American Gods and Where to Find Them: *Modern Myth and Material Experience*

Jesper Skytte Sodemann

Abstract

This paper examines the novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman as an expression of post-industrial mythopoeisis, calling its mythmaking a topological and material experience, rather than a strictly psychological and spiritual one. By using Joshua Landy and Michael Saler's idea of "antinominal enchantments", that is, simultaneous dis- and re-enchantments of things, the paper will challenge the view of myths, that their make and visage is a question of simple signifier and signified – "Old wine on new bottles". The antinominal approach will be used to analyze Gaiman's post-industrial America, both rural and urban, as a topos for simultaneous abundant build-ups of material meaning and depletions or total absences of material meaning. This attribution of "magic" or "mythic" energy to material things will be built upon Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter", as well as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's writings on the "production of presence". To aid in this conceptualization of myth as a modern material and antinominal enchantment, the paper will turn to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's use of the rhizome-form of growths of offshoots and skipping of lines. This helps explain how myths, such as those in American Gods, are not "essences" reinvented with different faces, but rather vibrant and organic offshoots and displacements of meaning and presence in material and human relationships. In this analysis, the paper will engage with several other readings of *American Gods*, who, in fact, take the opposite stance, that *American Gods* is not an expression of material mythmaking and magic, but rather a plea for a return to a more authentic past, where this magic and myth "existed". On this, the paper strongly disagrees, arguing that this is a novel about modern magic, not traditional: The modern myth is a relationship with the

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material, geographical, biological, thingly world as much as the social, existential and psychological.

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1. Introduction

In the beginning of Joseph Campbell's seminal work *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he describes the myth and its symbols as follows: "the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source." (Campbell 1948, 15) With this statement, he places the wellspring of myth firmly in the roots of the human psyche. Myths are psychological constructs, he tells us, a "secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation." (Campbell 1948, 15) And the writings and findings from the psychologists, such as Freud and Jung, he continues, have proven irrevocably that these myths have persisted into modern times. But how have they persisted, and why are modern myths simply considered to be old wine in new bottles, reiterations of deep, timeless cultural anxieties and dreams? And regarding this mythic wellspring hidden in the recesses of the psyche, the question is whether the myth of Prometheus was only a psychological and formless idea that flowed into and took form in a cultural manifestation; a question of whether Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was just a continuation of this myth with a twist of gothic horror and technology. The material dimensions of the myth are missing: the physical Promethean fire, the body parts of Frankenstein's creation. In our naturally anthropocentric approach to the world, we tend to forget that myths are not "simply" narrative negotiations of the psychological, humanly existential or epistemological – that is, absolute interiority in "abstract conversations with our selves." They are just as much material, topological, biological, technological, and ontological – an absolute *exteriority*, "abstract conversations with the world."

And if modernity, industrialism, technology, and secularization made western society and the self so fundamentally demystified, disenchanted, so modern and monomythically decoded, then why are the myths still perceived as the same tribal stories of the city and the forest, *polis* and *apolis*? If there is such a thing as a modern myth, should it not contain equally a force of disenchantment, just as much as it enchants the world? This idea I will pursue here, using Joshua Landy and Michael Saler's notion of an "antinominal enchantment" (Landy 2009, 3), that is, the simultaneous dis- and re-enchantment of things, as opposed to binary enchantments (roughly: "premodern" myths) and dialectical enchantments (early "modern" myths). This contradictory, antinominal enchantment is possible because science often re-enchants the world, just as much as it demystifies, "not just because of the technological marvels it produces, but also and especially because of the limits it ends up setting to its own powers." (Landy 2009, 8)

To investigate the material dimensions of myth and at the same time try to point out the specifically *modern* of modern myths, this paper examines the novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman as an expression of post-industrial mythopoesis, calling its mythmaking a

topological and material experience, rather than a strictly psychological and spiritual one. In doing so, the paper will engage with several other readings of *American Gods*, which take the opposite stance, by saying that *American Gods* exists as a plea for a return to a more authentic past, where magic and myth "existed" uncontaminated by the miseries of modern materialism, and that the narrative structure and its content follows Campbell's monomythic structure. On this, the paper strongly disagrees, arguing that this is a novel about *modern* magic, not traditional: the modern myth is a relationship with the material, geographical, biological, thingly world as much as the social, existential, and psychological. This we will examine in *American Gods*, where the protagonist, Shadow, a recently released convict, is tricked into the service of Wednesday, the scruffy American hustler-version of Odin, created and abandoned centuries ago by the worship and sacrifice of Viking explorers. Shadow is enlisted into Wednesday's service and travels with him across the country as they recruit other old gods into their alliance meant to wage war against the new gods, gods born by new material and spatial anxieties and needs, "gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon." (Gaiman, 151)

