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## The Logic of Capital and the Possibility of Resistance in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

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The Logic of Capital and the Possibility of Resistance in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

By

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## Abstract

This paper argues that Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, in the structuring both of the novel's diegetic and non-diegetic materials and of the presence of labor in the narrative, offers a model of how particularity can effect resistance to capital through iterative survival. The argument begins with a close explication of Dipesh Chakrabarty's deconstructive reading of *Capital*, demonstrating how the phenomenon of capital operates and proliferates through a logical structure that simultaneously necessitates and must eradicate the particular labors and histories that 'precede' any given instance of capital. With this theoretical framework in hand, the argument looks to James. M. Hodapp, whose analysis of the role of the kola nut in Abani's novel as a signifier of precolonial West-African culture that continues to survive and signify in the non-diegetic sections of a book about postcolonial Nigeria serves as a way into reading the interplay of *GraceLand*'s non-diegetic and diegetic materials as the iterative alternation of capital's simultaneous need to sustain and to destroy the particular histories which "precede" it, concluding that it is actually the repetition of the particular in the logic of capital that performs a kind of resistance and holds open the possibility of a future where the particular outlasts capital. Then, the argument responds to the common refrain amongst Hodapp and other critics that *GraceLand*'s narrative demonstrates only the degenerative, destructive drive and consequences of postcolonial capital, suggesting that Elvis Oke's iterative labors as a dancer and Elvis Presley impersonator actually repeat his experiences of precolonial Igbo culture, which for him are bound up with the feminine and the precolonial, and,

moreover, that Elvis's persistent return to these labors despite repeatedly getting caught up in the dehumanizing labors imposed upon him by capital again point to the possibility of resistance to capital through the iterative survival of its antecedents.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: The Logic of Capital and the Possibility of Resistance in Chris Abani's <i>GraceLand</i> .....	1
Works Cited.....	39
Endnotes.....	40

## Chapter 1: The Logic of Capital and the Possibility of Resistance in Chris Abani's

### *GraceLand*

Among its many concerns, Chris Abani's *GraceLand* is particularly interested in the possibilities of resisting the forces of global capitalism in the postcolonial era. Set primarily in Lagos during the 1970s and 1980s, its narrative follows Elvis Oke, his friends, and his family as they grapple with the forces of socioeconomic oppression and military terror in postcolonial Nigeria. The political pessimism of Abani's novel appears to be profound. The various narrative arcs almost universally lead to further degradation, flight from home, and even death. Moreover, this movement towards destruction and annihilation for many of the characters in *GraceLand* stems from the institution of global capital in postcolonial Nigeria, as can be seen in the novel's depiction of Sunday Oke's failed political career, the government-backed trafficking of human organs and human beings, and the displacement and erasure of socio-geographical communities in the name of commercialization. In this sense, *GraceLand* might convincingly be read as a chronicle of human impotence in the face of the dominative forces of global capital.

Yet James M. Hodapp has recently proposed a more generative reading of Abani's novel. In "The Postcolonial Ecopolitics of Consumption: Reimagining the Kola Nut in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*," Hodapp suggests that where *GraceLand*'s characters struggle to survive in the wreckage of postcolonial Nigeria, *GraceLand*'s text itself enacts resistance against the forces of colonialism still present in postcolonial Nigeria (7).

That is, Hodapp argues that the novel's non-diegetic descriptions of the kola nut and the rituals surrounding it in Igbo culture resist the colonial forces's movement towards the erasure of all non-hegemonic cultures and histories and holds onto the potential for the reproduction of precolonial cultural formations. In the following, I want to supplement Hodapp's analysis of the novel. I do this by placing Hodapp's analysis into dialogue with Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, which enacts a deconstructive close reading of Marx's *Capital*. My argument is that Chakrabarty's analytic maps a different mode of resistance occurring in both the form and the narrative of *GraceLand*, a resistance that exploits an alterity inhabiting the very heart of postcolonial capital.

### **The Logic of Capital and the Possibility of Resistance**

In "The Two Histories of Capital," the second chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty provides a framework for understanding how resistance to capital, both in its theoretical articulation and its historical instantiations, always inheres within capital's own logical structure. Chakrabarty's analysis begins by considering the various standard accounts of uneven development, that is, why individual, historically situated instances of capitalism around the world have common characteristics and yet also appear as though they have not all obtained uniformly. After enumerating a number of possible and common explanations for this phenomenon<sup>1</sup>, Chakrabarty suggests that capital is not a "totalizing unity[.]" that it is not a singular "force that encounters historical difference . . . as something external to its own structure" (47-8). Difference is rather intrinsic to its being. And this is evident, Chakrabarty argues, in the way that the concept of abstract labor and the history of capital's coming into being rely upon an externality that precedes and resists assimilation to capital. Thus, insofar as capital's logic impels it to establish



both the category of abstract labor and its own version of history, then it ensures that every instance of capital remains structurally open, unique, and particular, as these concepts prevent capital from “sublat[ing] differences into itself” (50). Let us take the two categories one at a time.

As regards abstract labor, Chakrabarty asserts that Marx’s articulation of capital entails the notion of commodity and, thereby, abstract labor. In this formulation of capital, the exchange of commodities, things that are by their nature not the same thing, requires a common term by which to value or measure them (Chakrabarty 51). Marx, as Chakrabarty shows, identifies the common category by which two different commodities can be exchanged as “human labor,” or abstract labor (52). Abstract labor, then, plays a crucial role in the logic of capital, as its existence grounds the exchange of commodities.

Abstract labor, however, proves to be a tricky concept to articulate. Though noting that Marx’s writings sometimes give the impression that “abstract labor” names a discrete, empirically discoverable “object” (or a unity of some kind), Chakrabarty concludes that “to conceive of [it] as a substance, as a Cartesian *res extensa*, to reduce it to ‘nervous and muscular energy’ is either to misread Marx . . . or to repeat a mistake of Marx’s thought” (53). Thus, abstract labor, the common term between commodities that allows the exchange between them, has a certain structural openness to it. Indeed, Chakrabarty posits that it is “a performative practical category [serving t]o organize life under the sign of capital [by acting] *as if* labor could indeed be abstracted from all the social tissues in which it is always embedded and which make any particular labor—even the labor of abstracting—concrete” (54). Establishing “abstract labor” enacts (in what is usually widespread, preconscious activity) an economic quantification of the labors and

labor time required for the production of a given object, assuming and necessitating the particularity of the individual, concrete labors that actually produce the object<sup>2</sup>. Thus, abstract labor, one of the most important concepts for the logic of capital, cannot attain “totalization,” as that would entail the absolute elision and/or suppression of the particularities of differentiated labors that allow the concept to be established in the first place.

Indeed, one tactic capital employs to suppress the structural instability, the non-totalization, of commodity exchange is to impose abstract labor back upon the very particular labor and laborers which constitute it. Chakrabarty highlights Marx’s account of how abstract labor not only allows the exchange of commodities in capital but actually grows into a standard against which particular laborers are compared and held accountable (55-6). Capitalistic modes of production hold their workers to an “ideal” (i.e. removed from particularity or abstracted) standard of labor by translating particular, historically situated labors performed by humans into mechanical forms or processes; Chakrabarty characterizes it as “transfer[ing] the motive force of production from the human or the animal to the machine, from living to dead labor” (57). So, the performance of labor abstraction creates an “idealized” labor that, in a significant sense, removes the human life from the labor and then measures the particular, human laborer and her labors against that standard (57-8, 60-1). The laborer under the imposition of abstract labor is, then, dehumanized; she is held to the dehumanizing standard of abstract labor so that the various commodities produced by differentiated, particular labors and laborers can “justifiably” be compared to or measured against one another.

