode of 'President Bill' (a weekly one-panel cartoon drawn by William L. Brown that originates in *The Chicago Reader*) tells a similar tale.

The cartoon in question depicts a presidential press conference at which a muck-raking reporter asks the President if it's true he doesn't think Elvis is King. 'That's right', Bill replies before his staff can intercede, 'Elvis got rich ripping off African-American music. Chuck Berry is King! Elvis was a sleazeba...mfff!' The aide who belatedly muffles the President's last word by placing her hand over his mouth makes a vain attempt at damage control: 'The President misspoke!' she frantically explains, 'He *does* think Elvis is King!' but it's too late. The damage has already been done, and the reporters race off to contact their editors so that Bill's gaffe can be used as a press-stopping, program-interrupting news bulletin.¹⁵

In the end, however, the problem with the myth of rock 'n' roll as rhythm 'n' blues in whiteface is not that there are no facts to support it, but that it represents far too simplified an interpretation of those facts: the issues involved here, both literally and figuratively, can't be boiled down to an uncomplicated opposition between black and white, and the notion that the predominantly white army of early rock 'n' roll heroes engaged in an unforgivable act of cultural poaching ultimately depends on selective cultural amnesia concerning several historical facts. For example, one of the facts that gets erased by contemporary claims that Elvis 'stole the blues' is that his music was as antagonistic towards the white mainstream of the 1950s as Public Enemy's is today: 'That's not *real* music, it's just noise' is a complaint levelled against Elvis and his peers in the 1950s at least as often – and with strikingly similar undercurrents of prejudice – as they are used today as an indictment of Public Enemy and other rap acts. When Sal takes a baseball bat to Radio Raheem's 'fuckin' radio' and the 'goddamned noise' it makes in *Do the Right Thing*, he's echoing the response of many whites in the 1950s to the playing of so-called 'nigger music' by Elvis and other early rock 'n' roll artists – both white *and* black.¹⁶ Whatever Elvis may have become later in his career, and whatever injustices were perpetrated upon black rhythm 'n' blues artists by the white-dominated music industry in the 1950s (and beyond), the early pioneers of rock 'n' roll *did* transform a mainstream pop music scene dominated by the white-bread sounds of Perry Como and Frank Sinatra into a more integrated and diverse beast than it had ever been before.

Moreover, it's worth remembering that in the early days of Elvis's career, when he was still only a regional phenomenon, many black rhythm 'n' blues deejays refused to play his records because they sounded 'too country', while at least as many white pop deejays thought Elvis sounded 'too black' to include on their playlists. As early as his first Sun releases, Elvis was commonly recognized as an artist whose music sprang from a convoluted tangle of influences: rhythm 'n' blues, country, gospel (both black and white), blues, Tin Pan Alley – all of these (and then some) can be heard in Elvis's early records. What was new about Elvis was not so much that he was a 'white boy singin' the blues', but that he refused to separate black music from white music in his recordings and performances. As Marsh puts it,

There was nothing shameful about appropriating the work of black people, anyway. If Elvis had simply stolen rhythm & blues from Negro

culture, as pop music ignoramuses have for years maintained, there would have been *no reason* for Southern outrage over his new music. . . . But Elvis did something more daring and dangerous: He not only 'sounded like a nigger', he was actively and clearly engaged in race-mixing. The crime of Elvis's rock & roll was that he proved that black and white tendencies could coexist and that the product of their coexistence was not just palatable but thrilling. (1982/92: 38–47)

Not only did all of Elvis's Sun singles feature a country song on the flip side of a rhythm 'n' blues tune, but these records all involved a blurring of these generic boundaries *within* individual songs. As early as February 1955, a *Memphis Press-Scimitar* story on Elvis's growing popularity described his first single with the claim that:

Sam Phillips still hasn't figured out which was the big side. 'That's All Right' was in the R&B idiom of negro field jazz, 'Blue Moon [of Kentucky]' more in the country field, but there was a *curious blending of the two different musics in both*. (quoted in DeNight *et al.*, 1991: 28, emphasis added)

However much Elvis may have 'borrowed' from black blues performers (e.g., 'Big Boy' Crudup, 'Big Mama' Thornton), he borrowed no less from white country stars (e.g., Ernest Tubb, Bill Monroe) and white pop singers (e.g., Mario Lanza, Dean Martin), and he made no attempt whatsoever to segregate the styles he'd appropriated from one another.

