

**Mythological Melting Pot: A Study of the Use of Simulacra and Myth in Neil Gaiman's  
*American Gods.***

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## I. Introduction

*“People believe, thought Shadow. It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen.”*

- Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*.

The use and appropriation of mythology is something that is often found in both classical and modern literature. The images and symbols most commonly associated with mythologies and beliefs are powerful: they can be used to convey ideas and unite groups of people but they can also be twisted and corrupted. Ovid used Greek myths as a framework for his poetic *Metamorphoses*, James Joyce based *Ulysses* on Homer's *Odyssey* and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series appropriated just about every classical myth it could find and moulded it to fit the story. This extremely unlike selection of books, with their target audiences ranging from intellectuals to children, share the common thought that their author uses these well-known images and stories to built upon. The myths are skeletons, covered with the stories, surroundings and opinions of the author. The common practice of appropriating myths is too broad a subject to discuss in its entirety, so this paper will focus on a specific approach and a specific novel only. In *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman has turned the images of the gods and creatures from classical mythologies from all over the world into characters, all thrown together in the jumble of cultures that is America. The come-to-life images of both mythologies and concepts from modern day society underline the conflict currently present in America, making the struggle between the real and the so-called hyperreal, a replication of the world as discussed by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, visible to all to see.

In this paper, I will look at *American Gods* from a postcolonial perspective and explore how Gaiman uses the mythologies belonging to both the ethnic minorities and the ruling class of America to create and destroy the identities of its characters, immigrants and even the country itself. The book relies heavily on the melting-pot nature of America, as it utilises characters from a plethora of different cultures. The characters themselves can be described as simulacra: images that have come to represent something different from their original meaning, living in a hyperreality created by media culture. Making use of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, the paper shows how the old and the new gods are a simulation of American society. Three groups are discussed extensively: the old gods, the new gods and the humans caught in the crossfire. The close reading of this paper will be split in three parts, each discussing a different group and the way the images from mythology has been used in their respective stories. All the different groups are in their own way linked up to Baudrillard's theory, which is used to explain and illustrate how Gaiman actually went about representing the minorities present in the book. The final chapter of this dissertation consists of an extensively annotated piece of original fiction that fills one of the gaps of the original story, namely that of Muslims in a post 9/11 society. Focussing on the favourite wife of the Prophet, the story demonstrates the way the media (the new gods) change the perception of different images, and how this change of perception affects the actual images (the old gods) that are turned into simulacra.

## II. Theoretical Framework

*“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.”*

- Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*.

### Postcolonialism and National Identity

In the field of postcolonial debate, America is generally left out of the literary and cultural analysis. Seemingly lacking a certain imperialism, it is the odd one out in “a field that mainly incorporates the former British colonies in India, Africa, and Australia and, to a lesser degree, New Zealand and Canada” (Mackenthun 263) as well as the great colonializing empires as Britain and France. The term “postcolonialism”, as opposed to its hyphenated brother “post-colonialism”, is something that requires defining before it is possible to apply it to America within this debate. As specified by John McCloud, “the hyphenated term ‘post-colonial’ seems better suited to denote a particular *historical period or epoch*, like those suggested by phrases such as ‘after colonialism’” (McCloud 5). Postcolonialism does not necessarily consist of “strict historical or empirical periodization” (McCloud 5), but refers to “disparate forms of *representations, reading practices, attitudes and values*” (McCloud 5). These less tangible phenomena can bridge the gap between colonial rule and national independence. It is much more a way of perceiving, analyzing or investigating “which range across past *and* present” (McCloud 6). This definition is relevant to America in the sense that it can be linked to both the colonial past and the post-colonial present, which are both very important parts of

the American national identity. The contrasts between personal and collective identity, both historically and in the present, are stark and ever present and it is these contrasts that “are fundamental in any attempt to grasp the dynamics of nationalism. To recognize oneself as a member of a particular nation – indeed to feel a powerful sense of belonging – and to be recognized by others as such, is a perquisite (sic) for the formation of the inside/outside, self/other, us/them boundaries that define the topography of nationalist sentiment and rhetoric” (Bell 64). In a country where the existence of a great number of personal identities is a crucial part of the national identity, it is interesting to note how these identities are only a minor contribution to the postcolonial debate.

According to David Bell, “when ‘national identity’ is employed as an analytic category by theorists of nationalism there is often little discussion of the manner in which identities are forged and reproduced across time and space” (Bell 64). As opposed to looking at what ‘national identity’ is, his approach relies on a certain ‘mythscape’: “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly” (Bell 64). These myths are a sign of common stories, of common memories and of common ground to stand on, no matter where these people are. Working both at a personal and a national level, “this approach understands memory to be a socially-framed property of individual minds, and (following from this) collective memory – or what is more accurately referred to as collective remembrance – to be the product of individuals (or groups of individuals) coming together to share memories of particular events, of time past. As such, memory can be externalized only through multiple acts of remembrance, through social interaction” (Bell 65). The phenomenon of creolization is not only relevant to the colonized in times during colonization and oppression, but also remains visible in the time period after colonization. Post-colonial America is a classic example of creolization: the motto of the entire country is *out of many, one*. It is interesting to