2. Monomythic Readings

Gaiman's novel has been widely read as a modern reiteration of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, which functions as a narrative wheel-structure of every hero's journey, ostensibly encompassing all stories. Ratá Irina approaches the novel as a reworked monomyth (Irina 2015, Irina 2016) oriented towards the intertextual or mythopoeic aspects, the timeless creation and maintaining of folklore and myth in an identity-challenged, multicultural, and modern America. Mathilda Slabbert, in a somewhat similar way, orients herself heavily towards a critique of the modern culture of materialism, reading the novel as a plea to return to a more authentic cultural past. (Slabbert 2006) Here the monomyth takes shape in Shadow's being a shaman-in-the-making, who, through his journey of monomythic transformation, will eventually heal the American tribe from its material disease. Jenn Anya Prosser, as the most direct example, reads Gaiman's novel comparatively with Homer's *The Odyssey*, utilizing Campbell's monomyth to show a similar focused narrative structure of The Hero's Journey of transformation and overcoming resistance. (Prosser 2015) Finally, Michael B. Key utilizes deconstructive methods to treat the novel as a poststructuralist struggle between ever-changing paradigms of myth and culture (i.e., different versions of the same non-existent monomyth). According to Key, "These myths were created because of a society's anxiety about disappearance." (Key 2015, 19) The old gods are struggling to maintain a center that is not possible to uphold, as "centers are illusions since a center must precede its parametrical binaries." (Key, 20)

What all these readings have in common is an almost unflinching focus on narrative drive and structuralist points of transformation in the myths of *American Gods*. The monomyth is certainly present as a figure in the novel, that much is indisputable. The main figure of a road trip in the novel would seem to suggest that a hero is indeed on a journey. But when a 600-page novel is described as a narratively tight monomyth, it seems to become a reductive instrument rather than a productive method in describing the

modern myth. To make this point, we cannot travel along the straight lines of the monomyth. Instead, we will willfully disregard them and follow Gaiman down the detours, digressions, bifurcations, and distractions that make up the bulk of his novel, in a fascination with regular "stuff," derelict and misplaced things, and odd and uncanny places like desolate diners, truck stops, and roadside attractions. As I will show, I believe the novel is occupied more by *intensity*, *restlessness*, and *distraction* than mythic narrative purpose, direction, and authenticity – that the mythic properties in the modern should, in fact, be found here. The monomythic narrative and the material and spatial digressions are, of course, connected and mutually supplemental, but if we accept the material dimension as subordinate to the "old" magic of the monomyth structure, we will not be successful in re-enchanting, as we will have ignored the disenchanting forces at play, the things of the world, which simultaneously allow their own possibilities of (secular) enchantment.

To better conceptualize the modern myth cohesively as a web of material digressions and distraction, we look to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who developed the concept of the "rhizome" in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The rhizome is a porous, many-rooted structure – the potato-root is often used as example – with "lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees." (Deleuze 2016: 9) Thinking and following the modern myth in this fashion means defining it as a *substantive multiplicity*, a single root which is many things "in-between" both psyche and matter, order and chaos. Deleuze and Guattari are interested in *intensities* (the "nomadic"' or "the War Machine" in the Deleuzian vocabulary) in-between the points of A and B of, in our case, the monomyth, whereas the monomyth itself maintains focus on the transformative endpoints of the cycle (the "State," "arborescent thinking" or the "Root of the World Tree"), which we, in opposition to the intensity of modern myth, might call the *authenticity* of the monomyth. In the following, I will begin by looking at some of the rhizomatic places and things to which Gaiman lets his characters be drawn on their road trip. Afterward, I will turn my focus to the road trip itself and finally challenge the readings of others with these findings.

