Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend

Darby Cook, New York University

A poor southern boy turned rock legend, Elvis Presley secured his place as the King of rock 'n' roll in the mid-twentieth century. With his good looks, smooth voice, infectious dance moves, and acting skills, Elvis quickly grew to be one of the most popular entertainers of the 1950s. Following his death in 1977, Elvis's posthumous career became arguably even more successful than his living career. In his book *Elvis after Elvis*, Professor Gilbert Rodman explores how and why Elvis's legacy persists decades after his death; Rodman is specifically interested in why Elvis "keeps showing up in places where he seemingly doesn't belong" (1). Rodman argues it is Elvis's position as a point of articulation for many different ideas, concepts, and feelings that has led to his extensive posthumous career.

Rodman defines a point of articulation as a "particular site on the cultural terrain that serves as the major conduit by which two or more other phenomena come to be articulated to one another." He expands, explaining that the articulations forged in this way "always come about indirectly, typically as part of a larger chain of articulative links" (27). This definition is pivotal to Rodman's argument as he spends a majority of his book categorizing Elvis as a point of articulation.

But these points of articulation are just a single part of Rodman's argument. Rodman, in total, offers three separate explanations for Elvis's pervasive posthumous career. In the first section, Rodman examines Elvis as a point of articulation for discourse on race, sexuality, class, and the American Dream. In the second section, Rodman highlights the role of Graceland (in Memphis) and the Elvis Presley Birthplace (in Tupelo) in creating a "tangible and publicly visible community [where] Elvis fans could congregate and actually make tangible the otherwise ethereal nature of Elvis's stardom." In the final section, Rodman outlines how Elvis served once again as a point of articulation during the mid-to late 1950s, ultimately crafting a "new cultural formation" (28).

Rodman's "three-pronged approach" to understanding the Elvis phenomenon is effective, but does not depict "the real Elvis." Rodman comments, "The real Elvis-whoever (or whatever) he might have been—is ultimately unknowable to us." Rodman assumes the reader understands

the star-making industry, and consequently doesn't view celebrities as a naturally occurring process. Finally, Rodman's goal is not to solve "the mystery of Elvis's unusual posthumous career" but instead to "make that mystery just a little bit better" (29).

Another essential definition to Rodman's claim is the term "myth" or "mythological formation." While commonly used as a reference to a "widely accepted falsehood," Rodman's definition is far more complex and consists of a "broader inflection." He defines "myth" as a "narrative (or, perhaps, a cluster of related ideas) that people collectively believe (or believe in) independently of its 'truth' or 'falsity'" (30). To Rodman, a myth can be "partially—or even entirely—true." Therefore, a mythological formation is a "set of related myths that revolve around a particular point (or points) of articulation" (31). In other words, hard facts can be used to add to the validity of a myth. Rodman goes so far as to claim, "Facts matter only because they can be (and generally are) articulated to larger myths." For instance, Rodman notes an uncontestable fact like "Elvis had his first national hit with 'Heartbreak Hotel'" is valuable only because it contributes to larger mythical narratives concerning Elvis's career and the birth of rock 'n' roll (38). Elvis's role as a mythical figure is essential to understanding his posthumous career since today he largely appears as a "signifier whose signifieds are ultimately not connected to his life or his art" (39). Today, Elvis is more myth than man.

Rodman focuses more on Elvis's myths rather than his music, noting that his records play a "minor role in Elvis's strange posthumous career." He argues that while Elvis's music does matter, "his myths may matter much more" (40). This knowledge suggests that Elvis's records are not what keep him relevant, rather it is the mythical formations surrounding him. Additionally, the "range and diversity" of the cultural myths surrounding Elvis, as well as the "multiple, even contradictory ways" in which he's connected to those myths fuel his posthumous career. This feat separates Elvis from the multitude of other stars, such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, who are "visibly articulated to the most culturally significant mythological formations" but do not encompass "so many of them simultaneously" the way Elvis does (41).