investigate how the national identity of the United States was created and “in what way ... a national identity maintain[s] temporal continuity, exerting its fierce gravitational pull from generation to generation?” (Bell 67). There is both a lack and an abundance of so-called ‘frontiers’, described as ““the meeting point between savagery and civilization” where European immigrants became “Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race.”” (Janiewski 82). This clash of cultures, in America’s case not just between savagery and civilization, but also between two different groups of savages or civilizations, “helped to construct the American identity as the “imperial self” with its implicitly patriarchal, Eurocentric, and colonial assumptions”” (Janiewski 82). Both the oppressor and the oppressed’s narrative are present in American culture and both are an important part of the national identity. The existence of common histories and myths underlines the difference between Us and Them, especially in America, which prides itself on being a country where individualism is valued above all else.

### **Simulacra Theory**

In his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation*, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard expands greatly on the idea of simulacra, proposing that humanity has formed some sort of hyperreality that is perpendicular to the world we truly live in. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two definitions for the term “simulacra”, with it being either “[a] material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing” or “[s]omething having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities, [a] mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something” (OED Online). Originally a material representation of concepts, groups of people and, more commonly, gods, the meaning of the word has slowly shifted to something less literal. Over time, the relationship between simulacra and what they imitate has changed into something less tangible: the second

definition given by the OED suggests a false representation and it is this definition that corresponds to Baudrillard's preferred meaning of the word. He argues that through the use of simulacra, there is a second reality that simulates the real world on either a smaller scale or in a different way. He uses Jorge Luis Borges's short story "On Exactitude in Science" "in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly" (Baudrillard 1) as his main example of simulation, where "the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts" (Baudrillard 1). In this example, he points out "the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction testifying to a pride equal to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, a bit as the double ends by being confused with the real through aging" (Baudrillard 1). In Baudrillard's contemporary society, *Simulacra and Simulation* argues, simulations have transcended from being territories or substances: "[i]t is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1). This hyperreality is a world parallel to reality, constructed from the reality of images we think we know. In a society where the media are everywhere, the world is shaped by images brought forward by text. A frozen Indian in a museum comes to represent an entire people with a complex culture and a complex life, and thus shapes the idea the public has of these people. This hyperreality goes beyond the representation of history: it can also be found in contemporary life. The image of an airplane hijacking is ingrained in most people's minds, but most of them will never have actually seen a hijacking. A simulation is created: their knowledge comes from the media, "inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences. In short, where they function as a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their "real" end" (Baudrillard 22). It is easy to lose contact with the real world when our world is shaped through images humanity has created itself, as it is now creating a world



parallel to our own. In a society where the media are only gaining in importance, it can be assumed that this contact with reality will only decline even further. As stated by Baudrillard, the true enemy of the real world “is the murderous power of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model”(Baudrillard 5). What happens then, and what has already come to pass in modern society, is that “the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard 5).

According to Baudrillard’s theory, every image goes through a number of phases until it finally turns into its own simulacrum; completely separate from the original meaning it once held. It slowly becomes an empty imitation, its succession being that “it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). These phases are classified as different orders: “[i]n the first case, the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance - it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance - it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation” (Baudrillard 6). Both the third and the fourth phase are simulacra: they have been changed into a reality that is manmade and that no longer exists on its own. The distinction between reality and representation disappears, leaving a state where originality is no longer needed or present. This lack of distinction is caused by a number of modern concepts, with the main five Baudrillard describes being media culture, exchange value, multinational capitalism, urbanization and language and ideology (Felluga). Out of these concepts, especially media culture and capitalism are featured heavily in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*, as it is these concepts the new gods embody to show how they are becoming more and

more fundamental to American society. According to Baudrillard, this is causing the growth of the so-called “hyperreality”. It is as he puts it: “[b]ecause heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, it is the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death” (Baudrillard 30). In a society where the media are everywhere and where money is everything, our every want and need is dictated by the media we consume. Through images seen on television, in films and in magazines, the world is no longer just relayed but also interpreted for the viewer, allowing the media to fill our heads with simulacra. Reality is pushed away and a new, parallel reality is born, man-made and now only resembling what it originally represented.

Just like he acknowledges four phases of simulacra, Baudrillard also uses the distinction of time in his theory. In the first order, that of the premodern society, “the sign becomes freer, and competition stimulates the counterfeit, the possibility of pretence through imitation (the first order of simulacra). This still imputes a realness to the sign, in that the counterfeit can be a realistic copy” (Hegarty 49). They are still unique, which only adds to their significance. When this uniqueness is lost, the images progress into the second order, which corresponds with the Industrial era and modernity. During this stage, meaning is lost due to mass-reproduction, diminishing the difference between real and copy (Hegarty 50). The third and final stage is that of postmodernism and Capitalism (Hegarty 50), where “there is no real to imitate [...] as the simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement” (Hegarty 50). The real is gone, replaced by a simulation, a hyperreality. These three orders or stages link up with Gaiman’s *American Gods*, as time plays an important role in the novel. Just like Baudrillard’s theory is built on distinctions of stages and orders, the book features examples of simulacra going through said stages and belonging to the orders. The old gods all have their origin in the first order, associated with premodernity, where they were still unique and realistic portrayals of the real. They originated in (and even before) times of colonization,

while the new gods belong in the second order, as they are products of the postcolonial, Industrial world. They are copies of copies in “the era of the 'political economy of the sign” (Hegarty 50) and they are less distinct than their predecessors as uniqueness is valued less. Together, both groups make way for the third order, that of Capitalism and media culture in a postmodern society, where the real has been lost completely and where the world is merely a simulation, as demonstrated in *American Gods*.