3. American Rhizomes

In *American Gods*, the nomadic movement of becoming is governed by a trademark of the American journey: roadside attractions. The world's biggest pancake, the smallest cow in the state, a rock shaped like the moon, a cave full of bats "that bats have traditionally declined to visit." (Gaiman, 130) Oddities of life. These are places of power, as explained by Wednesday:

> In other countries, over the years, people recognized the places of power. Sometimes it would be a natural formation, sometimes it would just be a place that was, somehow, special. They knew that something important was happening there, that there was some focusing point, some channel, some window to the Immanent. And so they would build temples, or cathedrals, or erect stone circles. (Gaiman, 129)

Wednesday defines the attraction as circling around an inherent intuition of energy outside of the subject's consciousness: "they feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, (...) pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would

recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent." (Gaiman, 129) The roadside attraction is an *American rhizome* and a modern temple. An assemblage of places, knick-knacks, roads, off-ramps and highways, bodies coming and going, names, myths, stories, and vibrations. An important rhizomatic place in *American Gods* that attracts attention (or rather, distraction) is the House on the Rock, a strange, non-fictitious house on a mountainside in Wisconsin, built by Alex Jordan Jr., "Frank Lloyd Wright's evil twin" (Gaiman, 131) in 1959, according to Wednesday, who convenes the old gods to this place to create his alliance against the new gods.

A long room protrudes from the House, like a Bifrost bridge of glass and steel connecting two planes of being, hovering over the landscape, "needle-like, out over the leafless black-and-white countryside hundreds of feet below them." (Gaiman, 131) Borrowing from Martin Heidegger might help frame the (holy) House for us further: "The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea." (Heidegger 1975, 42) But this temple is not just a line across the sky. The rhizome-form opens it up to inside scrutiny as well, lets us see even better how "By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple." (Heidegger, 41) The House is a labyrinthine complex of rooms, alleys, and shops. The Streets of Yesterday, the Eternity Room, the Mikado Room, the Travel Hall, an unnamed hall with a stuffed whale. The rooms are filled with broken toys, slot machines, and thousands of Santa figures. They are almost not things anymore, but "stuff." The things seem alive with what Jane Bennett calls "thing-power" of the uncanny: "when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls 'a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge.'" (Bennett 2010, 2) This forms a material vitality and Deleuzian assemblic agency, she writes, "the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – [to] not only impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (Bennett, viii) It is an abundance of semiotic meaning in matter that she describes, which, I believe, is to be found in the modern myth and which exists at the hermeneutic point of implosion between semiotic abundancy and semiotic depletion or exhaustion.

Music adds to the skewered, thrown-together nature of the House, "rooms filled with empty chairs upon which rested violins and violas and cellos which played themselves, or seemed to, when fed a coin. Keys depressed, cymbals crashed, pipes blew compressed air into the clarinets and oboes." (Gaiman, 133). Everything is mechanical, artificial, and yet eerily alive and affecting, "ever-so-slightly out of tune," which adds to the "otherworldliness of the place." (Gaiman, 133) It is "Much more unsettling, thought Shadow, than clockwork has any right to be." (Gaiman, 135) The Beatles' *Octopus's Garden*, Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, a Calliope steam-organ, and Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz* are "stirring and occasionally discordant" throughout the rooms. (Gaiman, 139) They are all equally out of time, yet put strangely into place. The House seems to never stop being a place. The sheer mass of things and sounds and the endless number of rooms all point in different directions and yet are still housed under the same roof. It has no cohesion, and yet it is a place that acts

and facilitates this state of non-cohesion. Much like Antoni Gaudí's never-finished church, La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Alex Jordan Jr. "continued building, and the people kept coming." (Gaiman, 132) It is a place never finished, always expanding with new rooms and reconfigurations of the old ones, a physical place of becoming – and according to Wednesday, a place of vibrancy and power. All changing room-and-thing combinations are merely shifting striations of the smooth, vibrant space the House stands upon; Heidegger might say a temporary worldly harnessing or expression of the Earth.

Shadow and the gods' destination is a room housing the world's largest carousel, but only after a lengthy journey through the labyrinth, which follows the line of the detour: "We travel a spiral. The quickest way is sometimes the longest" (Gaiman, 135), according to another companion-god known as Mr. Nancy. In the rhizome-house, the logic of the lateral movement or the wormhole, bending space, is just as viable as the logic of the straight line. During the trip, there seems to be even a roadhouse stop, a pizzeria-cafeteria, where the travelers can regain their strength before recommencing their odyssey of the House.