Rodman explains that while Elvis's "diverse range of mythological formations is not *sufficient* to explain the phenomenon of Elvis's current ubiquity in its entirety, it is a *necessary* condition for that phenomenon to exist" (42). The first point he discusses is Elvis's placement at both extremes of the racial spectrum. On one hand, Elvis is a "figure of integration" but he's also a "figure of racist appropriation" at the same time (55). The important takeaway for Rodman

though is “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” (55, 56). The debate surrounding this myth is in part what keeps Elvis “alive” on the “terrain of US culture today” (56).

Similar to Elvis’s role concerning race, his role in sexuality debates is equally complex. Rodman explores two competing mythologies of Elvis as a “butch god” and Elvis as a “teddy bear” (62). Of the two, the butch god is undeniably the more popular among mainstream media; however, Rodman suggests that fans themselves do not view Elvis in this manner. Society’s collective vision of Elvis is biased by the “limitations of male-dominated rock criticism,” and Rodman prompts the reader to look at how his female fans viewed him (63).

Rodman argues that Elvis possessed an “androgynous sexuality,” as highlighted by the mainstream fashion industry’s use of Elvis’s style/look in women’s clothing throughout the 1980s and 90s (64). Elvis managed to persuade a “sexually repressed population to fuck more,” yet simultaneously “his style, his fashion sense, and his onstage behavior celebrated the ‘feminine’ pleasures of the body over the more ‘masculine’ practices of the mind.” Elvis’s ability to challenge the traditional gender roles of the 1950s reveals his similarities to 80s pop star Madonna (67). Some scholars go so far as to cite the “tension between the masculine and feminine facets of his image” as the sole reason Elvis served as such a “compelling” sex symbol in the first place (70).

The next point of articulation—class—is harder to locate than race or sexuality. Rodman notes, “While Elvis’s success as a singer and movie star dramatically increased his economic capital, his cultural capital never expanded enough for him to transcend the stigma of his background as a truck driver from the rural south” (72). Rodman cites Elvis’s low class as a reason why he appears today as a “punchline or an object of ridicule in comic strips, sitcoms, movies, and the like” (72). However, many fans like Elvis for the fact that he “never strayed terribly far from his working-class roots, that his fame and fortune did not lead him to ‘put on airs’” (73).

Elvis’s class has even impacted the academic field of Elvis studies. According to Rodman, “Intellectuals have traditionally been unwilling to see Elvis as a figure of sufficient importance to undertake serious critical work on his life, his art, or his cultural impact” (75). Rodman cites Elvis’s lack of instrumental ability and the fact that he never worked as a

songwriter or producer for any of his records as reasons why he is not considered an artist. These examples seem weak though, considering that many artists do not play any instruments or write their own songs. Even those that are credited as co-writers often times make extremely limited contributions to the songwriting process. Rodman needs a stronger reason as to why Elvis is not considered an artist. Rodman's idea that Elvis could not "transcend" the cultural limitations of his class background and thus could not be a great artist is a much more convincing argument (77). However, Elvis's categorization as the King of rock 'n' roll suggests that he is an artist. Rodman does not explicitly address this contradiction.

Rodman then explores Elvis's embodiment of the American Dream, and consequently, America itself. No matter one's personal definition of the American Dream, Elvis's rapid rise and tragic fall inevitably changes his story and its relationship to the American Dream into a "cautionary tale." Rodman raises the question of "where [one] should lay the blame for the derailment of the American Dream that Elvis's decline represents" (85). There are multiple theories which Rodman explores, including that whatever went wrong with Elvis's pursuit of the American Dream was the "result of some problem with the way that Elvis tried to live out the American Dream" or even that there was a problem with the Dream itself to begin with. Rodman pays special attention to the theory that Elvis's decline was "not so much his fault as it was that of critics and fans" (86).