### III. *American Gods*

When Neil Gaiman published his 2001 novel *American Gods*, he expected to be met by a wall of resistance in America. Gaiman, a born and bred Englishman, calls it ‘an American novel’ (Gaiman, *American Gods*), borrowing extensively from American culture to explore the soul of the country and to paint a true picture of the Land of the Free. The idea of a British immigrant making such big assumptions about what is typically American, is something for which Gaiman feared scrutiny (Gaiman, *American Gods*): not only is he stereotyping an entire society, but his overall verdict on the state of the country is not always kind either. Yet it is not just the American collection of imagery that Gaiman has appropriated to get his point across: the story mirrors America itself as a multi-cultural melting pot, with a plethora of different religions, myths and folktales that all originate from their respective ethnic minorities. The resulting hodgepodge of cultures and beliefs is just as much a cornerstone of the American identity as it makes an outsider question the existence of a joined American identity. As one of the characters from the book states, America “is the only country in the world [...] that worries about what it is” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 128). With this in mind, this paper will explore from a postcolonial point of view the use of myths to show the postcolonial struggle in America, both at a literal level and through Baudrillard’s simulacra theory. It is, after all, as Mr. World says near the end of the book: “in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 570). Instead of focussing on the different groups of immigrants themselves, the story features the deities and creatures as true simulacra: they are living, breathing characters who arrived in America when the people who created them by believing in them did, but they have changed greatly since arriving. Just like humans are creating a hyperreality through images seen in the media, the world of these gods as well as the gods themselves were created by human ideas and symbols. The power of the gods is waning as they are no longer actively worshipped or even believed in, which is not

only what sets the plot in motion but also what can be explained as the simulacra of the gods moving from the third to the final phase discussed in Baudrillard's theory.

With new gods representing modern inventions such as technology, media and the Internet, there is a war for domination about to break out between the old and the new gods—a discord immigrants have always experienced as they are forced to leave their own culture behind when coming to America. By mostly leaving out the actual minorities, it is not always clear which groups of immigrants the gods represent, but the whole book is an obvious social commentary on the way America devours the identities of its new residents. In an interview, Gaiman stated that he “was trying to describe the experience of coming to America as an immigrant, the experience of watching the way that America tends to eat other cultures” (Dornemann). Postcolonial literary theory deals with the way the culture and beliefs of a colonized or oppressed minority are distorted, both in the eyes of the oppressor and in the eyes of the oppressed. The juxtaposition between the respective pantheons and the modern gods shows the struggle that is fundamental to American society: the dominant culture of multiculturalism and the hegemony of the West suppressing the individual cultures and identities of the American minorities. *American Gods*, as a genre novel written by an outsider in American society, shows the conflict by making subtle changes to the real world, “for it is the function of imaginative literature to show us the world we know, but from a different direction” (Gaiman, “Reflections On Myth”). The book explores the relationship between reality and manmade reality by adding “an omnipresent fourth dimension, that of the simulacrum” (Baudrillard 5) where the characters are simulacra just as much as the story itself is.

### The old gods

In terms of identity, the most obvious group of characters in the story to examine would be the old gods, who came to America in the minds of the respective immigrant groups and took root there. It is Baudrillard's definition of the concept "simulacrum" that is most applicable when trying to classify or even identify this group of old gods featured so prominently in the novel. Simulacra were originally tangible reproductions of (most commonly) deities, twisted into something empty of their original meanings, merely resembling what they once truly represented. *American Gods* makes use of Baudrillard's theory about the different phases images go through, having some of its gods hover between either the third (which "masks the absence of a profound reality" (Baudrillard 6)) or the fourth phase (which "has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 6)). A flesh-and-blood symbol of their respective groups of believers, the gods were created and shaped by their images and stories, only to have had to adapt to the changing times in America. They, in their own right, have become the perfect examples of simulacra: they are images that have gone through at least the first two of Baudrillard's phases and they now exist in their own reality, alongside our own. Some gods, like Easter, do relatively well in terms of believers, but others are on the brink of being forgotten and thus disappearing. Gaiman uses deities and creatures from a wide array of mythologies, all of them being symbols representing a group of immigrants from America's history. The interposed chapters in which the gods arrive on American soil show a stark contrast between them as deities and as characters in modern day America: they have been homogenized just as much as the immigrants they represent. One of the main characters is the Norse god Odin, nicknamed Mr. Wednesday, who arrived to these shores via the minds of Viking explorers in 813 AD (Gaiman, *American Gods* 75). He has been in America too long to still have worshippers here: the Norse pantheon, brought here by the explorers of Lief Erickson, holds little to no value in modern Western society—indeed,

