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CORPOREAL VESSELS: GODS AS PERSONIFICATIONS OF AMERICAN ANXIETIES IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*

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Introduction

Among Neil Gaiman's multitude of works, which cover a number of literary genres and media, *American Gods* (2001) is by far his least critically analyzed work. The novel has been nominated for numerous awards for best fantasy, horror, and science-fiction novel, but, characteristically for Gaiman, it eludes definite classifications. The novel follows the story of Shadow Moon, an ex-convict, who after losing his wife and best friend in a car accident, faces a new, solitary life. It is at this point that he meets Mr. Wednesday, a mysterious man who hires Shadow as a bodyguard and errand boy. Later in the novel, Mr. Wednesday and his associates emerge as American gods, i.e., Americanized versions of deities and mythical creatures that the immigrants brought to America together with their original beliefs and cultures. Mr. Wednesday's—Norse god Odin's—objective is to gather and unite 'old' American gods (such as himself) in order to fight the 'new gods' of technological advancement and globalization, who are on the rise in modern-day America, posing a serious threat to the old gods' existence. Throughout the novel, Shadow helps his employer convince different gods to join his side of the conflict, urging them to face the new gods in a battle that will determine America's spiritual future. In the end, however, Mr. Wednesday's plan turns out to be a hoax, set up in

collaboration with another god, Loki, in order to gain power from the strife. Even though the scheme is exposed, the conflict between the old and new gods remains unresolved—while both sides give up the fight, their mutual anxieties of surviving in modern America linger.

Despite the fact that Gaiman is a British writer, his depiction of America has been widely considered precise. According to Sara Kosiba, it is the author's status of an expat in North America, that allowed him to "view the region with fresh eyes and without the cultural associations and baggage that so many Americans would bring with them in perceiving a place" (108). Therefore, when analyzing existing scholarship on *American Gods*, one notices that the focus is most frequently placed on Gaiman's portrayal of American identity. It is considered by many critics to be a complex, diverse, and, most importantly, accurate representation (Kosiba 2010; Rata 2016). For example, in "Flyover Country," Kosiba provides a thorough description of Midwestern geography and culture present in *American Gods* and reads these tropes as exemplifying the construction of American identity through an emphasis on regionalism. Irina Rata's articles, on the other hand, address the problem of American identity in the context of the novel's intertextuality (2015) and its reliance on multicultural folklore (2016). Victoria Yee Wei Wen, in turn, argues that American identity presented in Gaiman's novel is also hybrid and diverse. She mentions its multicultural and heterogeneous character, as well as the fact that Gaiman's portrayal of American identity celebrates, at least to some extent, the country's cultural diversity resulting from its immigrant past (537-538). Although scholars focus in their analyses on the leading aspect of the novel, i.e., the representation of contemporary America, they simultaneously overlook the other, equally important element, namely, the gods. Even though the existing research acknowledges the gods' presence and reads them as symbols of America's conflict between its past and its present, few provide an in-depth analysis of the gods as personifications of the country's anxieties (Wheeler 2017; Yee Wei Wen 2019).

Because the gods' significance tends to be overlooked, the aim of this paper is to fill this particular gap in the critical reading of Gaiman's novel. It is my objective to examine these characters as fundamental for the analysis of the American identity in the novel, especially in their representation of historical traumas. Below, I argue that both old and new gods in Gaiman's novel are personifications of America's unvoiced anxieties, originating in the country's problematic relationship with its past and present. The following analysis will be based on the literary device of prosopopoeia as defined by Eric Savoy. I will use this literary device to interpret the gods as corporeal vessels manifesting America's hidden fears, namely the lack of a coherent national identity and the nation's settler colonial history.

Prosopopoeia

Savoy defines prosopopoeia (i.e., personification) as a "verbal device [...] by which abstract ideas (such as the burden of historical causes) are given a 'body' in the spectral figure of the ghost" (168). Characteristic of its Gothic tradition, Savoy argues, is a way of expressing America's true self through a corporeal manifestation of its repressed anxieties: "[t]hrough prosopopoeia – the figure of haunting through personification – the shadow begins to speak. And this shadow knows the underbelly of American history, the Real that has yet to be completely represented" (Savoy 175).

In American literature, fantastical figures that convey a hidden meaning are a part of the literary tradition dating back to the country's Puritan past. Allegory is an example of this technique, which was ubiquitously employed in the colonial period. It was later transfigured towards symbolization and ambiguity during the American Renaissance, most prominently in Nathaniel Hawthorne's works. According to Savoy, Hawthorne's technique can be called "a symbolism of *implication*," where "Puritan-based allegory" is reconfigured so that it "implies indirectly rather than gesturing explicitly" (176-177). Therefore, through implied supernatural images (seemingly real but never confirmed as

true), Hawthorne's works allow the reader to uncover a *predetermined* meaning of the symbol, legible according to their own knowledge and experience.