No less significant than the hybrid quality of Elvis's early music, however, is the fact that Elvis's popularity didn't follow the traditional patterns of tastes determined by (and segregated along lines of) racial identity. For instance, shortly after the release of Elvis's first record in July 1954, Marion Keisker told the *Press-Scimitar* that 'both sides seem to be equally popular on popular, folk and race record programs. This boy has something that seems to appeal to everybody' (quoted in DeNight *et al.*, 1991: 18). Similarly, in his history of Memphis's WDIA, the first all-black radio station in the US, Louis Cantor describes the 'spontaneous mass hysteria' that erupted when Elvis made an unadvertised appearance in front of a black audience at WDIA's 1956 Goodwill Revue:

[Emcee and WDIA radio personality] Nat D. Williams said: 'Folks, we have a special treat for you tonight – here is Elvis Presley.' That did it. Elvis didn't even get out on stage. He merely walked out from behind the curtain and shook his leg. That's all it took. At that point, thousands of black people leaped to their feet and started coming directly toward Elvis from both sides of the auditorium. (1992: 194)

Cantor goes on to quote Williams's newspaper column on this surprising display of Presleymania from Memphis blacks:

'A thousand black, brown and beige teenage girls in that audience blended their alto and soprano voices in one wild crescendo of sound that rent the rafters', he wrote, 'and took off like scalded cats in the direction of

Elvis'. . . . [Williams's] conclusion was that Beale Streeters should now wonder if this black teenage outburst over Presley 'doesn't reflect a basic integration in attitude and aspiration which has been festering in the minds of most of your folks' women-folk all along. Huhhh?' (1992: 196)

Elvis's interracial appeal, however, was not limited to Memphis or the South. An often-mentioned, but little analysed, early achievement of Elvis's career is that 'Don't Be Cruel' was the first record ever to sit atop *Billboard's* pop, country, and rhythm 'n' blues charts simultaneously. What is generally left unsaid about this record's unprecedented success on all three of the trade journal's major charts is that it demonstrates the extent to which Elvis's audience was integrated, not only with respect to race, but also with respect to divisions between North and South, and between urban and rural populations. Though Elvis is commonly recognized as someone who successfully packaged and sold black music to white audiences, his early successes on the rhythm 'n' blues chart (of which there were many)¹⁷ demonstrate that he was equally adept at winning over black audiences as well.

But while Elvis was certainly popular with blacks, it was whites who crowned him King. A common thread running through virtually all the critiques of Elvis's coronation, no matter what stance individual critics may take on the question of whether Elvis was himself a racist, is the accusation that those who put Elvis on his royal pedestal have been far too quick to reject black rock 'n' roll artists – Little Richard, Chuck Berry, James Brown, Fats Domino, and Bo Diddley are those most frequently mentioned – as legitimate contenders for the crown. Regardless of whom Elvis's critics offer as alternate candidates for his throne, however, the various criticisms levelled at Elvis's coronation point to very serious – and very real – flaws with the ways in which the history of rock 'n' roll has come to be accepted and understood. That black artists have systematically and repeatedly been denied the respect and rewards owed them for their musical labors is, lamentably, all too true, and what Vernon Reid describes as 'the crown thing' is, perhaps, the most obvious and clear-cut symbol of such denials.