Western comic books have changed Thor and Loki into mere superheroes instead of gods. This decline of influence has forced Mr. Wednesday to find other ways of survival. In terms of mythology, it is clear that he is no longer the all-powerful god he used to be: he has most of the characteristics his Norse counterpart has, but his power is all but gone. A glass eye, a couple of tame ravens, and a way with women: all are true to the original myths but none are particularly useful to him. Only the chapter showing his arrival on American soil is truly telling of how powerful he once was: the exploring Vikings kill and sacrifice a Native American to honour Odin, demonstrating how he and his people were once just as powerful as the modern gods are during the story. His character is a great example of the corrupting power of American society. Forced to adapt, Mr. Wednesday has survived by turning into a conman and, as is eventually revealed, the ruthless instigator of the entire war. His character, amongst others, is a perfect example of the fourth phase in Baudrillard's theory: the image of Odin has been warped so much by society (and, in theory, by media and technology) that he is no longer a representative. He is an empty symbol of a group that has long since assimilated in American culture and in his manmade reality. He has turned into a simulacrum of the fourth order.

A more interesting case is Mad Sweeney the Leprechaun. Tall, brash and more often drunk than sober, he seems to be a walking caricature of Irish Americans—except that he dresses, sounds and acts like a typical American redneck. The fact that he identifies as a Leprechaun shows the way he has been changed: the Leprechaun is a mostly American-Irish creature (Winberry 63), while the mythological character he is based on was a human king of Dál nAraidi in Ireland (Clune 50). The story of how Mad Sweeney came to America—carried over by an Irish immigrant girl—hints at a second layer of colonization, similar to the way Sweeney has been colonized in America. Where Shuibhne originated as a human king overcome by madness, it was the colonizing Christians who created the idea of Leprechauns

as the little people. The missionary Patrick “condemned the former Celtic pantheon to the underworld, to reside forever in the fairy mounds where they are believed to remain today. [...] No longer the objects of intense belief, however, their identities and characteristics were blurred. This [...] melded the traits separately introduced, and from this amalgam was slowly and unconsciously forged the contemporary leprechaun” (Winberry 70-71). Still, regardless of his origins, the characterisation of Sweeney as a Leprechaun, complete with coins taken from the hoard, is what brands him as a troublemaker and causes his demise. Traditionally, “[t]he leprechaun is prone to mischief [...] in fact, ‘nobody takes precautions against the poor little leipreachan’” (Winberry 63). This brings extra weight to the trouble Sweeney causes by giving Shadow the wrong coin, which in its turn completely accidentally raises Laura from the dead. The image of the leprechaun is a very American thing: it was not until he came to America that Sweeney was actually turned into a leprechaun by common belief. He exists as an image for Ireland, but it was the media in America that created him, infesting the minds of the people with images of small, green men with red hair and lots of coins from the hoard at the end of the rainbow.

The use of characters such as Mr. Wednesday and Mad Sweeney, with their respective myths, underlines the oppressive nature of America as the colonizer. This loss of identity is seen in nearly every single one of the old gods. Bilquis, historically the queen of Sheba, has resorted to prostitution to stay afloat and it is this new identity as a prostitute that eventually kills her. The Egyptian deities Anubis and Thoth have become Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel and run a coloured funeral home—the ‘coloured’ being a dimension the Civil War added: “Of course, it wasn’t until after the War Between the States that we found our niche here. Before that no one thought of us as colored—foreign maybe, exotic and dark, but not colored. Once the war was done, pretty soon, no one could remember a time when we weren’t perceived as black. [...] It was an easy transition. Mostly you are what they think you are,” (Gaiman,



*American Gods* 152). The basis of their identities is still intact: Mr. Jacquel preserves the dead like Anubis did in Ancient Egypt, while Mr. Ibis continues writing his histories as the patron of the scribes. Coincidentally, these new identities seem to match up with the knowledge contemporary society has of them: the general opinion of society has changed the myths and with it, the gods and creatures in them, even if they stayed the same in essence. The old gods are portrayed as human, just as suppressed by American culture as the actual humans are. They are flesh-and-blood ideas, attacked by human concepts that are quickly taking their place in our minds and in our society. It is as Wednesday says: “We have, let us face it and admit it, little influence. We prey on them, and we take from them, and we get by; we strip and we whore and we drink too much; we pump gas and we steal and we cheat and we exist in the cracks at the edges of society. Old gods, here in this new land without gods” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 150).