After covering these four points of articulation, Rodman shifts his attention to examining the importance of Graceland and Elvis's birthplace. Concerning Graceland, Rodman focuses on "what makes [it] a unique site on both the geographical and cultural terrain" (98). Rodman uses Graceland as a way to differentiate Elvis from other stars. Graceland has never been a "passive and neutral space," on the contrary, since Elvis bought the house in 1957 it has had a "significant and largely unacknowledged impact on the shape of Elvis's stardom." Rodman goes so far as to claim that the "public link between Elvis and Graceland altered the shape of his stardom in such a way as to ultimately give rise to his unusual posthumous career" (99).

Graceland gave Elvis's stardom a "stable, highly visible, *physical* anchor in the real world" (99). The visibility aspect of stardom is similarly important to scholar Ponce de Leon, who differentiates celebrities from the masses by their "visibility." This "visibility" is achieved through the media in order to make celebrities seem both "extraordinary and real" (13). On the same note, Graeme Turner addresses the importance of visibility like de Leon and Rodman, but

for him, the definition of celebrity rests on the fact that a celebrity's private life will "attract greater public interest than [his] professional life" (3). Under this definition, it makes total sense that Elvis is remembered more for his image than he is for his music. Elvis's continued presence in the tabloids cements his position as an enduring celebrity. Later on, Rodman notes that stardom is a phenomenon "entirely dependent on the mass media for its existence: without a strong infrastructure of interrelated media institutions, stardom is simply impossible" (99). Turner likewise recognizes the importance of these media institutions, leading him to label celebrities as the "epitome of the inauthenticity or constructedness of mass-mediated popular culture" (3).

Despite the inauthenticity and fakeness of celebrities, fans see these figures as real and oftentimes share a heavily one-sided personal connection with them. Rodman discusses this "non-reciprocal familiarity that the general public has with stars," a concept similar to the ideas posed by Joli Jensen in "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization." Jensen explains how "celebrities function as role models for fans who engage in 'artificial social relations' with them" (302). She explores Horton and Wohl's research, which characterizes the media-audience relationship as a form of "para-social interaction." They see fandom as a "surrogate relationship" that inadequately copies normal relationships" (305). Many of Elvis's fans have unhealthy "para-social interactions" with him.

Because of Elvis's mega stardom, the relationship between him and his fans varies from the relationship other celebrities and public figures maintain with their fans. Rodman makes an important distinction between stardom and "ordinary" fame. He argues that people like Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bill Gates, Margaret Thatcher, and Donald Trump can "safely be said to be stars" because the "circumstances that initially made them famous are not themselves media phenomena." On the other hand, stars are "famous primarily because of their activities *within* the realm of the mass media: particularly film, television, radio, and recorded music" (99). It would be interesting to see if Rodman still does not consider these people stars, especially those like Donald Trump who commonly appear on their own reality television shows.

Ultimately, for Rodman, the distinction between stardom and other forms of fame is the "different relationship to space associated with the former," making stardom an "ethereal, non-spatial phenomenon" (100). Consequently, there is a distinction between the "real flesh-and-blood body of a given star" and the "mediated public persona" (101). To Rodman, Elvis

possesses true stardom and not merely "ordinary" fame. Since Elvis was one of the few US celebrities of the twentieth century to have a "permanent place to call 'home,'" Graceland helped to set apart Elvis from other stars. Rodman acknowledges this as a "trivial" difference, but a noteworthy difference nonetheless (103).

When evaluating Graceland, Rodman places a special emphasis on the "unique nature of Memphis as a geographic and cultural space," specifically in terms of how it differs from "star studded metropolises" like New York and Los Angeles (103). The media centers in New York and LA are the usual avenues for celebrification, but Elvis "represents a significant exception to this rule" with his "rags-to-riches success story," and his ultimate decision to live in Memphis even after visiting New York and LA (104). Consequently, Elvis was more "publicly visible" than he would have been in New York or LA, his fame making even mundane public outings impossible in Memphis. Graceland's location has always made Elvis's home "accessible to a more diverse range of tourists and fans than would normally be the case for a star's home." Residences in New York or LA do not have "easy or comfortable access," and fans would have trouble negotiating the "social, geographic, and institutional barriers that protect the privacy of the rich and famous people who live in Beverly Hills or on New York's Upper East Side" (106).