Nevertheless, Elvis's ability to blend elements of black and white musics together into a new sound, one with a large following on both sides of the color lines that otherwise divided the US in the 1950s, suggests that Marsh's assessment of Elvis as a 'figure of integration' and his concurrent debunking of the 'shoe shine' fable are more than fair. This is not to claim, however, that Marsh's position on this issue is ultimately the correct one, while Public Enemy's (for instance) is invariably flawed. As compelling as Marsh's case may be, his larger argument with respect to Elvis and contemporary racial politics remains somewhat problematic. At the very least, Marsh implicitly overstates the degree to which the public as a whole shared his vision of Elvis as a progressive force in the arena of racial politics:

The wholeness of our appreciation for Elvis has reached a presumable end; there are now believers and non-believers, in a permanent stand-off. . . . I now know that when Lester Bangs said that he guaranteed we

would never agree on anything else as we agreed on Elvis, he meant that we would never agree on anything at all. (Marsh, 1992: xi)

Marsh's revised interpretation of Bangs's comment (made at the conclusion to Bangs's 1977 obituary of Elvis) is only half correct, as we had never entirely agreed on Elvis in the first place. Marsh seems to assume that the rift between 'believers and non-believers' is one that has only surfaced in the wake of the 'shoe shine' myth's recent dissemination. The rest of Bangs's essay, however, makes it abundantly clear that whatever consensus actually existed regarding Elvis in 1977 was far from universal. In fact, this is what makes Bangs's conclusion so poignant: that the best we, as a culture, can hope for when it comes to agreeing on *anything* is the relatively limited (and ultimately inadequate) extent to which we agreed about Elvis. Marsh, however, seems to miss this side of Bangs's point entirely, and one can almost hear Chuck D responding to Marsh's lament about 'the wholeness of our appreciation for Elvis' with that clichéd, but still appropriate, punchline, 'What you mean "we", white man?'¹⁸ Similarly, Marsh's confident assertion that 'Elvis was a figure of integration' overlooks two important facts. First, however widespread such a vision of Elvis might be now (or have been in the past), it has never been a universally held truth: the argument that Elvis 'stole the blues' is itself sufficiently old and widespread that when Marcus – generally a very meticulous scholar in this regard – refutes it in the mid 1970s in *Mystery Train* (1990a), he doesn't feel the need to cite specific sources or address particular critics to do so. Second, that Elvis did, in fact, signify racial integration for many people is no guarantee that those who saw him this way celebrated that vision. For many whites, racial integration was (and is) seen as a nightmare to be avoided rather than a dream to be embraced, while for many blacks, integration was (and is) nothing more than a code-word used to disguise the destruction of black culture through its forced assimilation into white culture.

At worst, however, Marsh needlessly and problematically posits a rigidly polar opposition between believers and non-believers in which the former are for integration, freedom, and liberation, while the latter reject such ideals in favor of 'a separatist cultural mythology'. As useful as these categories may be in helping us think about the range of positions found in contemporary US racial politics, they are less than helpful when it comes to describing real people and their positions on questions of race. If Marsh conceived of these particular categories as endpoints on a continuum with an infinite number of gradations in between them, his argument here might be more compelling. As it is, however, his too-neat division of the world into 'us' (believers) and 'them' (non-believers) creates two major problems for his analysis. First, such an argument implicitly denies the fact that the positions people take on the issue of Elvis and racial politics (or almost anything else, for that matter) are rarely reducible to a binary opposition between black and white. Both Living Colour and Joe Wood, for example, call Elvis a great artist – significantly, they do so on the basis of the racially integrated music he made in the 1950s – while critiquing his coronation as 'The King of Rock

'n' Roll'. Second, by describing all 'non-believers' as proponents of 'a separatist cultural mythology', Marsh ultimately erases the very real – and very important – distinctions that exist between Elvis's many critics, and thus unfairly tars them all with the same brush. For example, Living Colour – four black men playing what many people feel to be white music – is hardly the symbol of cultural separatism that Marsh implicitly makes them out to be. Moreover, despite the way in which Marsh casually lumps them together, Living Colour's position on Elvis does not seem at all to be identical to or interchangeable with that held by Public Enemy. For that matter, Public Enemy don't seem to be true cultural separatists either, as there is no necessary correspondence between the group's pro-black rhetoric and a separatist, anti-white worldview. Chuck D's primary concern with 'whites dabbling in black musical styles', for instance, is not with maintaining some sort of mythical cultural purity (in which whites make 'white music', blacks make 'black music', and never the twain shall meet), but with where the profits from such cross-cultural ventures go: 'I'm not making fun of white people picking up on black things: all I'm saying is that black people should get paid when this shit goes mainstream' (Owen, 1990: 60).