Unlike Hawthorne's ambiguous texts that allude to supernatural presence, Gaiman's *American Gods* is rather specific. The presence of gods and other mythical creatures is never uncertain. Although their presence may be sometimes questioned by the main character, the gods in the novel are unmistakably real and alive. They are corporeal entities of spiritual and historical origins that haunt American landscape with their presence, having witnessed first-hand America's horrific past. This is why in the case of Gaiman's novel allegorical analysis seems futile: in a symbolic or allegorical reading of *American Gods*, the eponymous deities would function as ambiguous supernatural figures to deliver a symbolic message of the country's complicated past. In a prosopopoeic approach, however, the characters are treated as gateways to an explicit, culturally specific meaning, bringing the repressed national fears to light. In Gaiman's novel, therefore, the gods become personifications of America's dreadful past, allowing the atrocities of colonialism to resurface.

The New Gods and Critique of Consumerism

In Gaiman's novel, the new deities embody progress. They represent the cultural shift into the modern, turn-of-the-millennium America, marked by rapid technological advancement and globalization. As indicated by their names (Media, Technical Boy, Mr. World), they are "birthed from the ideas or consequences of a modernising society" and emerge as "wealthy, attractive [...] and more tangible [than the old gods]" (Wheeler 124). The new gods are initially presented as an evil force that threatens the existence of the old ones, since they play into the stereotype of the new being intrinsically worse than the old. There are numerous occurrences in the novel where this conflict is visible and takes shape of a stereotypical generational gap. The new gods are described by the old gods as "foolish creatures" (Gaiman 151), whereas, in

return, the old gods are considered to be obsolete and unsuited for modern times by the new gods (Gaiman 476).

Since the new gods embody progress and modernization, they can be directly linked to the social reality of modern-day America. Their gradual rise to power, visible in the creation of globalized cities, fast food restaurants or roadside attractions, centers on providing cheap entertainment for the masses. The new gods, therefore, symbolize consumerism that threatens to eradicate the “traditional” ways of life represented by the old gods. The American lifestyle governed by consumerism is constantly referred to in Gaiman’s novel, often with an emphasis on its senselessness and absurdity. Participating in consumerist routines also carries a specific spiritual meaning to American people:

Roadside attractions: people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that. (Gaiman 130)

Because roadside attractions are commercial endeavours that obscure the potency of an actual sacred place, the visitors are often stuck between the superficial pleasure of consumerist behaviors and their wish for actual spiritual fulfillment. When describing one of the tourist attractions in the novel, the dialogue clearly indicates such a connection:

And then there was a carousel. [...]
‘What’s it for?’ asked Shadow. ‘I mean, okay, world’s biggest, hundreds of animals, thousands of lightbulbs, and it goes around all the time, and no one ever rides it.’
‘It’s not there to be ridden, not by people,’ said Wednesday. ‘It’s there to be admired. It’s there to be.’
‘Like a prayer wheel goin’ around and round,’ said Mr. Nancy. ‘Accumulating power.’ (Gaiman 139)

In *American Gods*, the overall commentary on consumerism points to the fact that it is a structure which provides people with a false experience of spiritual fulfillment. Not only are such behaviors senseless but they are also excessive, often overstimulating people’s minds. This is why the consumerist routines

exemplified in the novel are considered by some critics to be detrimental to American society. According to Irina Rata, changes resulting from globalization and consumerism nowadays pose a serious threat to what she sees (perhaps mistakenly) as the previous coherency of American identity; such phenomena dissolve it into “hundreds of disparate pieces connected together by the same territory and politics” (2015: 104). Yee Wei Wen argues similarly that the new gods are “representative of the desacralised and impersonal modern society, characterized by advances in technology, commercialisation and consumerism” (530).

Following Botting’s argument (295) that overstimulation masks emptiness, I argue that consumerism represented in Gaiman’s novel by the new gods actually conceals America’s lack of identity. It is imperative to treat the excessive materialism described in the novel not as mere commentary on the problem America is currently facing, but as a façade behind which another, more profound issue is hidden. Therefore, in order to uncover the true nature of such problem one must access it by means of prosopopoeia.

Absent Identity

Since the new gods in Gaiman’s novel are embodiments of the rapid progress of America at the turn of the century, one can claim that this is all that they represent. Nevertheless, as it was argued in the introduction, such conclusions would only be accurate in a symbolic reading. Through prosopopoeia, however, the new gods acquire a different meaning; rather than a mere commentary on America’s current problems, they voice a deeper unspoken anxiety of a more universal nature. As I argue, the new gods in Gaiman’s novel articulate America’s fear of its actual lack of national identity.