Since Graceland and Elvis's birthplace are both easily accessible to fans, they have each become a kind of sacred shrine to the Elvis fandom. Rodman acknowledges, "Whatever parallels may exist between stardom and holiness, in most cases the religious metaphor for stardom is overblown to the point of banality…except, that is, in the case of Elvis." Rodman argues, "Elvis's role in many of his fans' lives is similar to that which might be played by a major religious figure" (112). One of Rodman's most fascinating pieces of evidence is the role of the impersonator as a "medium who channels the spirit of a savior, all the while opening up a public space where people can express their mutual faith in an abstract principle that no one can name" (113). In this scenario, the Elvis impersonator's performance is a "spiritual revival: a ritualized ceremony that brings the Elvis faithful together in order to make a public expression of their devotion" (114).

Rodman looks at fan behavior at Graceland like Christian pilgrimages, considering Elvis fans visiting Memphis "frequently leave behind tokens symbolizing their faith, love, and devotion" (117). Similarly, fans schedule their pilgrimages around holy days related to Elvis

(118). Ultimately, Graceland and Elvis's birthplace function primarily as a means to "help put (and keep) that community of fans in the public eye" (129).

In the book's final chapter, Rodman poses the claim that Elvis has impacted culture more than any other entertainer since he gave rise to a completely new cultural formation. Rodman examines life before and after Elvis, concluding, "The culture that we reinvent for ourselves on a daily basis doesn't just belong to us, it belongs to Elvis" (180). Many critics are skeptical of crediting Elvis with such a large cultural impact because generally Elvis and his work simply aren't "complex or innovative enough" to be categorized as art, much less to support the image of him as a "crucial figure in the history of US art—popular or otherwise." Unlike his peers, such as Lennon, McCartney, or Dylan, people have difficulty seeing Elvis as a "self-aware author of his art" (140). However, Elvis is unlike his peers because "his significance to US culture can't readily be traced to the artistic texts that he left behind" (141). Elvis left society with a very rich, complex legacy. Thus, Rodman chooses to focus not on whether or not Elvis consciously meant to transform US culture, but on what the changes he brought about actually were (146).

Rodman pays special attention to Elvis's 1956 performance of "Hound Dog" on *The Milton Berle Show,* which was Elvis's first televised performance where he was free "to dance, to twitch, to gyrate, to bump and grind, and to shake, rattle, and roll to his heart's content" (149). Rodman pinpoints this precise moment when Elvis and rock 'n' roll are "first recognized as a threat to mainstream US culture that is too significant simply to be brushed aside or ignored" (152). This moment could easily be described as a cultural epiphany, or "the point in time when an entire culture undergoes a major transformation of some sort" (154). Elvis's groundbreaking performance on *The Milton Berle Show* is now dismissed; the "shocks and thrills" go unappreciated because Elvis changed the world so drastically. Rodman explains, "These changes are so tightly stitched into the fabric of our daily lives as to be virtually invisible to most people today" (157). The cultural shift, prompted by Elvis, transformed his once-controversial performance into "just another piece of televisual wallpaper" (158).

Rodman specifies, "My claim here is that Elvis was the point of articulation around which a new *cultural formation*—the one that crystallized around rock 'n' roll…could come into existence" (158). He in no way insists that Elvis "invented" this formation on his own (159). However, without Elvis, it's not clear that rock 'n' roll would have given rise to a cultural formation the way it did under his guidance. While there were other great musicians creating

rock ‘n’ roll music—perhaps even better than Elvis—Elvis’s role in rock ‘n’ roll history arises not so much from his musical contribution, but from what he contributed culturally. Rodman insists, “No one else could have accomplished what Elvis did in terms of bringing together a vast range of musical genres, attitudes, styles of dress, behaviors, and other social practices in such a way that a coherent cultural formation could come into existence” (160).