### **The new gods**

The new gods in *American Gods* are personifications of the hegemony of modern day America over its minorities: their war with the old gods is a palpable mirror of how the identities of (ethnic) minorities are actively being threatened by the ruling class. The usually invisible conflict between the past and the future has become tangible. When it comes to their mythology, the new gods appear to be the polar opposites of the old gods they are fighting. Whereas the old gods have adapted to be what contemporary American society believes them to be, the new gods are imagined by the hegemony of modern day American society. In terms of Baudrillard’s theory, they belong to the second order of time and are similar to the concepts that make the differences between reality and simulacra so indiscernible. As mentioned earlier, it is mostly media culture, capitalism and urbanization that are corrupting the simulacra and turning the world into a hyperreality and it is these concepts that are the

new gods in *American Gods*. Concepts such as the stock market, television and Hollywood are the flesh-and-blood antagonists in the story, intent on destroying the old gods and thus the belief systems and minorities they represent. While the old gods are remembered but no longer worshipped, the new gods are worshipped through common use but they are not (yet) publically recognized as actual deities. Their power comes from their importance in every day life. There are no official rituals to give them power, but they get by purely on their influence on modern society. The goddess of Television feeds off the sacrifice of hours upon hours spent watching TV, while the car gods take their own offerings “with blood on their black gloves and on their chrome teeth: recipients of human sacrifice on a scale undreamed-of since the Aztecs,” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 419). Just as the old gods are used as metaphors for the immigrant societies, the new gods are symbols of modern American culture—and Gaiman is not kind in his judgement. They are described as “proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 151). They are greedy, murderous and shallow, but arrogantly claim to be the future, which is definitely a statement about American society when keeping in mind that the new gods are its offspring.

America has always had a culture of the masses, a homogenising meeting point of all the historical colonizers. Not a single one of the new gods is described as a person of colour: they are the white people trying to assert their dominance over the oppressed minorities, headed by old gods of all races and skin colours. The fat, spoiled god of technology kills Bilquis, taking her final bit of dignity after she has been forced to prostitute herself to stay afloat. Media has killed her own children. Where the old gods are representations of myths and folktales, the new gods lack any mythological background whatsoever. Even traditional American folk heroes are written off as old gods, old-fashioned and useless. The new gods are impersonations of intangible concepts and everyday objects that are all important parts of modern American society. The TV is all-powerful. The final battle sees an even bigger group

of new gods, including a personification of cancer fighting for dominance over the old gods, implying that modern American culture is literally carcinogenic. The lack of mythological background in the identity of these characters underlines the usurping nature of dominant American culture: even the traditional gods of the immigrant cultures are threatened, while they are often the only remnants of their original homes these people have. The new gods have the same anxiety about disappearing that the old gods have: the speed at which their society develops makes it very easy for the new gods to become obsolete. It happened to the gods of the railways and, had the novel been published in 2014, it would probably also have happened to the god of the beeper. This emphasizes the ruthlessness of the dominant American culture, where not even its own creations are safe from the ever-destroying white heat of progress.

### **The humans**

Caught in the crossfire are the humans, as characters in the novel hugely outnumbered by both the old and the new gods. Most important, of course, is main character Shadow Moon, who is introduced to the world of the gods by Mr. Wednesday after being released from prison. As a narrator, he is a blank slate. He is unaware of the gods, like all other human characters, but he accepts everything that happens to him without prejudice, as he is not paid to ask questions. Shadow does not seem to have a dominant culture himself: he has not fallen prey to the American culture criticised by Gaiman, but he also seems to lack a cultural identity in general. With his mother working for a diplomat, he grew up in Europe and moved around too much to ever take root anywhere as a child. All in all, it is unclear what his heritage is. For most part of the novel, he is not aware of who his father was and thus, it is unsure where his true roots lay. The prison guard asks him whether he is a “[s]pic? A gypsy?” (Gaiman, *American Gods* 12), and then suggests that he has “nigger blood” (Gaiman,

*American Gods* 12) in him. In Shadow, the lack of a cultural background means a lack of identity, especially after both his mother and his wife have died. He has no one to fall back on, which is the initial reason that he accepts Mr. Wednesday's job offer. Shadow, as someone without any mythological roots, seems the perfect observer.

The story can be classified as magical realism, which in postcolonial theory is generally explained as "a perception of "living on the margins," encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems". Through his meetings with the old gods, Shadow describes the old cultures and traditions from a Western perspective, while he can also observe the American culture of oppression for he is not part of that culture either. Through the influence of the human-made American society and the melting pot nature of the country, there is a certain creolization at play in the story. This creolization is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the assimilation of aspects of another culture or cultures; hybridization of cultures. Also: the action or process of becoming naturalized to life in a colonized country". This creolization is seen in the old gods themselves, as they become fundamentally different from their original forms, but it is also seen in the formation of the new gods and modern American society. This is especially visible in the roadside attractions, a few of which are important locations in the book. They are described as places of power: people "feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, and they respond to it by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they've never visited, or by erecting a gigantic bat house in some part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people feel themselves 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, *American Gods* 130). These places, just as seemingly simple and irrelevant as they are a part of American

culture, are the places where the old gods are most powerful. Created by oblivious Americans, there are everyday places that have mythologies attributed to them to attract the masses, while also giving power to the old gods as they are a combination of old power and modern day mass culture. They are simulacra in their own rights: they are images and symbols of America that most people know about through the media only.

The existence of the humans as a group in the novel rectifies the creation of the hyperreality of the gods. Even before media culture, the simulacra of the old gods were manmade, built on the idea and images their respective immigrant minorities brought with them when they came here. All concepts and characters present in the novel stem from the imagination of humanity: the old gods were creations shaped by stories and myths, while human inventions such as the media in their turn shape the world they live in as well as the old gods. The concepts they themselves are simulacra of, originate from the minds of the humans, but they have become so powerful that they have changed human society for good.