Ultimately, then, Marsh is at least partially right: Elvis *is* a figure of integration. But he's also simultaneously a figure of racist appropriation, of musical miscegenation, and of cultural assimilation (at the very least), and the main problem with Marsh's argument is that he exerts too much effort trying to fight the myths he doesn't believe in with facts inadequate to the task. The fact that matters here, however, is that all of these articulations between myths of Elvis and myths of race are currently active on the terrain of US culture, and have been since the earliest days of Elvis's career. This is not to say that all of these myths are equally 'true', but that they all 'work': for different audiences, in different contexts, all of these myths serve to explain (at least in part) the cultural significance of Elvis Presley. Moreover, the 'effects' of these myths (i.e., the ways in which they encourage certain views of the world while discouraging others) are inevitably distributed unevenly across the cultural terrain, as at any given point in time, one (or more) of these myths may circulate more widely or be held in higher esteem than the others: the 'shoe shine' fable, for instance, has given the myth of Elvis-as-racist a renewed vigor. Despite the various contradictions that exist between these myths, however, none seems either to have completely died off or to have become so firmly lodged in the public imagination that it might safely be described as the dominant myth describing the racial politics of Elvis. Peter Guralnick once wrote that 'anyone you interview, anyone in life, really, could be portrayed in exactly the opposite manner with exactly the same information' (1979: 10), and part of what keeps Elvis alive and active on the terrain of US culture today is the way in which the very same facts concerning Elvis's career have been narrativized and subsequently articulated to a diverse – and even contradictory – range of broader cultural myths.