It is here, in the imposition of dehumanized and dehumanizing abstract labor back onto the particular human labor and laborers necessary for capital to be at all, that capital possesses an opportunity for resistance against itself. Chakrabarty articulates that “[r]esistance [to capital] is the Other of the [mechanistic] despotism inherent in capital’s logic” (59). For capital to exist, it *must* have particular labor and particular laborers from which to extract abstract labor, and these labors and laborers always proceed from and exist as more than what abstract labor attempts to reduce them to. Indeed, Chakrabarty contends that for Marx it is the very fact of the laborer’s “living,” it is “life, in all its biological/conscious capacity for willful activity, [that] is the excess that capital, for all its disciplinary procedures, always needs but can never quite control or domesticate” (60). Crucially, the labor requisite for the performance of abstracting labor is always living and therefore cannot be fully subjugated to or destroyed by the imposition of mechanistic, abstract labor upon production activities. More simply, life itself is the very thing that resists capital. Chakrabarty notes the contradiction inherent in the foregoing logic: insofar as capital actually moves toward the attainment of its “will” by eliminating the particularities of life through the translation of particular labors and laborers into a “universal,” “measurable” abstract labor, it moves towards its own dissolution (62). Thus, because capital, insofar as it exists, cannot reduce, dehumanize, and eliminate particular, living labors and laborers without imploding its own logic, capital always contains within its structure resistance to its total realization.

The second site of internal resistance to capital that Chakrabarty identifies concerns the history that capital tells about itself. Chakrabarty notes that Marx articulates the story that capital must tell about itself as one moving from “Becoming,” or “the

historical process in and through which the logical presuppositions of capital are realized” to “Being,” or “the state when capital has fully come into its own[,]” when capital has reached a unity (62). The history, then, that capital tells about itself suggests that over time the logical pre-conditions of capital have become manifest and that, consequently, history moves univocally towards capital’s realization in its “pure” form. Moreover, Chakrabarty draws attention to how this historical construction, what he calls “History 1” (“a past posited by capital itself as its precondition”), aims to silence, dominate, and/or destroy “the total universe of pasts that capital encounters [which] is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital,” i.e. “History 2” (63-4). In other words, capital must privilege some aspects of history over other aspects of the particular histories of the world, creating through suppression a version of history, a story, a fiction, that demonstrates progression towards the achievement of capital’s totalization. Yet, the movement of capital’s historicizing thrusts mirrors abstract labor in that just as capital must enact abstraction (i.e. translation or interpretation) on particular, living labors in order to derive the performative category of abstract labor necessary for its functioning, so too must it repress or eliminate the particularities of History 2s in order to arrive at the fiction of History 1. Thus, History 1, the story wherein history unambiguously moves towards the attainment of totalized capital, always presupposes the existence of History 2s<sup>3</sup>, the ways of being and living and modes of economic organization that do not always and unambiguously lead to capitalism.

Chakrabarty describes the phenomenon of capital’s projection of History 1 upon History 2s as attempts to “subjugate or destroy the multiple possibilities that belong to

History 2[s]” so that History 1 can appear to be a totalized unity (65). Once again, however, capital cannot complete the subjugation and destruction of History 2s and attain totality, but, insofar as historical capital *is* at all, it is always “not yet” (65). Chakrabarty summarizes this reality of capital as follows:

History 2[s do] not spell out a program of writing histories that are alternatives to the narratives of capital. That is, History 2s do not constitute a dialectical Other of the necessary logic of History 1. To think thus would be to subsume History 2[s] to History 1. History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1. (66)

Historical capital, for Chakrabarty, contains within its own structure that which prevents it from obtaining as a totalized unity; History 1 cannot fully subjugate and destroy History 2s because History 2s are requisite to the instantiation of historical capital at all. Indeed, insofar as History 1 works to diminish or externalize those History 2s that are necessary for History 1 to be at all, then it functions analogously with abstract labor, which seeks to quantify labor time but must assume concrete particular labors in order to do so. Thus, History 2s not only sustain but also threaten capital; History 2s, necessary to the logic of capital, always exceed the story that capital must tell about itself.

For Chakrabarty, the result of this structural openness of History 1 to the resistance of History 2s is that “historical difference is not external to [capital] but is rather constitutive of it” (70). Capital, then, will never reach a state where it is entirely homogeneous and whole because it is structured upon historical difference. Returning to the question of why individual instances of capital are all different, Chakrabarty asserts that the “globalization of capital is not the same as capital’s universalization[, because

g]lobalization does not mean that History 1, the universal and necessary logic of capital so essential to Marx's critique, has been realized" (71). For Chakrabarty, capital will never progress to totality even in its globalized form; every individual instance of global capital will always contain within it the life and the History 2s, that resist its absolute obtainment. Resistance against capital, then, occurs *within* capital, both in the life of the particular individual whose lived reality fails to fully conform to the demands that capital imposes on the laborer and also in the histories incompletely expunged by the dominative narrative that capital seeks to establish. It is with this analytic that I will augment Hodapp's argument concerning *GraceLand's* capacity to resist capital, first by demonstrating how the form of its text interrupts History 1 and second (occurring much later in the argument) by exploring how the life and labors of at least one of its characters are not fully circumscribed and destroyed by the the impositions of abstract labor.

### **The History of Capital and *GraceLand***

As I noted earlier, Hodapp argues that *GraceLand's* paratextual materials resist the totalizing drive of colonialism that remains in the postcolonial world. His argument highlights the seemingly hopeless situation depicted in the novel's narrative but suggests that the inclusion of non-diegetic descriptions of the kola nut counters the narrative's bleak vision and suggests the possibility of reproducing precolonial cultures. Though Hodapp's argument does not explicitly engage with Chakrabarty, I contend that mapping his argument onto the logical structure of capital outlined in "The Two Histories of Capital" (that is, treating the kola as a Chakrabartian History 2 interrupting the narrative, i.e. the History 1) extends and augments Hodapp's argument, allowing me to attend to

how the structuring of the diegetic and non-diegetic texts in *GraceLand* offers some potential for resistance to capitalism.

Hodapp's argument about the kola begins with his identifying the kola as a signifier of precolonial West African culture in general and then demonstrates how this signifier of precolonial West African culture interrupts and resists the colonial forces depicted in the novel's narrative. Though noting that the kola mainly serves as a signifier within certain Igbo cultural conventions, Hodapp argues that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* not only "emphasized the centrality of kola to traditional Igbo life, as well as its importance as a site of meaning making in social transaction[,]” but in its “use of the kola nut as integral to Igbo cultural identity[, it also] initiated an important literary trope in West African fiction” (1-2). For Hodapp, *Things Fall Apart* charges the kola with the significance of the particular histories of precolonial Igbo culture as well as West African cultures in general. Establishing the kola as signifier both within and of precolonial Igbo (and, more generally, West African) culture allows Hodapp to contend that its inclusion in the novel interrupts and resists the colonial drive to eliminate precolonial culture that is in evidence in the novel's narrative. To demonstrate how the kola accomplishes this resistance, he notes how the kola is absent from the narrative of the novel, appearing only as paratextual, or non-diegetic, descriptions between each of the chapters (5).

Accounting for this, he suggests that “European colonialism [as well as the postcolonial power structures] disrupted . . . established trade routes, undermin[ed] traditional religions, and urbanis[ed] populations to partially rupture the connective tissue of Igbo cultural tradition” (7). In short, by the late twentieth century, colonial and postcolonial

power structures in Nigeria effectively removed the kola, a signifier of precolonial West African cultures, from Nigeria; it is nowhere to be seen in the narrative of *GraceLand*.