## V. Short Story

### SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

Her hijab marks her as a target for many a glare as Aisha enters the subway car. It is packed with the usual rush hour crowd—weary and impatient after a long working week, their minds already occupied by the upcoming weekend. It is noisy, as New York always is to her, but a loaded silence follows her as she moves to make room for the people still piling themselves into the train. Conversations halt and eyes are averted as she passes, only to start up again when she has found herself a spot in the corner of the car. Staring at the ground, Aisha uses one of the hand supports to keep herself steady as the doors close and the train leaves the station.

A big man next to her is rapidly working his way through a bucket of KFC chicken wings, licking his lips between each piece he devours. A group of teenage boys stare at her, making lewd comments in whispers that are perfectly audible to her. An old woman complains loudly about feeling unsafe around those damn terrorists, all the while feeling not even a little bit of shame. Aisha can't do anything but sadly shake her head. They don't know any better.

She takes night classes at the local community college, just because she misses learning. She yearns for the discussions she used to have with her husband, before America turned him hateful. Her current job as a speechwriter for a New York State Senator is as mind numbing as the conversations of her co-workers, who spend their every break smoking strawberry-flavoured e-cigarettes and gossiping. They ignore her completely most of the time, just like her boss does. He rarely praises her, but knowing it was her speeches that helped him get elected gives her enough satisfaction not to quit. She prefers it this way: she has seen the praise he gives some of the more attractive girls, late at night in his office, and it disgusts her.

Neither her college nor her job is very accepting, but she makes do. The feminist group at her school asked her to come to one of their meetings once, motivated by the white saviourism so prevalent in this country. Aisha finds their hatred for her veil to be just as oppressive as they think the simple piece of cloth actually is. Any attempts to change their minds were met with

pitying smiles and shakes of their makeup-less heads. When she stopped coming, they blamed it on the husband they were sure she had to have.

The subway has come to frighten her, but it is unavoidable. She doesn't like taking a cab, preferring the hostility of the many to the fear of the one. American cabbies ignore her, apprehensive of driving around what they think is either a terrorist or a pitiable victim of an oppressive religion. The Muslim drivers are just as silent, recognizing her as non-mahram<sup>1</sup> and thus off-limits for even the most trivial of conversations. They never know what to make of her when she's in her work attire. The tailored suit Aisha has to wear is decent enough, but it is still reminiscent of the young women she so often sees out on the streets—all tight clothes and unthinkably high heels, their hijabs pushed so far back that their dark hair is almost fully visible. Aisha doesn't really mind them. She, too, has felt the corrupting power of this country. Still, there is no mistaking her for one of those girls. There is too much power, too much reverence about this particular young woman. The cabbies sense this, instinctively, and it makes them uncomfortable.

It's not long until she can escape the enmity. The journey from her office to her apartment takes thirty minutes tops on a good day. Three subway stops, followed by a short walk during which she often does her grocery shopping in the small shops this part of New York is littered with. The bright colours of the vegetables and fruits in combination with the familiar tongues of the customers calm her down. They remind her of home, before she came to this land, a kinder place hidden away in the verses of the Quran most Muslims know so well. America, too, used to be a safer place when she first arrived. Not as hateful. Not as hostile. Sometimes she thanks Allah that her husband never had to see the changes of the past decade. He was a peaceful man, more interested in knowledge and respect than in blind hatred. Aisha and Muhammad did not participate in the war between old and new over a decade before, preferring their steady jobs and quiet lives over the power the winning side would bring them.

It was a good life until the plane hit the tower where Muhammad worked as a lawyer, killing him instantly.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahram means non-marriable kin. In Islamic tradition, a woman is not allowed to be around a non-mahram person without being accompanied by one of her mahram.

He has since been reborn, of course, and quite quickly, too. The terrorists dedicated the attack to Allah and the Prophet in the same way that that old Odin had planned to dedicate the battle to himself. But the man that came back is not the same one Aisha spent her life with. The terrorists were using his words to justify their actions and the energy released twisted the Prophet beyond recognition.

He left quite suddenly. She hasn't seen him since, which is something the authorities find hard to believe. Some alert CIA agent recognized Muhammad a couple of years ago while investigating a terrorist cell and came to the conclusion that he had not been killed after all. The cell fled the country soon after they were detected, but it didn't stop the government from taking her in for questioning. To this day, she has never been able to answer any of their questions, but that doesn't mean that they've given up.

Aisha is alone now, has been so for almost thirteen years. Officially, she is a widow. Practically, however, she is still the Prophet's favourite. He calls her once a year, ignoring the phone taps and the eavesdropping government officials just to hear her voice. Instead of asking questions, she describes her world to him, not mentioning his other wives or his children. He never asks. He is more interested in America, anyway, but his reasons are as tainted as he himself has become. The hatred has made him into someone she does no longer recognize.

Armed with a bag full of fresh vegetables and fruit, she reaches the old apartment building where she has been living since the sixties. The doorman rushes to let her in before she can find her keys.