As it was famously described by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1991), national identity is a fictional concept, initially created by means of cultural texts (such as books or newspapers). In Gaiman’s novel, American identity follows a similar logic. It is depicted as fictional; however,

some elements create a sense of coherence, such as the country's regionalism (Kosiba) and its lack of universally shared cultural or national values (Hume 300). Yet despite various explorations of the novel's representation of the American identity, few scholars have paid attention to the novel's commentary on its actual absence.

Carroll argues that "national identity [in *American Gods*] is a fictive construction" (307). She describes the extent to which American identity has been fabricated:

The more Shadow sees of the United States, the less he feels that there is such a thing as a 'real America,' and the more he appreciates the national fiction that holds it together. (...) The problem may not be so much that America has no distinct identity, the novel suggests, as that coherent national and personal identity itself is an illusion. (320-321)

As Carroll notices, it is the national fiction that masks the lack of identity. As argued above, modern America's image is constructed by excessive consumerism and material wealth, and yet what created the country's current (placeholder for) national identity was a constant retelling of its history and lore.

Indeed, historically speaking, American identity has always been rooted in a fictive representation. Imagining itself as the New Jerusalem, founded on "the Anglo-Saxon values [considered to be] obviously superior to any of the traditions brought over, or maintained by, other immigrants" (Orosco 13), America gave birth to an entirely fictive identity. In *American Gods*, this construct is recognized and acknowledged as something entirely fictional and ultimately non-existent. As one of the gods describes it:

The important thing to understand about American history, (...) is that it is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself. (Gaiman 103)

It is important to notice that Gaiman does not attempt to re-imagine American identity, nor does he try to characterize its genuine self, as opposed to the current fiction. Following Savoy's Lacanian argument of the literature's impossibility of expressing the Real America (169), *American Gods* offers a

vision where behind the fictive image of American identity lies a void, giving rise to American anxiety of absent identity.

Since the artificial image of America created by consumerism is represented in the novel through the new gods, these characters become personifications of the American anxiety discussed above. As animated ideas of consumerism, globalization and progress, the gods become not only their symbolic representation, but also a mask behind which the underlying problem is hidden. Representing an illusion of identity, the new gods finally voice this usually repressed anxiety through their embodied existence in the story.

From the Old Gods to Progressing Secularization

In Gaiman's novel, the old gods play a pivotal role to the plot—they accompany Shadow from the very first pages of the novel (Low Key Lyesmith, i.e., Norse trickster god Loki) to the very last (the 'original' Odin in Iceland). As the novel describes them, in Mr. Wednesday's words: "[w]hen people came to America they brought us [the old gods] with them. (...) We rode here in their minds, and we took root. (...) Soon enough our people abandoned us, (...) and we were left, lost and scared (...). Old gods, here in this new land without gods" (Gaiman 150). As the passage suggests, the old gods started out as transplants to the American land, brought there by immigrants to the New World. When the people stopped believing in their original gods, the latter gradually lost their power. As Wheeler summarizes, the old gods were "transformed as a result of having been removed from their source culture and setting and [had to negotiate] between new terms of existence and relevance" (123). Thus, in Gaiman's novel the old gods represent beliefs, cultures and traditions imported by early American settlers and immigrants. As Rata states, "the old gods pertaining to different pantheons, with their idiosyncrasies, represent different ethnicities and cultures, as well as the Old World they come from" (2016: 37). Despite the fact that each god comes from a different cultural and historical

background, all of them face the same ordeal—that of struggling to survive in a rapidly secularizing American society.

According to Yee Wei Wen, American culture presented in Gaiman's novel is "a continuous process of struggling to find or create meaning in an increasingly desacralized world" (529), and since the old gods symbolize the country's traditional (spiritual) values, their existence seems to be threatened by the progressive secularization of American society. According to Baker, "[i]n recent years, (...) secularism in the U.S. has been making headlines and receiving more attention due to the rapid increase in the number *and* proportion of Americans who are secular" (1). Because of that it is frequently argued that *American Gods* shows how "modernisation has led to the diminishing belief in traditional mythic and religious narratives" (Yee Wei Wen 530).