Finally, they arrive at the carousel, in a room framed in a wicked holiness from above by "dozens of winged angels constructed rather obviously from female store window mannequins; some of them bared their sexless breasts; some had lost their wigs and stared baldly and blindly down from the darkness." (Gaiman, 139) Everything is in a play between the living and artificial, between the subject and object. Shadow reads a sign in front of the carousel that says "it was the largest in the world, said how much it weighed, how many thousand light bulbs were to be found in the chandeliers that hung from it in gothic profusion, and forbade anyone from climbing on it or from riding on the animals." (Gaiman, 139) But according to Wednesday, "It's not there to be ridden, not by people (…) It's there to be admired. It's there to *be*." (Gaiman, 139) And the animals on the carousel are of great variety, as Shadow remarks: "hundreds of full-sized creatures who circled on the platform of the carousel. Real creatures, imaginary creatures, and transformations of the two: each creature was different." (Gaiman, 139) This is perhaps the heart of the rhizome, if ever a rhizome could have such: a centrifuge of heterogeneity. It is "Like a prayer wheel goin' round and round, (…) [a]ccumulating power." (Gaiman, 139) They all climb aboard the whirling prayer wheel, straddling animals and beasts, anthropomorphized and metamorphosed, animals not quite done becoming, and as the chapter ends, "[Shadow] was going around and around and around again… Then the lights went out, and Shadow saw the gods." (Gaiman, 141) At this point, they seem to suddenly shift to another plane of existence. They are riding real living creatures, flying in the sky towards a hall on a hill. The carousel is an aggregate of the place-intensity, we could say. Through a semiotic abundancy, there is an implosion of meaning, which reveals and releases the vibrancy of the House and its things, enchants them in their materiality. It connects them, creating a material assemblage, and the House entire makes it possible for Shadow and his party to "skip a line," a line between places, temporarily appearing somewhere else while never leaving their physical position. Their line bifurcates, and, at the same time, it does not. The tilting nature of the entire place destabilizes the arborescent paradigm and reveals the vibrant, rhizomatic form of the gods. The House seems to expose and enchant relations

and connections to be seen and perceived simultaneously in an abundancy, as Shadow glances at his fellow riders, unsure of what he sees:

> The images that reached his mind made no sense: it was like seeing the world through the multifaceted jeweled eyes of a dragonfly, but each facet saw something completely different, and he was unable to combine the things he was seeing, or thought he was seeing, into a whole that made any sense. He was looking at Mr Nancy, an old black man with a pencil moustache, in his check sports jacket and his lemon-yellow gloves, riding a carousel lion as it rose and lowered high in the air; and, at the same time, in the same place, he saw a jeweled spider as high as a horse, its eyes an emerald nebula, strutting, staring down at him; and simultaneously he was looking at an extraordinarily tall man with teak-colored skin and three sets of arms, wearing a flowing ostrich-feather headdress, his face painted with red stripes, riding an irritated golden lion, two of his six hands holding on tightly to the beast's mane; and he was also seeing a young black boy, dressed in rags, his left foot all swollen and crawling with black flies; and last of all, and behind all these things, Shadow was looking at a tiny brown spider, hiding under a withered ochre leaf. Shadow saw all these things, and he knew they were the same thing. (Gaiman, 144)

Shadow is confronted with a semiotic abundance to such an extent that there is too much to interpret and gather into a cohesive being. He becomes hesitant to define what he is experiencing, struggles to describe what is essentially a substantive multiplicity. The figure of a multifaceted jewel as the tool of perception is interesting as it denotes a perception that is both distorted, true, cohesive, and yet dividing. Mr. Nancy is shimmering nebulas of jewels and emeralds, something rather "traditionally godlike." And he is human, yet anxiously non-human, a spider and a sick child, a human with too many arms, too many lines protruding, a humanoid aggregate of intensity with too many "lateral offshoots." He is an entity without any third order; his multiplicity of being is its own third order of many connections. Mr. Nancy refuses to decide on his own being and form, mirroring the House by actively being himself a semiotic abundancy out of place, a pure exteriority slightly "out of tune."

These conflicting, simultaneous literary representations are an aesthetic strategy to convey a fundamental restlessness that permeates the novel. As soon as one form is assumed, a room found or a destination picked, it is found wanting and abandoned, or it mutates to something new – while still retaining combinations of the former. Throughout the novel, Shadow himself seems always to be somewhere between certain and uncertain of what he is experiencing. As we shall see later, just as the House, the gods, and even the entire country are never determined – and in fact wish not to be – Shadow is also always restless to move on, a fact that seems to constitute the energy that drives the mythic incidents.