Yet, the kola is still present in the novel's paratextual, non-diegetic materials, and Hodapp suggests that this presence entails two things: the interruption of the postcolonial by the precolonial and the possibility of the regeneration of the precolonial. Regarding the first consequence of the paratextual kola, Hodapp characterizes kola sections as "defamiliarizing breaks [that] consistently remove readers from Elvis' hyper-violent story and make them focus on traditional Igbo food and rituals in an effort to let them know that the horrendous events of the narrative are not the only version of Nigeria and Lagos" (8). Said another way, the kola interrupts the narrative of the novel with signifiers of the precolonial past. Moreover, these signifiers of the precolonial past, for Hodapp, possess the potential to instigate a revival of traditional Igbo culture. He asserts that *GraceLand* "emphasi[z]es the kola's] importance as a potential site of traditional cultural production in the context of social deterioration in the slums of Lagos" (3). Hodapp claims here that *GraceLand*'s deployment of kola actually opens up the possibility for reproducing Igbo culture. Indeed, in the conclusion of the argument, Hodapp suggests that though the setting of *GraceLand* (postcolonial Nigeria) does not provide the proper grounds for the revival of Igbo culture, the kola's survival as paratext portends the possibility of a moment in which precolonial history might re-emerge: "Igbo culture . . . is not an impotent ruin, as one might presume from reading Elvis' story in isolation without the Igbo register, but [it] persists as a system that can produce substantial meaning again because its core structure, constituted by kola, is intact though in need of transformation for contemporary circumstances" (12). Over and above the kola's ability to resist



colonial power structures, the kola's survival in the text promises the possibility of re-instantiating precolonial Igbo culture when (and if) the circumstances in Nigeria become something other than the postcolonial wreckage of global capital that *GraceLand* depicts.

Now, notably, although Hodapp never explicitly interacts with or references Chakrabarty in his article, reading his argument through Chakrabarty's analytic proves to be not only rather intuitive but also strikingly productive. The way that Hodapp pivots from establishing the kola as a signifier both in and of Igbo culture to suggesting that *GraceLand* mobilizes its survival (as a signifier) as a way to remind the reader that colonial forces have not fully eradicated the possibility of the regeneration of precolonial cultures and traditions maps perfectly onto the History 1 and History 2 apparatus of Chakrabarty. The postcolonial, politico-economic moment of Nigeria depicted in *GraceLand*'s narrative might best be characterized as a repetition of the kleptocratic system of capital instituted first by colonial powers and then perpetuated by the endemic military forces that took root in the wake of Nigeria's achieving "independence."<sup>4</sup> From this vantage, the kola's paratextual repetitions act as History 2s to the narrative's History 1 in that the kola as a (signifier of a) History 2 serves as a continuous reminder both of that which History 1 must try to excise and also of that which History 1 can never fully eliminate. Moreover, as a paratextual element occurring between chapters, the kola repeatedly interrupts the smooth deployment of History 1 (in this case the narrative of the novel) and its movement to suppress and eliminate those elements of history that do not always and unambiguously point towards capital's progress towards "being." In what follows, I will demonstrate how mapping Hodapp's argument onto Chakrabarty's deconstructive reading of *Capital* extends and augments Hodapp's conclusions.

When one explicitly approaches *GraceLand* as a depiction and experience of History 2s interrupting History 1, then one can extend Hodapp's analysis by attending to how all of the non-diegetic elements, the kola and others, have the function of disrupting the novel's History 1, or the narrative. Indeed, these disruptive non-diegetic elements can for the most be read as History 2s that resist the totalization of capital. Yet, careful attention to how the various recipes, kola-nut descriptions, and other non-diegetic materials interact with the diegesis of *GraceLand* demonstrates the untenability of understanding these History 2s as straightforwardly portending anything like the regeneration of precolonial culture. Indeed, the novel's complex interweaving of History 1 and History 2s does not simply lead to a ready-at-hand ability to reclaim the precolonial for the contemporary moment, but instead the novel's form suggests only that global capital always contains the histories that are simultaneously the conditions of both its possibility and its impossibility and, thereby, that every instance of capital always risks a "misfire" that, over time might render a meaningfully different structure of relations, i.e. capital becomes displaced by "capital."

In order to show how the kola and the other non-diegetic History 2s disrupt the smooth articulation of History 1 we will carefully examine the first pages of the novel. In the first chapter, the reader meets Elvis, a teenage, Nigerian boy living in one of Lagos's slums who instead of holding a "real" job solicits tips from his performances as an Elvis impersonator. The narrative follows Elvis as he rides the bus through Lagos and introduces the reader to his family when he arrives home for the evening. The first chapter's narrative ends on page fifteen, but before the next chapter the reader is confronted by the following words, written in a large font: "BITTER-LEAF SOUP AND

POUNDED YAM” (Igbo: Ofe Onugbo Na Nnji)[,]” followed by a list of ingredients and instructions for preparation (16). Nowhere in the foregoing chapter is such a recipe or dish discussed; the only food mentioned in the chapter goes unnamed and only manifests as a part of conversation (15). When, then, the recipe occurs at the close of the chapter, the reader experiences a disruptive intrusion; up to this point the novel has only been a standard, realist narrative, but it is here punctuated, or interrupted, by what appears to be a traditional Igbo recipe. Thus, moving beyond Hodapp’s limited focus, the recipe functions for the reader as a History 2 in the same way that the kola does, disrupting the reader’s experience of the narrative with an appearance of a cultural signifier potentially signifying both within and of Igbo culture. Indeed, the recipe at the end of the first chapter proves to be largely representative of those recipes, prayers, and other precolonial signifiers that occur at the ends of most chapter in the text, functioning as a non-diegetic, History 2 that disrupts the realist narrative of a post-colonial Nigeria dominated by global capital.

Remaining attentive to the novel’s form demonstrates that *GraceLand* always follows the disruptive History 2s that occur at the end of every chapter with a double movement, or two registers of kola nut descriptions: a sustained History 2 interruption and then an appropriation that undermines the requisite historical particularity of the kola as History 2. Describing the two, distinct descriptions of the kola and its rituals that occur at the beginning of every chapter, Hodapp contends that they represent two culturally distinct perspectives, or registers: “[t]he first register is an Igbo’s insider perspective familiar with kola traditions explaining them to younger Igboes” and the second register is “a Western ethnographic description” (5). The two registers of the

descriptions, then, have distinct functions: the first register represents a particular moment of Igbo history and culture via the kola nut, while the second register offers a Western explanation for the kola nut and its rituals. The first register sustains the History 2 interruptions (the recipes and other journal excerpts) that occur immediately prior to it at the end of every chapter. The second register, however, actually serves History 1; it undermines the specificities of the History 2 kola by iterating, appropriating, or “translating” the precolonial Igbo signifier, removing it from its specific cultural context and abstracting it into an “ideal” version, a kola account fit into a “standard” (read: Western) account of culture.

Indeed, one of the most striking examples of the second register’s culturally eliminative translation occurs in the space between the first and second chapters. After deploying the Igbo recipe at the end of the first chapter on page sixteen, immediately on page seventeen the first register sustains the History 2 disruption, discussing Igbo worship practices and delineating the significances for the Igbo of a variety of material objects (including the kola). The first register’s description, here, ends with the following: “[b]ut greatest of all this, is the offering of kola in communion, the soul calling unto life” (17). This description has no obvious connection to the story of *GraceLand*, but primarily functions as a History 2 disrupting History 1’s realist narrative. Yet, the second register description which occurs immediately below the first register description, though also having little to do with the narrative itself, seems to delimit or control the signficatory potential of the kola through the imposition of a Western (colonial) perspective over the Igbo’s own explanation of the kola and its place in their culture:

The Eucharistic qualities of the kola-nut ritual are clear. There are close parallels to Catholicism, as there seems to be some kind of transubstantiation involved in the kola-nut ceremony, similar to the communion wafer in the Catholic ritual of mass. There is the invocation of a supreme deity, the reference to the kola nut as representative of life and by association, the implication that the consumption of one was equal to that of the other. (17)

In this instance of the second register kola description, the eliminative force of History 1 is on full display; if the second register description can be understood as a response to the first register description, then the second register attempts to control the first register's signifiatory potential by abstracting it from its context and then translating it and evaluating it according to a Western notion of religion. Between the first and second chapter, then, History 2s disrupt History 1 first with an Igbo recipe and then with a kola description before being appropriated into a "universal" (i.e. western or colonial) notion of religio-cultural history that acts as a conduit back into the History 1 narrative of Elvis and the postcolonial Nigerian state.