"Assalamu `alayki<sup>2</sup>," he greets her, right hand raised to his chest, his expression a little too eager to be appropriate. He is a kind faced Indian<sup>3</sup> boy—too young for her even if she were as youthful as she looked—who spends his days browsing the Internet for things neither his religion nor his job quite condone. It is common knowledge amongst the residents that he

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<sup>2</sup> "Peace be upon you."



cares for his elderly parents living on the twelfth floor in his free time, which is why people always go easy on him.

“Wa alayka us salaam<sup>4</sup>,” she replies, granting him a smile. She knows better than to encourage him, but she can’t deny that she likes the attention. The last decade has been very lonely.

“Do you want some help carrying those?” He offers it often, but she rarely accepts.

“You know you can’t leave your desk unattended.”

He beams at her, ready to take the bag from her. “I’m off for the night soon, so I am going up anyway. It’s no trouble.”

They enter the small lift together, careful not to touch. Both have problems with the casualness that is prevalent in American society, even if the doorman’s issues are quite opposite of Aisha’s. He chatters away happily as they travel upwards, used to her reservedness. He knows she is married: the story she has been telling is that her husband had to go back home to take care of his dying mother. The kid is too young, too new to have met him. He had been a child when America changed.

Her apartment is small, but she doesn’t mind. Muhammad bought it for her when the building was still new, just like he did for his other wives over time. Sawda, his ex wife, still lives next door with her boys. They divorced before Aisha came here, back when she was still half a child herself. The other women are spread out over the building<sup>5</sup>, preferring their distance. Aisha can’t blame them. America has not been kind to them.

She opens her front door, the kid following her into the narrow hallway before stopping awkwardly.

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<sup>4</sup> “And Peace be upon you also.”

“Have some tea with me,” Aisha says, breaking the short silence that has fallen. “And close the door, it’s cold.”

In the kitchen, she fills her electric kettle and turns it on before moving her attention to the bag of groceries. The doorman watches her as she puts everything away, completely ignoring his presence. It has been a while since this apartment has had a man inside it, but she refuses to acknowledge the inappropriateness of the situation. It is a very Western thing to do, after all, but she doesn’t care. It’s all innocent. It’s all good.

He follows her around, not wanting to invade her privacy by going where he isn’t welcome. When the water has boiled, they settle down in the living room, where Aisha pours him a glass of tea from her golden tea set. It’s one of the only things she brought with her when she came here from the home country, its age now making it worth a small fortune. She keeps it around because it reminds her of her parents.

They sit in silence for a while, both too uncomfortable to speak. The boy has stopped watching her every move and is now examining the decorations. She has draped pieces of cloth everywhere, the colours bright and vibrant. Some are old hijabs. Others are priceless tapestries. On the wall, there is a photograph of her husband, back when he had a kind smile and bright eyes, alive with intelligence. Those eyes still haunt her every day.

Next to it is another photograph, this one depicting Aisha next to a smiling woman. Her teeth are too white, her blond hair too perfect and there’s an undeniable air of fakeness surrounding her. She is older than Aisha, but then again, it’s almost as if Aisha has been getting younger in the last decade or so. The kid seems to recognize the woman in the photograph, and Aisha sees his eyes narrow in disgust. People like him have no reason to love the media, with their vultures sweeping in to twist around every personal tragedy.

They are not so different. Aisha met the woman after 9/11 and they kept in contact, providing each other with information, keeping each other company when they are shunned by the general public. She does not hate the new gods, not like some of the others still do. They all have their own ways of surviving.

“How was work?” the kid suddenly asks, taking a break from the non-stop blowing in his tea.

Aisha smiles. “It was good, thank you.”

“You must be tired. I’ll stop bothering you.” He gets up, smiling apologetically. Aisha gets up, too, and follows him to her front door before doubling back and entering her kitchen.

The kid leaves her apartment a couple of minutes later, a bowl of strawberries in his hands as a thank-you for helping Aisha carry the groceries. The hot, spicy tea has burned his upper lip ever so slightly, causing him to lick it from time to time. He is smiling, happy to have spent some time with that nice lady on the seventh floor. He makes a mental note to bring along his boyfriend when he visits her next. He has a feeling that he would love Aisha’s hijab collection, with all the lush and luxurious fabrics.

Aisha’s neighbour from across the hall sees him leave and draws conclusions from his smile. It is an easy accusation to make, and so it is all she can talk about with her sisters, aunts and cousins.

It doesn’t bother Aisha much.

## VI. Annotation

The short story details a moment in the life of Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet in Islam. Originally known as ‘Ā’isha bt. Abī Bakr, the character of Aisha can be classified as one of the old gods—though my Anglicisation of her name suggests that she has been changed by American society just as much as the original characters in the novel are. ‘Ā’isha is one of the key female figures of the Quran, as she was both Muhammad’s only virgin wife as well as his favourite one (Afsaruddin). Marrying him “when she was around six or seven years of age” (Afsaruddin), she was “one of several wives, within the compound of the Prophet’s household” (Hammer 94).