To try and put this positively self-contradicting, restless roadside attraction of rhizomes and multiplicities in a larger perspective, let us turn to another American rhizome towering in *American Gods*: the Statue of Liberty, who is, "like so many of the gods that Americans hold dear, a foreigner" (Gaiman, 116), as Wednesday remarks, referencing that the statue, however intrinsically American today, was originally a gift from France. The statue comes to Shadow in the form of a coin, a Liberty dollar, plucked from the moon by a Slavic

goddess-version of the Fates, who, herself also an immigrant, reminds Shadow of the statue. Already upon entry, Wednesday explains to Shadow, the statue itself changed to fit an American paradox of freedom and conservatism: "in deference to American sensibilities, the French covered up her magnificent bosom on that statue they presented to New York." (Gaiman, 116) Equally, the trademark freedom was won by bloodshed and death, arguably opponents of freedom. "Liberty," Wednesday proclaims, "is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses" (Gaiman, 116), quoting the French revolutionary writer Louis-Antoine St. Just.

The statue is interesting because it holds several different positions at once, both as a thing, a place, and an abstract symbol, identity or energy. First of all, the location of the statue is the place the Old World encounters first, when it heads northwest, perhaps drawn to it as a place of power, like a mythic roadside attraction of the world, a place of peculiarity or an intensity that produces itself on the journey line between points A and B, being Europe and the Indian subcontinent.[1] Secondly, since its construction, the statue was the first glimpse caught by the immigrants. It was framed by the empty blue sky, announcing firm land (and new hope) before the land itself had even manifested before the eyes of the sailing travelers, letting us once again echo Heidegger's words on the temple. It is also a sculpture of a human, but massively so, perhaps that it might symbolize or materially convey the "actual size" of the free human and the perception of the liberty created by the inhabitants of the country. It is, perhaps, almost analogous to the ancient statue of Zeus in Olympia. Liberty as a modern myth, then, would be not just an abstract idea but a (sculpted) body taking up physical space. Equally, the nomadic movement of bodies in the novel, Shadow and Wednesday traversing the States, as we will see later, means the production of the presence of liberty, the creation and exercising of freedom as a mythic substance. Shadow continuously returns to the open road and the freedom to move at will as a fixture of a sort of security. He is "comforted to know there was another world out there, one he could walk to any time he wanted." (Gaiman, 63)

The statue is both a physical place and an idea, a place of physical and mental entry. It is both a lateral offshoot of the Old World and an entry into the rhizomatics of the nomad country. It gathers and divides simultaneously. As every immigrant, divine or mortal, sets foot in its shadow on Ellis Island, the country itself, as rhizome and assemblage, begins to expand and accommodate the new combinations, always in a becoming of its multiplicity and desire for freedom of movement. The iconic statue then, in a strained and unwilling semiotic relationship, embodies a paradoxical vibrancy of the country, being both transitory immigrant and a focus point for fixed national identity. Similarly, the liberalist narrative of the open road clashes oddly and greatly with the arborescence of American patriotism. There is an abundance of identity in the latter, an absence in the former, both to the point where hermeneutical interpretation of American nationhood seems to break down at times in the novel. In a vignette chapter, through a diary entry of the American-Egyptian god of death and embalming in the form of the mortician, Mr Ibis, the history of America is presented as something unreflected: "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) The (State) narrative of American identity is a simplification and an illusion of arborescent cohesion. But though Mr. Ibis presents this as a solely negative reduction, it could be argued that this very "unthoughtness" also makes possible the "unity" of paradoxes: America is a story for "the easily bored," the restless; it is not striated by differentiated thinking. Being "uninspected" means being beyond laws and regulations; it maintains a vibrancy or potential of the indeterminate. These paradoxes Walt Whitman posed and in some fashion answered one and a half centuries earlier in *Song of Myself*, essentially accepting the contradiction but refusing the need for an answer: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I am large, I contain multitudes." (Whitman 2001, 53) How do we pinpoint a paradoxical culture and myth of unity and multiplicity defined by its restlessness? Perhaps the USA is not a nation with many cultures and identities but a substantive multiplicity, one schizoid national identity. The rhizomatic statue on Liberty Island, then, finally begs a Heideggerian question as to nation (or State) and freedom as concept and myth: How does a nation "nation?" Does the nation need a center, or fixed identity, to "nation?" And in the same vein, how do we "freedom?" Not as political action, but cultural and physical. In this sense, can we "citizen" without the President issuing the order? Can something be mythic without the order of the monomythic structure? How could we describe a restless culture, the mythic nomadology of such a nation?