The structure of History 1 disrupted by History 2s and then translated back into History 1 recurs throughout the text; the reader experiences many times over the undermining of History 2s's potential to signify something outside of the totalizing vision of History 1, and, importantly, the significance of this repetition does not obviously support Hodapp's reading. The following lists the most striking instances of this translation process: in chapter eight, the second register compares the different numbered kola stars to numerology; in chapter ten, it compares the numerical system of the Igbo that derives from the kola star to Greek mathematics; in chapter fourteen, it compares the

kola nut ritual to the Japanese tea ceremony; in chapter sixteen, it contrasts the ceremony to the Japanese tea ceremony; in chapter twenty-one, it suggests that the kola ritual is history; in chapter twenty-two, it suggests that the kola nut ritual enacts an underlying Igbo philosophy; in chapter twenty-eight, it again draws comparisons of the kola nut ritual to rituals in Christianity; and in the rest of the chapters, it otherwise translates the first register to a Western perspective and thereby limits and controls the signifiatory potential of the kola descriptions. Certainly, the first register kola nut descriptions, as well as the recipes and other non-diegetic materials at the end of each chapter, do function repeatedly as disruptions to the main narrative's History 1, and, thereby, as sites where precolonial culture might manifest again. Yet, *GraceLand* repeatedly deploys eliminative appropriations<sup>5</sup> that temper the signifiatory potential of these disruptive precolonial signifiers. While one might be inclined to concur with Hodapp in privileging the disruptive function of the non-diegetic bits of the text, the Chakrabartian analytic disallows one from ignoring the formally repetitious re-uptakes of History 1: narrative, recipe, kola register 1, kola register 2, narrative. Thus, one must augment Hodapp's contention that the kola discourse in the novel suggests the possibility that the precolonial, History 2 signifiers might escape the logic of capital and allow for reproduction of the precolonial, as the novel's form provides no obvious indication that this will occur, though there is also no indication that it never could.

At this point, then, one might ask what to make of Hodapp's argument given the claims that we have augmented in the wake of reading him and the novel through Chakrabarty, and I would contend that Hodapp makes the best case possible case for understanding part of the potential of the kola in *GraceLand*. At the outset of his

argument, Hodapp invokes Barthes and poststructuralism in explaining the signficatory potential of the kola (2-3). This is significant because postructural thinking often works to problematize the coherence of identity over time, to demonstrate the paradoxical inseparability of repetition and difference<sup>6</sup>. In this framework, Hodapp does an excellent job of championing the repetition of the kola in *Graceland*; his argument convincingly demonstrates how the kola continues to survive in (the literature of) postcolonial Nigeria and how its survival does actually portend the kola's (and traditional West African culture's) continued survival and repetition beyond the novel.

Of course, reading Hodapp and *GraceLand* through Chakrabarty reveals that Hodapp underserves the significance of difference as it relates to the kola. Chakrabarty reminds us of the significance of difference in repetition precisely because he is trying to account for why capital's various historico-geographical instances have not reached a uniform, homogeneous state. As noted above, he reaches the conclusion that no instance, no repetition of capital can ever fully be rid of the unique and particular labors and histories that underwrite it, and moreover, this structural inability to totalize into a perfectly coherent and whole idenity is lauded as the resistance internal to capital. Yet, it is this force of difference in repetition that disallows the kola from ever straightforwardly promising the "regeneration" of the postcolonial and also that which allows the kola to be translated in the first place.

In "“What do I have to do with all this?” Eating, excreting, and belonging in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*" Delores Phillips drives home the significance of difference in repetition. She contends that the "recipe collections [. . .] evoke [the spaces they describe] through taste and odour, but can never completely evince them[; t]he power through

which they conjure the essences of daily life in a distant place, this magic is revealed as simply an illusion” (109). Considering the recipes as signifiers of precolonial culture, Phillips suggests that while they do have some success at pointing to the precolonial they will always fail to communicate the full, material reality of the precolonial (i.e. they are never, in Derridean terms, “present”). Indeed, Phillips explicitly invokes Derrida and contends that “[r]ather than replicate or enact culture, the recipes resonate—they echo and reverberate, repeating in imperfect form” (110). Though again mirroring Hodapp by invoking a poststructuralist understanding of the signifier in order to analyze *GraceLand*’s non-diegetic elements, Phillips uses the poststructuralist analytic to argue *against* the regenerative potential of these precolonial signifiers; the sign can never (re)produce the presence of the precolonial and ultimately determine these signifiers’ meanings. Indeed, Phillips highlights how this failure to (re)produce presence manifests itself in *GraceLand*, pointing to how many of the included recipes are reproduced in the narrative in a transformed and “ironic” fashion: “[r]ather than complement and complete the narrative, the generic distinctions in the novel—delicious recipes paired with narrated horrors—contrast, contradict, or make one another ironic” (114). In *GraceLand*, the non-diegetic precolonial signifiers are repeated, but this repetition in the postcolonial context necessarily entails a difference, an absence of presence that disallows these signifiers from simply invoking the precolonial traditions from which they originated.

Though the kola in *GraceLand* does not straightforwardly portend the regeneration of the precolonial as Hodapp contends, it also does not remain *totally* ambivalent concerning both the possibility of resistance to capital and the reproduction of precolonial culture. The structure of *GraceLand*, indeed, might be summarized as the



repetition of the logic of capital: History 2 translated into History 1 interrupted by History 2 and translated again into History 1, repeated again and again without any indication whether the disruption can ultimately escape the translation back into History 1 or whether the translation will ever eliminate the excess significances of the History 2s. This resonates well with Chakrabarty's articulation of the logic of capital, which suggests that non-totality, or repeated and persistent disruptions to capital's becoming a unity, *is* capital's Being. Though the History 2s will repeatedly undergo the violence of History 1 and the repeated translation will create more distance between the precolonial and the present, the poststructuralist underpinnings of Chakrabarty's articulation of the logic of capital entail that History 2s will survive in one form or another. Thus, Hodapp's regenerative reading of kola in the novel is not simply naïve. The survival of History 2s by no means guarantees their regenerative potential, but there is the guarantee of their regenerative force. There is, then, always the possibility that the History 2s, the non-diegetic precolonial signifiers in *GraceLand*, might, eventually, iterate *beyond* the logic of capital (or beyond the confines of the novel) and, someday, take root in circumstances conducive to their reproductive potential (whatever that might look like).

### **Labor and Resistance to Capital in *GraceLand*'s Narrative**

To this point in the argument, the application of Chakrabarty's analytic has positioned *GraceLand*'s narrative as a History 1, that is, the story that capital tells about itself through both the retroactive and proactive elimination and translation of the material particularities of History 2s. Indeed, in characterizing the narrative as leaving little room for hoping that anything might escape the colonial forces and structures that pervade postcolonial Nigeria, I contend that Hodapp and Phillips<sup>7</sup> might be said to reinforce the

idea that the narrative of *GraceLand* functions univocally as a History 1. To this point in my analysis, I have also participated in treating the novel's narrative as a totalized History 1 insofar as I have positioned it as simply telling the story of the "progress" of capital in postcolonial Nigeria. Like many theoretical analyses, my foregoing application of the Chakrabartian model repeats the logical movements that the theory critiques in the first place; in applying the theory, I assumed the univocality, the totality, of the instances and categories of History 1 and History 2. I would contend, however, that *GraceLand* does not ultimately sustain such a move. Instead, I suggest that attending to the novel's depiction and structuring of labor points to the non-totality of the narrative as a History 1. In what follows, I will explicate how the novel's treatment of Elvis's labors resists a simple identification of the narrative and History 1.