Extending upon the analysis of the old gods being simulacra living in a hyperreality that is manmade, the character of Aisha has gone through the different phases argues by Baudrillard. She is a simulacrum, a representative of Muslim women in America, but her story has changed by images put forward by the media. Just like in the Quran, Muhammad had multiple wives, all of whom still live in the same apartment building in the story. Most of them are less well known to the general public, which I took to mean that they had at least started fading away like some of the other forgotten gods in *American Gods*. I also wanted to incorporate Aisha’s traditionally young age into the story, especially since it is one of the most controversial things about her in modern society. Regardless of the fact that the Prophet had multiple wives, it will be considered shocking by most Western people that a six-year-old girl married an old man. It should be noted “child marriage was not an uncommon practice in the Arabian peninsula (and elsewhere) at the time, often being contracted for political purposes between leading families” (Afsaruddin), but it is this image that helps perpetrate the image of the savage Muslim so often seen in post 9/11 America. In a world where the oppression of female Muslims is something even politicians have started to worry about (e.g. the banning of burqa’s in France (“Texte Adopté N° 524...”)) I wanted to show how this

changing image changes Aisha as a representative. In the story, “it’s almost as if Aisha has been getting younger in the last decade or so”, which she has. The original ‘Ā’isha was around 18 years old when Muhammad died (Afsaruddin), but was still a prominent person after that. Her “lively temperament, obvious intelligence, and keen interest in matters of the community destined her to play a leading public role in the stormy period after the Prophet’s death” (Afsaruddin), which is something she tries to continue in her current job as a speechwriter for a local politician. Originally, ‘Ā’isha and Muhammad were both intellectuals, with ‘Ā’isha helping him to write and give speeches, as well as writing prayers after his death (Afsaruddin). Her position in American society is not nearly as prominent now, which is mirrored by her relatively entry-level job. She influences a powerful man, but both the patriarchy and prejudices against Muslim women in America keep her from getting recognition. The fact that she keeps appearing younger frustrates her, as it stops her from advancing her career. In a way, she had more freedom in the ancient times, before coming to America, even if this is something the white saviour feminists at her college do not believe. They fight against the image of the oppressed female Muslim, not realizing that it is their society that is just as oppressive to Aisha.

As a Muslim woman, Aisha is caught between two sides of the story. On the one hand you have the Muslims, like the cab driver who is not allowed to talk to her, as it would not be proper. The doorman, who is also a Muslim, does not mind, as he is second generation as well as seemingly very assimilated in American culture. The choice to make the young doorman Indian is a conscious one. As of 2010, 14.6 per cent of the Indian population were Muslim (“The Future of the Global Muslim Population”), but these Muslims seem to lack the social stigma so clearly placed their Arab brothers by American society (Bilici 605). He is human, completely unaware of both the old and the new gods, and so he co-created the hyperreality found in the text. He is just as caught between two cultures as Aisha is, the difference being

that he is not a god-like creature depending on the belief of humans. On the other side are the Americans, who fear her on the train and who try to unveil her at college. Their image of Aisha is so twisted by the media that they believe her to be the victim, not realizing they themselves are oppressing her just as much. Originally, in Islam, when “contrasted with the social and legal status of women in succeeding centuries, *‘Ā’isha* stands as an idealised symbol of the religious and social empowerment that Islam initially promised women” (Afsarunnin) but in this story this empowerment is taken away from her both by her fellow Muslims and by American society as a whole.

Muhammad dies in the story, just like he does in the Quran. Both he and Aisha were hardworking Americans before 9/11 killed him and his death and rebirth are just as much an example of Baudrillard’s simulacra theory as Aisha’s story is. After 9/11, the image of Muhammad changed drastically (Bilici 605). The media portrayed him as hateful, simply because Muslims saw him as one of the most important people in their faith. Instead of intelligent and peaceful (Afsarunnin), America started to see him as a vengeful and aggressive. In the story, I have made this visible by not just changing the image of Muhammad, but also actually changing him. After being reborn, the hateful representation moves him from the third into the fourth phase: he is now his own simulacrum, bearing little to no resemblance to his original image. Instead of a peaceful scholar, Aisha’s husband is turned into a terrorist and she now knows him no better than the rest of America, as she only has the images in the media to identify him.

Another goal of this short story is to fill the gap in *American Gods*. Apart from the jinn cab driver in New York, Islam is not featured in the novel at all. In a country where 0.8% of the population is Muslim (“The Future of the Global Muslim Population.”), the book is lacking of a simulacrum to represent this minority, especially when updating it to the present time. The original novel was published before 9/11 happened, making it impossible for it to

deal with the hate and the prejudices the attacks brought with them. Caught between two cultures as well as a victim of the hateful image the American media bring about, she is the perfect example of an image being twisted by the media until she becomes a simulacrum—she is already significantly different from the original ‘Ā’isha in the Quran and now she is trying to stay afloat after the ‘death’ of her husband.

Just like the other old gods, she is a living image of Muslim women, living in a hyperreality created by humans and hurt by the media culture Baudrillard describes as being so poisonous to images and simulacra. She is moving through the phases until she loses all her original meaning, just like her husband before her.

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