Even though secularization is a result of global technological progress, what seems surprising is that many critics of the novel regard this shift away from traditional values as a fundamentally negative phenomenon. According to Wheeler, for instance, the gods in Gaiman's novel "uncover how the loss of tradition has a detrimental effect on concepts of personhood, native ecological perceptions and aspects of an individual's personal connection to the collective history of a cultural group" (125). Claiming that the values represented by the old gods (i.e., traditions and beliefs) are inherently better than those of the new gods (i.e., progress and globalization) is a common theme in the existing research on *American Gods*. Hume even goes so far as to claim that "[t]he old gods (...) embody emotions that are strong and human. The new gods are too shallow to exhibit any humanity" (299). These, I believe, are analytical inaccuracies resulting from the stereotypical conviction that the old values, whatever they may be, are superior to new ones, indicative of cultural change. It is important then, to recognize that the values represented by the old gods in Gaiman's novel are not only far from superior but also rooted in a colonial context. It has been repeatedly stated that the old gods symbolize America's historical and cultural traditions; it is, therefore, safe to assume that they are

also representative of the country's past. However, the past that the old gods embody is not only that of the fading cultural traditions, but one that has been successfully deformed in and repressed from American collective consciousness, i.e., colonialism.

Colonial Residue

Although the subject of colonialism appears in critical readings of *American Gods* (Wheeler 2017; Yee Wei Wen 2019), it is never addressed as the juxtaposition of the colonial and the Native perspective, which is actually at the core of Gaiman's novel. What the researchers often choose to overlook is that the old gods are not *really* America's old gods—they are immigrants on a foreign land, just like the people who brought them there.

Nevertheless, the old gods unapologetically claim to be superior beings in America. They believe that it is primarily them (and not Native American deities) that need protection from the changing times, despite their awareness of the country's actual history and colonial oppression. They consider themselves to be embodiments of America's true self, failing to notice their own immigrant status in America. It is especially visible in the way in which Mr. Wednesday describes the origins of the old gods in America:

When people came to America they brought us [the old gods] with them. (...) We rode here in their minds, and we took root. (...) Soon enough our people abandoned us, (...) and we were left, lost and scared (...). Old gods, here in this new land without gods. (Gaiman 150)

Mr. Wednesday's speech seems to overlook the fact that in broader historical context the old gods were not the "original" deities in America. Following the colonial perspective, the old gods consider their arrival to be the starting point of not only of their lives but also of the country itself (described by them as a "new land"). Thus, they engage in mimicking a Eurocentric vision of America, where it is the colonizers' values and beliefs that are treated as representatives of America's real self.

The colonial past is a complicated and horrific aspect of American history, which has been continuously repressed and dismissed. However, as Savoy observes (following Freud's argument), the repressed always eventually returns: "[American] Gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national pasts to complicate rather than to clarify them (...) Gothic literature is committed to representing that fearful 'uncanny' as it reappears in arresting figures (...)" (171). Thus, in Savoy's definition (175), the main function of prosopopoeia is to voice the ineffable nature of America's true self, namely, its dreadful past. In the case of *American Gods*, this resurfacing of anxiety over past atrocities is personified by the old gods. Indeed, the old gods' presence in the novel points to the problem of colonialism. They are the corporeal colonial residue that goes unnoticed and unrecognized because of America's long tradition of deforming and embellishing its past. Rather than defenders of long-lost values, the old gods stand as reanimators of the American anxiety of its own horrific past, reminiscent of specters that haunt the land.

Conclusion

Although often disregarded by the existing research on *American Gods*, the gods themselves can be read as a serious and accurate commentary on the American experience. As I have argued in this article, they are in fact personifications of repressed cultural anxieties of America's colonial past, resurfacing through the device of prosopopoeia.

The new gods, born from America's rapid modernization, symbolize the country's problem of globalization, technical progress and, consequently, increasing consumerism. However, just like the new gods' superficial characteristics, a façade of material wealth masks America's anxiety over the lack of coherent identity since that is shown to be non-existent. As animated ideas of consumerism, globalization and progress, the new gods become

personifications of America's unvoiced fear of the lack of coherent (and real) cultural identity.

The old gods, on the other hand, apart from signaling America's secularization, personify the country's horrific colonial past. The traditions that they represent are those of early settlers and colonizers, which, due to the United States' deformed history, have come to be considered traditionally American. However, through the figures of the old gods, the real, horrifying history comes into view, and the American anxiety over the colonial past resurfaces.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the variety of anxieties represented by the eponymous characters in Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel *American Gods*. Through prosopopoeia, a device typical for American Gothic, corporeal gods become metaphors for American traumas and concerns, both hidden and silenced, such as the nation's colonial past as well as external ones, like globalization, consumerism and technical progress. Likewise, the characters constitute a basis for numerous questions about the true nature of the American experience, originating from the country's continual search for universal identity. Although the problems addressed in *American Gods* are rooted in the country's traumatic colonial past, Gaiman's personification of the foreign divine figures is also a way of offering a European perspective on America's current condition. In Gaiman's novel, personified gods—corporeal vessels for American anxieties—haunt the imaginary land, hinting at the complex terrors of America's past and present.