Let us, then, return to the novel's opening in order to begin examining the structure of Elvis's labors in the novel. *GraceLand* begins with Elvis laboring as an Elvis Presley impersonator, though from the start, the novel demonstrates that this particular way of living and of laboring does not fit within the socio-economic hegemony of postcolonial Nigeria. As the novel opens, Elvis' pensive observation of the slum of Maroko is interrupted by his father, Sunday Oke, knocking on his door and haranguing him to go find work. When Elvis retorts that he already has a job, Sunday rebukes him, saying "Dancing is no job. We all dance in de bar on Saturday" (5). In this exchange, the reader learns that Elvis "works" as a dancer, an occupation that his father does not view as a viable occupation because he believes the "labor" is a form of recreation, not work. Despite harboring feelings of disdain for his father, Elvis partially agrees with Sunday, conceding in his own mind that "[h]e was broke all the time, making next to nothing as a

street performer[; h]e needed a better job with regular income” (6-7). The novel clearly points to Elvis’s labor’s place in Lagos’s society: outside, excluded, other. The novel, the other characters, and even Elvis himself struggle to identify Elvis’s Elvis Presley impersonation as labor.

Elvis’s and Sunday’s reservations about dancing as labor, however, do not stop Elvis from performing his Elvis Presley impersonation. When he performs his impersonation for the tourists at the beach, the tourists’s questions affirm that Elvis’s labors are unrecognizable/unviable as labor: “‘Does he work for the hotel?’ . . . ‘So what d’ya think he wants?’ . . . ‘He doesn’t look like any Elvis I know.’ . . . ‘Hey, son, what do you want?’” (12). The tourists fail to understand Elvis’s attempt to perform as a dancer/impersonator as a kind of labor. Elvis, in contrast, expects, or at least hopes, that his activity will be understood as a kind of labor, responding to their questions of what he wants with one word: “[m]oney” (12). Elvis’s performance of “Elvis” fails to register as labor in the context of postcolonial Nigeria and is, thereby, excluded from “labor” in a postcolonial Nigeria dominated by the forces of global capital.

While the exclusion of Elvis’s impersonation labors from the the category of “labor” might be attributed to the personal bias of the novel’s characters, I want to argue that Elvis’s Elvis impersonation is excluded precisely because it is too bound up with the particularity and materiality of the History 2s that the forces of global capital have tried to eliminate in postcolonial Nigeria and, thereby, challenges the category of abstract labor. To contextualize why the History 2s, the particularities invoked by Elvis’s Elvis Presley impersonation must be elided in establishing the category of abstract labor, we must first attend to how the tradition is distinctively feminine. Second, we must attend to

how this feminine tradition ultimately relates to the specific precolonial history and traditions of the Igbo. In establishing the connection amongst Elvis's dancing and impersonation labors, the experiences of femininity in his immediate past, and the precolonial, Igbo traditions that he mostly lacks awareness and experience of, it becomes clear why the logic of capital must suppress Elvis's impersonation/dancing labors and exclude them from the category of "labor."

Let us begin, then, by examining the most paradoxical History 2 aspect of Elvis' impersonation, the subject of impersonation, Elvis Presley<sup>8</sup>, and demonstrate how it is bound up with Elvis's experience of the feminine. Though Elvis Presley is obviously a Western cultural icon, he is also, for Elvis Oke, a connection to his late mother, Beatrice. In one of the novel's many flashbacks to Elvis' youth, the narrative depicts Elvis and an ailing Beatrice connecting through their mutual appreciation for dancing to Elvis Presley music:

Beatrice . . . set the plastic disk on the record player. The needle . . . launched into the throaty call of Elvis Presley. Beatrice grabbed Elvis and began to dance with him. . . . Dropping Elvis's hands, she grabbed Efua[, Elvis's cousin,] and pulled her up. . . . [T]hey stuffed themselves with food and laughter and dancing. (42-3)

Here, Elvis experiences joy while dancing to Elvis Presley music with his mother, cousin, and grandmother. Elvis's Elvis Presley impersonation, then, is tied to this experience, the experience of dancing with the female members of his family. Thereby, insofar as Elvis has chosen his subject (Elvis Presley) and method (dancing and singing) of impersonation in relation to this experience, his impersonation is tied to the feminine.

Elvis's impersonation-labor is further tied to the feminine by the means of impersonation he employs. Before beginning to perform his impersonation on the beach, Elvis dons a wig, attempts to use sparkle spray on his face, applies talcum powder in order to fascimile a white visage, and wishes it was culturally acceptable for him to wear makeup (11). Elvis does his best with the makeshift "beauty products" he has, but he clearly longs to participate in a more conventionally feminine performance. Indeed, later in the novel, Elvis's desire for a more "convincing" impersonation routine seems to be connected to another experience of femininity in his past. In another flashback to Elvis's childhood, the narrative records an episode wherein he transfixedly watches his aunt and her friends practice beauty routines. Looking on at the proceedings, Elvis becomes utterly enraptured:

[He] long[s] to try on their makeup and have his hair plaited. Aunt Felicia finally [gives] into his badgering and [weaves] his hair into lovely cornrows. One of the other girls [puts] lipstick on him. Giggling, and gettting into the game, another [pulls] a minidress over his head. . . . He step[s] into a pair of Aunt Felicia's too-big platforms and prance[s] about, happy, proud, chest stuck out. (61)

In this scene, Elvis relishes the opportunity to participate in this female community's performance of femininity. Moreover, Elvis's Elvis impersonation routine re-enacts this feminine experience and performance in his makeshift application of beauty products and attire. The first labor that Elvis performs in the novel repeats the feminine experiences (Elvis Presley, dancing, singing, and "beauty routines"/dressing up) he relished in as a child.

Yet, it is not simply because Elvis's Elvis impersonation labors repeat femininity that capital must elide or suppress it in establishing abstract labor (not to mention History 1), but rather it is because, in *GraceLand*, the feminine carries vestiges of the precolonial. In yet another flashback, the narrative recounts Elvis' participation in an Igbo manhood initiation ritual. Some of the imagery involved in the ritual have an associated with Elvis's experience of the feminine. Note, first, the gathering and singing involved in the ritual: "This group [that had gathered for the ritual] was made up of young men [that] as part of the ritual . . . would form a retinue of singers" (18). Here, the gathering and singing involved in the ritual somewhat obliquely tie this traditional Igbo ritual to the experiences of femininity Elvis has with his mother and with his Elvis impersonation labors.

Indeed, the connection between Elvis's experience of the Igbo initiation rituals, the feminine beauty routines and his impersonation labors are made more obvious and direct when one considers the manner of adornment involved in the Igbo ritual. In the same flashback as referenced above, Elvis is called to the family's backyard and asked to strip. Thereafter, the narrative records that "Uncle Joseph first strap[s] a grass skirt on him and then beg[ins] to paint strange designs in red and white dye all over his body" (17). Here, quite explicitly, Elvis is made to wear a skirt, an item of clothing that he and the book associate with feminine beauty routines and, more simply, femininity. Moreover, Elvis' body is painted with red and white dyes, prefiguring both the makeup he will wear when participating in feminine beauty routines with his aunt and her friends and the makeshift beauty products he uses in order to impersonate Elvis. The multi-experiential resonance of applying makeup is reified after Elvis has "killed" the "eagle"

when each of the elders in attendance “[walk] up to Elvis and bl[o]w chalk powder in his face [and anoint] his head with oil” (20). Once again, the Igbo ritual prefigures both the feminine beauty rituals and the Elvis Presley impersonation in which Elvis will later experience and perform, respectively. In “‘In the name of the son’: Fatherhood’s Critical Legitimacy, Sonhood and Masculinity in Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* and *The Virgin Flames*”, Christopher E.W. Ouma explores the gendered aspect of Elvis’s plight to survive in Lagos, suggesting that “[j]uxtaposed against the maternal past is the masculine texture of the cityscape that leaves Elvis in a marginal position as he attempts to hack his way out of the liana of Lago’s underbelly while he ekes out a living” (82). In other words, Elvis’ ties to his mother, which in turn tie him to the precolonial, position him as being “outside” the hyper-masculine culture of postcolonial Nigeria, i.e. the capitalist bastardization of precolonial and colonial socio-economic structures. Indeed, Elvis’s labors as an Elvis impersonator re-assert the feminine precolonial culture within the postcolonial moment of Nigeria in which capital must eliminate or suppress precolonial particularity and materiality in order to establish itself, to establish abstract labor and History 1; for this reason, capital disallows Elvis’s labors in this first scene from being identified and supported.