Notes

- 1 Dave Marsh claims that 'we made him the repository of our boldest dreams and our deepest fears. . . . Elvis functioned as a mirror, revealing more about the observer than the observed' (1982/92: xiii), and thus 'when we go seeking Elvis we most often find ourselves' (1992: x). This sentiment is echoed by Lynn Spiegel's description of Elvis fans, for whom Elvis 'is truly a popular medium – a vehicle through which people tell stories about their past and present day lives' (1990: 180), by David Futrelle's review of Greil Marcus's *Dead Elvis*, which he sees as 'less a chronicle of a cultural obsession than it is an exploration of Marcus's own obsessions' (1991: 10), and by Peter Guralnick's assessment of the vast body of writing on Elvis: 'Enough has been written about Elvis Presley to fuel an industry. Indeed a study could be made of the literature devoted to Elvis, from fanzines and promotional flack to critical and sociological surveys, which would undoubtedly tell us a great deal about ourselves and our iconographic needs' (1979: 118).
- 2 See, for example, the *Doonesbury* comic strip (28 June 1991) in which Elvis is reported to be in Iraq 'giving autographs to the [Gulf War] refugees'; Mark Alan Stamaty's depiction of General Schwarzkopf in Elvis drag ('Live! On Stage! "Stormin' Norman" in Vegas!') on the cover of the *Village Voice* (7 January 1992); or the 1992 State of the Union Address, in which George Bush discusses (and seemingly celebrates) the 'Elvis Lives!' graffiti that US troops left scrawled on walls in the Middle East.
- 3 See, for example, Heileman's discussion (1991) of Boris Yeltsin finding solace in Elvis's 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' during the aborted 1991 Soviet coup; the print ad for Yamaha's MT120 four-track mixing board (back cover of the January 1992 *Musician*), in which the proper adjustment of the mixer's equalizer transforms former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev from a Cold War ideologue to an Elvis-like rocker (complete with greasy pompadour and white jumpsuit); or the Mike Luckovich political cartoon (*Chicago Tribune*, 27 September 1991, section 1: 13) depicting Lenin's tomb where one Soviet can be seen telling another, 'Bad news, Graceland doesn't want him . . .'.
- 4 See, for example, the *New York Times*' story on Operation Rescue's failed attempt to shut down Buffalo abortion clinics (Manegold, 1992), in which an anti-abortion activist's shouts of 'Jesus is King!' are met with the retort that 'Elvis was king!'; or 'Fetal Elvis' (Landman, 1991), the alternative comic that implicitly asks the question: if the fetus really is a viable human being, does it have the right to take drugs, carry handguns, and shoot out television sets?
- 5 I recognize that the use of the term 'America' in a context that refers exclusively to the United States is problematic; the ethnocentric conceit behind such usage, however, is appropriate to Elvis's mythology.
- 6 It is possible that Marcus tried to verify the quote with Phillips – this may be the source of his acknowledgement of Phillips's denial – but if this is the case, then it is all the more significant that Marcus relies on Keisker's comments, rather than Phillips's, to refute Goldman's version of the story.
- 7 At the very least, Marcus correctly foretells the acceptance of Goldman's version of the statement, which has appeared as 'the real thing' in such places as Jill Pearlman's *Elvis for Beginners* (1986: 59) and Robert Pattison's *The Triumph of Vulgarly* (1987: 32). Marcus also points out that, in Pattison's case, the choice to use the Goldman version of the quote was made very deliberately: 'After receiving galleys of the book, I wrote the publisher, pointing out the distortion and insisting on its seriousness. The publisher replied that the author was sure Goldman's words were correct, because they were "more vulgar", and that, in the annals of popular music, "vulgarity is always closer to the truth"' (1991: 53n).
- 8 Even the subtitle of Marcus's review of Goldman's book – which describes Marcus's version of the story, not as 'the truth', or even as 'the truth behind the legend', but as '*The Myth* behind the truth behind the legend' (emphasis added) – displays a greater concern for myth than fact, reflecting (albeit probably unconsciously) the famous creed of the newspaper editor in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend'.
- 9 Given what evidence can be called upon to attest to Phillips's intentions forty years ago, such an assumption seems quite reasonable. As Marcus describes it, 'Sam Phillips was one of the great pioneers of racial decency in this century. He worked with black people, and in Memphis in the '50s, he was ostracized for it. . . . Sam Phillips ran the only permanent recording facility in Memphis, and he had opened it in order to record black musicians' (1981: 16).
- 10 At a 1993 conference on popular music, one African-American woman told me that she and her childhood friends grew up as Elvis fans. They bought all of his records and they saw all of his films – up until about the time that *Viva Las Vegas* was released (1964), when a variant of the 'shoe shine' story reached their community and successfully transformed Elvis into an offensive and unappealing figure in their eyes.
- 11 Admittedly, there is no such thing as a sure thing in the music business, but given the central role the song plays in *Do the Right Thing* (a movie topped only by *Batman* for media attention during the summer of 1989) and the fact that Public Enemy's explicitly political lyrics and 'harsh' sound have generally worked to keep them off of commercial radio playlists, it seems safe to say that 'Fight the Power' was guaranteed to become the group's best-known song from the moment Spike Lee chose to feature it so prominently in his movie.
- 12 This is not to claim that the field of popular music is as rigidly divided into racially defined categories as it was before the advent of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s. On the contrary, it is actually fairly easy to find prominent examples of 'race-mixing' on the contemporary popular music terrain. From the funk/rock fusion of Prince to the hyper-eclectic hodge-podge of the average CHR playlist, from the rap/metal combination of Public Enemy and Anthrax (both on tour and in the studio) to the multi-cultural genre-blending coverage of *Rock and Rap Confidential*, the musical terrain is more integrated today than it was forty years ago. Even in this relatively progressive scenario, however, the barriers and chasms between so-called 'black music' and 'white music' seem to be far more common than the connections that could (and should) be made between black and white musicians, audiences, and institutions.
- 13 Asked in 1990 if he thought Boone's cover versions of his music had helped or hurt his own career, Little Richard said, 'I think it was a blessing. I believe it opened the highway that would have taken a little longer for acceptance. So I love Pat for that' (Puterbaugh, 1990: 54).
- 14 Roger Taylor, for instance, quotes Little Richard as saying, 'He was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let Black music through. He opened the door for Black music' (1987: np). Similarly, Sandra Choron and Bob Oskam's collection of quotes about Elvis also includes an expression of unabashed and heartfelt gratitude from Little Richard: 'When I came out they wasn't playing no black artists on no Top 40 stations, I was the first to get played on the Top 40