The greatest weakness in Rodman’s text is by far the amount of time elapsed since he wrote it. Published in 1996, the book does not discuss the role of the Internet or social media in aiding Elvis’s posthumous career. Obviously Elvis was hugely popular prior to the Internet, and he will surely be popular after the Internet—if there is even such a period in human history. However, it is key to examine how neomedia has strengthened and shaped the Elvis fandom.

Twitter is a prime example of neomedia. Launched in 2006, Twitter quickly became a common social media tool among young adults and by 2012, over a 100 million people worldwide were registered users (“Twitter Milestones”). Twitter allows celebrities to “verify” their avatars, insuring their identity amongst the numerous fan accounts. One such celebrity is Elvis Presley. Elvis joined the site in June 2008 and currently has 217k followers and is following 602 users respectively. His account rarely features “promotional content,” and rather consists mostly of “trivia, interviews, photographs, videos, and more” (Mayoras).

Many scholars have emphasized that Twitter users oftentimes feel they have “direct access to a famous person” especially through the presentation of “insider information, first-person pictures, and opinionated statements” on celebrity accounts. Although Elvis is dead, there are many unknown facts and previously unpublished photos that the Twitter account uses to engage fans. Research has shown, “Those celebrities who use Twitter primarily to ‘broadcast’ publicity information are seen as less authentic than those using the tool for dialogue and engagement with fans” (Marwick and Boyd 141). Since the Elvis account only rarely uses the platform to promote memorabilia or other products, the account is deemed worth following by many users and music critics alike. Although Elvis himself never lived to see the twenty-first century or pondered social networking sites like neomedia, he has indubitably shaped society and will continue to do so for many decades to come.

Works Cited

Joli, Jensen. “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization.” *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. New York: Routledge,1992. 256. Print.

Marwick, A., and D. Boyd. “To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17.2 (2011): 139-58. SAGE. Web.

Mayoras, Danielle, and Andy Mayoras. “Top Ten Celebrity Twitter Accounts from the Grave.” Forbes. Forbes Magazine, 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 01 June 2015.

Ponce De Leon, Charles. “Becoming Visible: Fame and Celebrity in the Modern Age.” *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina, 2002. 352. Print.

Rodman, Gilbert. *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 280. Print.

Turner, Graeme. “Part One: Understanding Celebrity.” *Understanding Celebrity*. 2d ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013. 184. Print.

“Twitter Milestones.” *About Twitter*. Twitter, n.d. Web. 08 May 2015.

Nor is Elvis simply about fame. Nor can we explain what makes Elvis special by the avidity of his fans, the charm of his films, his devilish good looks, or his gyrating hips. None of this is sufficient to exhaust the richness that is the phenomenon of Elvis 20 years after his death. Gilbert Rodman looks at the posthumous career of this redneck holy man in order to shed light on the myths by which American culture survives. This is not your typical fan book, but neither is it a dry academic exercise. Rather, it is a twisting, unpredictable analysis and narrative that shows how an American relig In 1956, shortly after Elvis began to rise in popularity, Smith began jumping on stage and imitating Presley. Smith's physical resemblance to Elvis and his mannerisms happened to catch the attention of DJ Norm Pringle of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, who had been playing "That's All Right, Mama" and "Heartbreak Hotel" on the radio.Â On "the thriving phenomenon of Elvis impersonators", see also Gilbert B. Rodman, Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend (1996). In the Summer 1997 issue of The Oxford American magazine author Tom Graves wrote an acclaimed article, Natural Born Elvis, about the first Elvis impersonator, Bill Haney, the only tribute artist Elvis himself ever went to see perform. In Elvis after Elvis Gil Rodman traces the myriad manifestations of The King in popular and not-so-popular culture. He asks why Elvis continues to defy our expectations of how dead stars are supposed to behave: Elvis not only refuses to go away, he keeps showing up in places where he seemingly doesn't belong. Rodman draws upon an extensive and eclectic body of Elvis 'sightings', from Elvis's appearances at the heart of the 1992 Presidential campaign to the debate over his worthiness as a subject for a postage stamp, and from Elvis's central role in furious debates abou