As the narrative moves forward, Elvis does bow to the pressures of capital and gives up his impersonation labors which, in its ties to the feminine precolonial, retains the particularities of History 2s that capital must elide or suppress in establishing both History 1 and the category of abstract labor. In the third chapter, Elvis “decide[s] to find steady work, as he couldn’t depend on his dancing to bring in a regular income” (24). So, Elvis finds work in construction, building “new high-rise apartment complexes and office

blocks [which] were going up seemingly overnight” (27). In this job, Elvis is laboring to bring about the progress of capital; his labor directly contributes to the progression of History 1. Moreover, Elvis’s labors come under the standard of abstract labor, that is Elvis’s labors dehumanize him. Elvis “had no experience and was not trained in a particular trade[, b]ut he was strong and willing so the foreman had put him to work as a general laborer” (28). The language, here, tells the story: Elvis is an unskilled laborer who is valued not for the particular knowledge or skillset he possesses but is instead valued for the “general” labor he can provide. In short, Elvis finds himself employed in a position that *only* values him for his potential “nervous and muscular energy”. Elvis seems to have some implicit understanding of this when the narrative allows a glimpse into his thoughts about his work experience at the construction site: “Lunch was Elvis’s favorite time, not because of the small respite from work, but because it was only at lunch that he really saw the people behind the bodies that slogged through the day’s work, tight-lipped and taciturn” (28). In this reflection, Elvis highlights how the labor actually dehumanizes him and his co-workers, focusing only on their bodily capacities and suppressing every other aspect of their lives. The workers at this construction site, then, are dehumanized as they come under the category of abstract labor. Elvis gives up his radically particular Elvis impersonation labor and becomes a dehumanized, general laborer.

Let us pause, here, and highlight the structure of Elvis’s labors to this point. He first engages in a labor that through its perpetuation and repetition of particular, precolonial traditions (History 2s), fails to adhere to the standard of abstract labor and thereby destabilizes capital’s structure. Then, falling to the pressures of the capital



system, Elvis finds a job wherein he is dehumanized under the imposition of abstract labor, a position wherein his physical potential is abstracted away from his particular humanity. Much like what occurs in the novel's form, these opening labors begin in the narrative a series of alternations between capital's other and the suppression and erasure of that other. Stated more directly, where the novel's form repeatedly moves from History 1 to History 2 and back, the novel's narrative follows Elvis's repeated movement between particular labors that interrupt the category of abstract labor and labors that dehumanize and reduce Elvis and others to economically quantifiable bodily potential.

Indeed, this alternation between labors picks up immediately; after losing his job at the construction site, a dejected Elvis begins to seek other employment opportunities that do not involve such explicit, capital-driven dehumanization. Elvis's friend Okon tells him about his current means of employment: "De hospital, dey pay us to donate blood. One hundred naira per pint" (76). In "laboring" as a blood-donor, Okon explicitly allows his particular, material body to be economically quantified; his labor is a direct expression of the imposition of abstract labor. Okon asks Elvis if he wants to join him as a blood donor, and Elvis says "[n]o, I don't think that's for me" (76). Elvis rejects the opportunity to make money from a job that so directly and explicitly dehumanizes its workers through the imposition of abstract labor, the economic quantification of the physical capacity of the laborer. Instead, Elvis goes back home, applies makeup in an elaborate beauty routine, looks in the mirror and tells himself "Elvis has entered the building," and dances around his room (78). Instead of moving from one dehumanizing job to another, Elvis practices his Elvis impersonation, a performance performatively tied to his experiences of the feminine and of the Igbo traditions from his

childhood. Further, at the end of the chapter, Sunday calls Elvis “my son de useless dancer,” prompting Elvis to run off to his friend Redemption who gets him a job in a club as a dancer/escort (80, 89). Note that Elvis is rejecting the dehumanizing labor opportunities presented to him in favor of repeating, however feebly and imperfectly, the feminine experiences and precolonial traditions from his past with his dancing-labor. Moreover, the repetition of feminine experiences and Igbo traditions in Elvis’s repeated impersonation and dancing labors suffuses the History 1 (the narrative) with particular labors that interrupt the univocal accession of abstract labor and, thereby, capital.

As the narrative progresses, Elvis’s alternating labors continues, with Elvis spending a majority of the middle of the novel working with Redemption for the military dictator, the Colonel. After an incident with Elvis’s dancer/escort job at the club leaves him unemployed, his friend Redemption offers to cut him in on some illicit jobs. At first, Redemption has Elvis help him pack cocaine (107-11). But, later, Elvis accompanies Redemption and others in what turns out to be a human trafficking escort job. Elvis and Redemption, both ignorant (to varying degrees) to the nature of the job they are on, get in a car with a bunch of men working for the Colonel, the military dictator, and leave Lagos. When Elvis asks what they are doing, the driver of the vehicle notes that they are going “[t]o collect de merchandise” (230). They make a stop, and one of the men loads two coolers and six kids into the vehicle. Elvis becomes curious and asks Redemption what is going on. Redemption says that “As I know it, de Colonel dey supply dese children to white people who want to adopt dem”, but then admits that he does not buy the story told to him and suspects that the children are being sold into slavery (235-6). Here, then, it becomes clear that Elvis has been roped into a job wherein his labor is transporting

economically quantified bodies/persons. In other words, Elvis is participating in the dehumanizing logic of capital, though the extent to which that is true only becomes apparent as the scene develops. Redemption asks Elvis to fetch beer out of one of the coolers in the back of the car, and when Elvis opens the first cooler he discovers that there is not beer inside but instead “[t]here were six human heads sitting on a pile of ice,” and when he opens the next one it “held what appeared to be several organs, hearts, and livers” (237). Given how both Redemption and the other men have characterised the job to this point, it is clear that the heads and organs are being sold to individuals willing to purchase organs on the black market. Elvis, then, is complicit in a labor that perpetuates not only the economic quantification of bodily movement but also the capacity of body parts that are abstracted and extracted from their bodies. But, when Elvis realizes the nature of the job he is on, he and Redemption flee (238). This flight calls back to Elvis’s refusal of Okon’s offer to join him in selling their blood. Elvis does not want to serve capital by dehumanizing (especially violently) himself or others, but repeatedly finds himself doing so.

Elvis’s final two labors in the novel follow the alternating model that we have established. In order to escape persecution from the Colonel, Elvis is afforded the opportunity to join the King of the Beggars and his band, the JOKING JAGUARS, as they travel around Nigeria, performing music and theatrics for various communities (260). This opportunity excites Elvis as “[h]e missed dancing and [this] was a chance to get back into it” (261). Elvis jumps on the opportunity to labor as a performer because he simply misses dancing, a labor that, as has been established, is tied to feminine, precolonial traditions. Moreover, though he knew “he probably wouldn’t get to do his

Elvis impersonation, . . . there would be an audience, one that paid to see them perform” (261). Elvis takes the job as a travelling performer because it gives him the opportunity to dance and to be properly compensated for dancing. Though he must compromise his Elvis impersonation, this is an opportunity nonetheless for a dancing-labor that repeats the feminine experiences and precolonial traditions *and* generates money. Elvis is, once again, interrupting capital by practicing particular labors that repeat feminine, precolonial tradition, but he is actually making a profit.