- stations – but it took people like Elvis, Pat Boone, Gene Vincent, to open the door for this kind of music, and I thank God for Elvis Presley. I thank the Lord for sending Elvis to open that door so I could walk down the road, you understand?’ (1991: 17).
- 15 The strip in question appeared in the 25 October 1991 edition of *The Chicago Reader* (section 3: 21), and was accompanied by the following commentary from President Bill: ‘I had hoped to keep the election campaign from falling prey to the sensationalistic, simplistic media, which lay in wait, ready to pounce. They hadn’t the intelligence or the patience to investigate real issues in depth, so they reduced everything to a lurid, bastardized form, which they then fed to the public. The public in turn regurgitated the media’s pabulum through public opinion polls. In this way, the media kept voters focused on flashy, superficial topics. So I had to beware of reporters eager to stir up politically pointless but highly popular sensational issues.’ While I would dispute the claim that Elvis’s coronation is ‘politically pointless’ – if nothing else, the arguments made by Living Colour and Public Enemy serve as evidence of the political relevance of such issues for many people – the strip *does* accurately foreshadow the unusual role that Elvis played in the 1992 presidential campaign. To give just one example, when Democratic front-runner Bill Clinton appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (3 June 1992), not only did he open the show by playing ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ on his saxophone, but Arsenio’s very first question to Clinton dealt, not with the presidential election, but with the Arkansas governor’s choice in the Elvis stamp run-off.
- 16 For example, the video documentary *This Is Elvis* (1981) contains footage from the mid-to-late 1950s of an unidentified white man – from his accent and his immediate surroundings (which include a gas pump and sign reading, ‘We Serve White Customers Only’), presumably the owner of a filling station somewhere in the South – who proudly proclaims that ‘we’ve set up a twenty man committee to do away with this vulgar, animalistic, nigger, rock ‘n’ roll bop. Our committee will check with the restaurant owners and the cafés to see what Presley records is on their machines and then ask them to do away with them.’ The North Alabama White Citizens Council issued a similar (and now infamous) statement at about the time Elvis was first breaking nationally to the effect that ‘rock and roll is a means of pulling the white man down to the level of the Negro. It is part of a plot to undermine the morals of the youth of our nation’ (Marsh and Stein, 1981: 8).
- 17 Between 1956 and 1963, Elvis’s records fared very well on *Billboard’s* national rhythm ‘n’ blues charts. During this period, he placed more than two dozen singles in the R&B Top Twenty, including seven number ones (Worth and Tamerius, 1988: *passim*). Elvis’s post-1963 decline on the rhythm ‘n’ blues charts can probably be attributed to two factors, neither of which necessarily reflects a significant drop-off in his appeal to black audiences. The first of these is a general decline in Elvis’s success on *all of Billboard’s* charts that more or less coincides with the appearance of the Beatles on the pop music scene: after ‘Bossa Nova Baby’ (the last Elvis single to make the R&B chart) was released in October 1963, Elvis didn’t have another top ten *pop* hit until ‘Crying in the Chapel’ in May 1965 – an unprecedented drought for someone who’d averaged nearly five Top Ten pop hits per year over the previous seven years. A far more crucial factor in Elvis’s disappearance from the national rhythm ‘n’ blues chart, however, is the actual disappearance of the chart: from November 1963 until January 1965, *Billboard* didn’t publish such a chart at all.

- 18 Given the opportunity in 1990 to tell *Playboy’s* readers what he had against Elvis, Chuck D said, ‘Elvis’s attitudes toward blacks was that of people in the South at that particular time. The point of the song [“Fight the Power”] is not about Elvis so much, and it’s not about the people who idolize that motherfucker, like he made no errors and was never wrong. Elvis doesn’t mean shit. White America’s heroes are different from black America’s heroes’ (Wyman, 1990: 136).

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