The travelling performer job, however, is only a temporary measure to get Elvis out of Lagos and, more importantly, out of reach of the Colonel, and when he returns to Lagos Elvis’s home has been destroyed, he is thrown into prison and tortured, and he is forced to take another job wherein the dehumanization inherent to the labor positions Elvis as an enforcer of abstract labor, a dehumanizing force. Finding himself alone and without any connections in a post-Maroko Lagos, Elvis again encounters Okon who when asked about his previous job of selling his own blood recounts that “I stop dat long time” (308). Okon, then tells Elvis what he has done for work in the meantime: “For a while we hijacked corpses from roadsides and even homes which we sold for organ transplants” (308). Once again, Okon admits to participating in dehumanizing labors that economically quantify the human body and its capacities, though he suggests that he is not still doing this kind of labor. When Elvis asks what he is doing now, Okon replies “I am caretaker” and asks Elvis to join him (308). Elvis goes with Okon to the newly christened Bridge City, a shanty-town under one of Lagos’s bridges, and becomes a caretaker whose job it is to protect the child beggars from those that would steal from them. The narrative describes the genesis of the “caretaker” job as such: “Young

children who had been out all day begging . . . were beaten raped, robbed and sometimes killed[, so t]he children paid one set of scavengers to protect them against the others”

(309). Elvis’s new job, then, is exploitative in that these “caretakers” use the threat of their potential violence to force their would-be victims to pay them for insurance against violence from others.

As Elvis will quickly learn, the caretaker job is not simply exploitative but it actually causes the dehumanization of the child beggars, as the caretakers treat the children’s bodily capacity in economic terms. While watching over the children, a small girl, twelve or so years old, approaches Elvis and extends sexual advances (311).

Alarmed Elvis cries out and tells her to stop, causing Okon to approach, take advantage of the girl, and tell Elvis that he “must learn to enjoy more [because d]ese are de fringe benefits of dis job” (312). Okon’s description of his sexual interaction with the girl is purely economic; the sex that Okon and the girl have is a kind of reimbursement for his services. This “tradability,” or marketability, of bodily capacity and action is consistent with Okon’s behavior throughout the novel and, moreover, with the enforcement of the category of abstract labor. Once again, however, though Elvis does participate in this dehumanizing labor, when he discovers its dehumanizing *telos* he refuses to continue laboring, to continue enforcing and maintaining the category of abstract labor.

For the duration of the narrative, Elvis alternates between the particular, History 2 infused labors that repeat and sustain feminine precolonial traditions and the dehumanizing labors that attempt to economically quantify bodily capacity and, thereby, enforce the category of abstract labor. He begins the novel performing the former labor (the Elvis impersonation) and ends the novel performing the latter labor (the “caretaker”

job). Much like the alternation between History 1 signifiers and History 2 signifiers in the form of the novel, *GraceLand*'s narrative seems to play out the logic of capital in that capital must constantly negotiate the tension between the necessity of its other, the particular labors that can be abstracted, and the necessity to eradicate its other, the implementation of the category of abstract labor. Moreover, the narrative follows the novel's form in that it does not suggest whether Elvis will be able to find a sustainable job wherein he can repeat the feminine precolonial in his Elvis-impersonation and dancing or whether he will ultimately be forced to accept a job wherein his labors are dehumanized or he is forced to do the dehumanizing inherent in the implementation of abstract labor.

The narrative's ending perfectly encapsulates the ambivalence concerning whether or not Elvis will be able to escape the logic of capital and sustainably perform the particular labor that repeats the feminine precolonial traditions. After refusing to work as a caretaker in Bridge City, Elvis encounters Redemption who ultimately offers him the means to flee Nigeria and travel to America (317). Throughout the novel, Elvis repeatedly discusses America as a place that will offer him the labor opportunities that he lacks in Nigeria. Indeed, when he gives up his Elvis impersonation act near the beginning of the novel, Elvis thinks that "with the money he earn[s from the construction job he will take], he could save up to go to America[,] a place where they [appreciate] dancers" (24-5). In one sense, then, Elvis's belief that America will offer him opportunities to labor as a dancer where Nigeria could not actually drives him to assent to dehumanizing labors. Further, over the course of the narrative Elvis seems to maintain hope that America will be a land of opportunity for him, and this is evidenced when he

tells his Aunt Felicia that “[i]n America I can become very famous doing what I do” (168). For Elvis, America represents an opportunity to labor as he sees fit, as an Elvis impersonator, repeating the feminine experiences and precolonial traditions of his own particular past.

Yet, the narrative does not allow Elvis, much less the reader, to have a simple, univocal understanding of America as a land of opportunity where one might represent or repeat capital’s other, its excluded and suppressed. From the very start of the novel, the American tourists cannot recognize Elvis’s Elvis impersonation as labor. Indeed, Elvis does express, early in the novel, that aside from “[h]is fascination with movies and Elvis Presley . . . he wasn’t really sure he liked America” (56). As the novel continues, the inspiration for Elvis’s ambivalent feelings toward America come into relief. In a flashback, Elvis encounters a dwarf practicing “American magic” and his grandmother, Oye, warns him that the practitioners of such magic “can steal your soul and turn you into anything they want” (66-7). This episode hints to Elvis, and the reader, that America may be in possession of some kind of “magic,” but that this magic can be used to destroy your humanity and shape one’s whole existence for its own ends. Thus, before progressing through the main events of the narrative, Elvis harbors some reticence concerning the positive, generative potential of America.

Indeed, although Elvis does, at various moments in the narrative, express that he believes America might provide him opportunities he does not possess in Nigeria, the narrative repeatedly shows Elvis, and the reader, the dangers of America. With Elvis listening, the King of the Beggars lectures about “the evils of capitalism that the United States of America practice[ --] it [is] a land of vice and depravity, infested with a perverse

morality based on commercial value rather than a humanistic one” (155). Directly contraposing Elvis’s hope that America might offer him an opportunity to freely perform the Elvis impersonation and dancing labors that repeat and represent the feminine experiences and precolonial Igbo culture of Elvis’s particular past, the King suggests that America harbors the same system of capital that forces Elvis into jobs wherein his dehumanized and dehumanizing labors participate in the implementation of the category of abstract labor. Later, evidence of America’s implementations of abstract labor becomes apparent to Elvis when Redemption tells him that the organs they were escorting/guarding in the job they worked for the Colonel were to be bought by Americans (240-1). If by escorting the people and organs on their way to be trafficked Elvis is guilty of participating in the dehumanizing labor requisite to the implementation of abstract labor, then how much more guilty is the country creating the demand for the trafficking? By the end of the novel, then, it is clear to Elvis, and the reader, that America does not straightforwardly offer opportunities to perform labors that embody and repeat his particular experiences and traditions.

Despite the knowledge he has gained, Elvis does choose to go to America. He expresses that he understands Nigeria is not a place where he could live and labor in all of his particularity. At this point, however, Elvis’s hopes concerning America are certainly tempered: “Even though it had become painfully clear to him that there was no way to survive in Lagos, there was no guarantee he would survive in America” (318). Elvis chooses to go to America not because he believes that America *will* offer him the opportunity to labor as a dancer and an Elvis Presley impersonator, but because he knows Nigeria will never allow him to meaningfully do this. In a gutting twist, however, the



novel's penultimate word on whether Elvis will be able to represent and repeat the necessary and necessarily excluded "other" of capital is, perhaps, the strongest articulation of the hopelessness of Elvis's situation. Waiting to board his flight to America, Elvis reads James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*. Reading through the lynching scene wherein the lynched black man's genitalia are violently and publicly removed, Elvis muses about the scar that was left on the lynched black man, reflecting that he, Elvis, "knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body, [and, moreover] he was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face[, h]e and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with the scarred black men dying in trees of fire" (319-20). Elvis identifies with the lynched black man in Baldwin's story; he understands that he occupies the same position in the world as that man, the position of the other, the excluded, the suppressed, the immasculated, the eradicated. Critically, Baldwin's story takes place in America, and in identifying with the lynched man in the story, Elvis seems to anticipate that he too, the black, Nigerian Elvis Presley impersonator who repeats his particular experiences and traditions in his labors, will occupy the same position in American society as the lynched black man did: excluded, suppressed, eradicated. Nonetheless, when the attendant calls Elvis's new, assumed name, Redemption, the ambivalence concerning Elvis's future in America reasserts itself; will Elvis actually find redemption in America and be able to survive and repeat the feminine experiences and precolonial traditions of his particular past, or is he simply becoming a displaced version of Redemption, an African man removed to an America that will always and unequivocally force him to be dehumanized

and eradicated or to dehumanize and eradicate him in the implementation and maintenance of abstract labor?

*GraceLand* does not tell the reader whether in America Elvis becomes a successful dancer or whether he becomes a dehumanized and dehumanizing instrument of capital. The novel has, instead, provided a framework for understanding how labor works in systems of capital. Any laborers whose particular labors embody and repeat the experiences and traditions which capital presupposes and must suppress are themselves excluded and forced to participate in dehumanizing labors that implement and maintain the category of abstract labor. Nonetheless, as Chakrabarty highlights, these labors that bear and repeat particular experiences and histories are necessary for capital to instantiate and maintain the essential category of abstract labor. That is, capital must always have particular labors because these are the very things that must be abstracted from and suppressed in order to establish abstract labor. Thus, perhaps we can postulate that Elvis will find America much as he, for a time, found Nigeria, a place where he can, alternately, find some success as an Elvis Presley impersonator, but who must also be victimized by and become complicit with the dehumanizing consequences of the imposition of abstract labor. In this sense, then, *GraceLand's* narrative resists univocal identification with History 1: no matter how much it does try to eliminate them, the narrative always allows Elvis's labors that repeat his particular experiences and, importantly, must always allow them in Elvis's future as well.

### **Conclusion**

As has been shown, *GraceLand* and the logic of capital as articulated by Chakrabarty are deeply ambivalent concerning the possibility of resisting the dominative and eliminative

proliferation of capital. The logic of capital dictates that capital's Being is only ever "Being," that it can never achieve true universality because as it repeats over time and space each repetition must always retain, in some form, the particularities and idiosyncracies out of which it arises. Resistance, then, occurs within the logic of capital, meaning that the particular is allowed some way to live *in* or *with* the eliminative drives of capital. *GraceLand* plays out this logic in a unique way: the repetitious interplay of History 1 and History 2s in the novel's form and of particular labors and dehumanizing labors that impose and maintain the category of abstract labor in the novel's narrative in some sense dramatize the logic of capital. The novel depicts the repeated survival of the labors and histories that capital tries to eradicate, but this resistance occurs within the logic of capital which dictates that for capital to be at all, these vestiges of the pre-capital world *must* survive. It becomes difficult to determine whether the survival of the particular labors and histories resist or maintain capital.

Perhaps, however, it is precisely the *repetitions* of the logic of capital in *GraceLand* that ultimately provide a less ambiguous, if not entirely satisfying, understanding of the potential for resistance in the survival of capital's other within its own logic. Remember, Chakrabarty's analysis aimed to solve for the differences that manifested in historio-geographic instances of capital. To account for this, he appealed to a poststructural framework that suggests the inextricability of difference from repetition. The consequence of this appeal is that capital cannot be understood as a unity, but is instead a series of "capitals," each inextricably bound up with its own unique circumstances. *GraceLand*, in repeating the logic of capital time and again in both its form and its narrative, suggests that a particular instance of capital is not univocal even

unto itself. Instead, the unique instance of capital must constantly repeat its logic as the circumstances internal to it continue to drift and change. Capital must repeat its logic because nothing stays the same, and it, in turn, must be altered by the difference driving its repetition. Indeed, this is particularly apparent with Elvis's journey from labor to labor, every time Elvis finds a way to manifest his particularity capital must respond, and be altered, by reapplying its logic. Could, then, capital ever be significantly displaced by "capital," a meaningfully different repetition that actually, somehow, breaks from the structure which spawns it? Could the difference, repetition, and drift inherent to capital ever actually amount to something we would recognize as resistance to capital? Could America be, for Elvis, in undepicted (perhaps undepictable?) circumstances, "America"? If it is possible, it is so because the kola, Elvis, and the novel survive.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chakrabarty suggests three standard ways of thinking about capital's differences: "these differences among histories [are] invariably overcome by capital in the long run," "these differences [are] negotiated and contained – though not always overcome – *within* the structure of capital," and "capital itself [produces] and [proliferates] differences" (47). These options are ultimately dismissed because Chakrabarty sees them as being too intimately bound up with historicism, with the idea of the "progression" of history (47-8).

<sup>2</sup> I have tried, here, to make evident that establishing the category of abstract labor is not, primarily if at all, a conscious activity. Rather, riffing on Chakrabarty's deployment of the word "performative," the category of abstract labor must be said to accomplish its ends in a pre- or non-conscious way, a playing out of the logic of the system rather than a conscious imposition.

<sup>3</sup> In "Two Histories of Capital," Chakrabarty usually refers to "History 2" in the singular (65). I choose here to say "History 2s" because it seems to better capture that the "category" is made up of irreducible, unassimilable particularities.

<sup>4</sup> Hodapp draws a more complete picture of how the forces of colonial capitalism took root in post-independence Nigeria. He suggests that the novel must be understood of the Nigerian oil boom of the 1970s and economic collapse of the 1980s: "During the boom, Nigeria moved away from an agriculturally based economy. Exports in particular, became dominated by oil sales as nearly 90 percent of all export earnings

came from them. Previously a net food exporter, Nigeria became dependent on imported food as many people migrated from rural areas to urban centres to capitalise on oil revenue. Capital became centralised in the government and the acquisition of government job and contracts via bribes became an open secret . . . In the post-boom period, generally understood to be the 1980s oil prices stabilised creating a drastic decrease in public expenditure only made worse by growing food import costs. This period . . . saw bouts of hyperinflation and general economic downturn that disproportionately affected the poor who largely did not directly benefit from the preceding boom” (4). The oil industry drove the entrenchment of capital in a “freed” Nigeria, creating massive wealth disparity when the oil industry failed to continue to grow. This sequence economically repeats the violence done by colonial forces.

<sup>5</sup> I am here re-framing the first-register kola descriptions that translate the historical and material particularities of traditional Igbo culture into a “universal,” Western perspective that must always do violence to the particular to fit it into the “general”.

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking primarily of Derrida and Deleuze. Specifically, I am thinking of Derrida’s idea of iterability in “Signature Event Context” and, of course, of *différance*.

<sup>7</sup> While I only explicitly reference Hodapp and Phillips, this is largely due to constraints of space. Ashley Dawson’s “Surplus City” also presents a compelling and condemning account of the Lagos and Nigeria in *GraceLand*’s narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Though I do not discuss it here, the subject of Elvis’s impersonation, Elvis Presley, is also significant because Elvis Presley repeated (i.e. appropriated) the musical tradition of African Americans. Elvis Oke, similarly, repeats the traditions of the Igbo.

Thus, Elvis Presley's appropriation of African American musical tradition, a tradition that he had no obvious claim to, speaks to Elvis's disconnection from the precolonial Igbo traditions.