4. Restless Road Trip: A Material Nomadology

To answer these questions, we turn to the road trip that Shadow undertakes throughout the novel. The trip is nomadic, where "the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival." (Deleuze, 353) It is the "war machine," sudden and in conflict with the State. Shadow never knows where the road is leading, and at every arrival, he is already leaving. Conflict and aggression are spontaneous and sudden. He encounters places of vibrancy and leaves them behind, as we saw at the House on the Rock, and likewise, he is accompanied by homeless gods who have purpose and intention and yet are seemingly aimless and wandering. If the roadside attraction is an American rhizome, then the American road trip is the nomadic movements in and between these rhizomes. After spending years in prison, the nomadic intensity is the only comfort for Shadow: "he was relishing the idea that he could simply walk and walk, forever if need be. He could keep walking north, and wind up in Alaska, or head south, to Mexico and beyond. He could walk to Patagonia, or to Tierra del Fuego." (Gaiman, 55) In fact, Shadow's entire purpose in the service of Wednesday, his job description, is to be a transporter between points on a line: "You transport from place to place." (Gaiman, 40)

There seems to be something sickening about the *polis* – the endpoints of the line or the State. The novel continually ascribes an anxiously disenchanting air to everything "modern." When they, for once, leave the smooth open space of the highway and enter the striations of city and intersection, the polis emerges like an illness: "Chicago happened slowly, like a migraine. First they were driving through countryside, then, imperceptibly,

the occasional town became a low suburban sprawl, and the sprawl became the city." (Gaiman, 82) There is nothing sudden between the two places. The city is not entered, it becomes. There is a blending, a line here, a few more houses there, and finally crowded intersections, with the semiotics of green, yellow, and red stopping free flow, regulating it; the striation of apartment blocks and sidewalks. The city "sprawls" in opposition to the open road, in an ungraceful stretching and etching of the land.

Even when visiting Eagle Point, Shadow's hometown, it is with discomfort and anxiety: "The super-8 motel had gone, torn down: in its place was a Wendy's. There were more stoplights, unfamiliar storefronts. They drove downtown (…) left on Main Street. Past a new tattoo parlor and the Armed Forces Recruitment Center, then the Burger King, and, familiar and unchanged, Olsen's Drug Store." (Gaiman, 52) The homogenization (globalization) and stratification is hinted at by the Wendy's and Burger King chains. Small-town America seems to have been disenchanted – every shop has been "revealed" to serve the same function, from the same model. Shadow and Wednesday travel through the towns of America "past red and yellow and blue lights advertising every kind of fast food a man could imagine, as long as it was a hamburger" (Gaiman, 60), parodying the famous quote of Henry Ford in his autobiography, epitomizing American industrialization: "Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black." (Ford 2002, 31) Multiplicities are reduced to "hamburger"/"black" – things of stasis and arborescence – that make places and people cool in intensity and possibility of combination as well. But then again, this is precisely also the mythic and magic of the modern USA: urban sprawls, fast food, hectic living, and constant fluorescent lights. So paradoxically restless is the culture that it even refuses to be content with restlessness. The dis- and re-enchantment happens simultaneously.

But the nomadic intensity does not suffer fixed abodes for long, instead being drawn to non-places, or in-between places: the interchangeable, faceless oasis of the airport, truck stop, motel, and diner. In Eagle Point, they do not stay at Shadow's nearby apartment but at Motel America, an equally bland and encompassing name. It could be anywhere, and, in fact, so it is, since the motel is the nomadic home as a non-place. Even when settling down for the night, it is between points – home, but not at home. Necessities are single-use, as when Shadow buys a "Clean-U-Up" kit, containing "a razor, a packet of shaving cream, a comb, and a disposable toothbrush packed with a tiny tube of toothpaste" (Gaiman, 49), which transforms the seedy restroom of a gas station into a temporary inner sanctum of bodily cleanliness. Wednesday seems almost to worship these nomadic stops in the same manner as the roadside attraction, as when he drags them to his favorite diner, which is, in truth, more a shed but also a place that achieves a special "ambience" (Gaiman, 121) because of the constant bankrupt-sale of random things going on in the back:

> Boxes of coffee 'for use in airline filters only', Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toys, and Xena: Warrior Princess harem dolls, teddy bears that played patriotic tunes on the xylophone when plugged in, and other teddy bears that played seasonal songs on the xylophone when plugged in, cans of processed meat, galoshes and sundry overshoes, marshmallows, Bill Clinton presidential wristwatches, artificial miniature Christmas

> trees, salt and pepper shakers in the shapes of animals, body parts, fruit and nuns, and Shadow's favorite, a 'just add real carrot' snowman kit, with plastic coal eyes, a corncob pipe, and a plastic hat. (Gaiman, 122)

These listings of things are numerous throughout the novel and become almost like a modern excerpt from Adam's task in *Genesis*, naming the "livestock" of the world, discovering them anew through perceiving them and experiencing them by naming them. Shadow finds delight in picking out his favorite oddity of the discards. It is an index or inventory of the 21st century. While the scenery is obviously a display of the dark side of capitalism, a disenchantment from the magic dream of industrialism acting as a dumping ground for modern consumerism, it is also a steady flow of things, always with new arrivals (businesses are always in a becoming of "going out of business"). The abundance of misplaced things and things that do not go together converge and form an assemblage of ambiance but can only do so because of their disenchanted form. The empty discard of capitalism is re-enchanted by acting as itself. By being the object of the novel's and the subject's playful distraction, it achieves thing-power. In this sense, materialism becomes re-enchanted in the novel by being transitory and nomadic in its semiotic content and physical being. But to really understand the re-enchanting nomadology of the novel, we must look at what happens when Shadow and Wednesday seem to reach the end of the trip, when confronted with the epitome of the monomythic, the World Tree.

5. The World Tree Against Itself

In this Deleuzian rhetoric of the arborescent form of the World Tree versus the rhizome, it is amusingly convenient for us that *American Gods* contains an actual World Tree as both symbol and physical form. In their first encounter on an airplane, Shadow notices the distinct tie pin worn by Wednesday, in the form of a silver ash tree. Wednesday eventually dies on their road trip, at the hands of the new gods, and Shadow, having promised to hold his vigil in the event of his death, ties himself to an ash tree somewhere in Virginia and sacrifices himself to himself, as Odin once did. Through a trip to the underworld, Shadow discovers that Wednesday is his father and that he is plotting to restore his former power by having all other gods, new and old, fight a great final battle dedicated to him.[2]

The ash tree presents itself as a perfection to Shadow, a unity of One: "It was the most beautiful tree Shadow had ever seen: spectral and yet utterly real and almost perfectly symmetrical." (Gaiman, 490) It is a one-sided physical manifestation of the binary logic of arborescence, of holy and profane, perfection and flaw. "Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root tree." (Deleuze, 5) This tree as symbol, and Wednesday apparently as its humanoid ally, presents a form of salvation from what Deleuze calls the "fascicular root," that "to which our modernity pays willing allegiance. (…) the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed." (Deleuze, 5) Wednesday and the World Tree seem to offer a possibility of authenticity, a negation of the modernist narrative of consumerism (semiotic abundancy) and the "God is dead" slogan (semiotic absence) and a return, instead, to the original root. Shadow is bound and hung from the World Tree without food or water for nine days, and according to Wednesday's plan, he will die in the process and bring Wednesday back to life with his sacrifice. But the World Tree reveals itself to be much less

a place of the One than a multiplicity. The tree is not just a tree, it is alive. A spider crawls across Shadow's face, and a squirrel runs up and down the tree, bringing him water in a little chestnut cup. Shadow begins to hallucinate and, in the process, recognizes the rhizomatic form that the tree is:

> In his delirium, Shadow became the tree. Its roots went deep into the loam of the earth, deep down into time, into the hidden springs. (…) Other roots went to other places. Some of them were secret. Now, when he was thirsty, he pulled water from his roots, pulled them up into the body of his being. He had a hundred arms which broke into a hundred thousand fingers, and all of his fingers reached up into the sky. (Gaiman, 502)

In a sense, Shadow finally enters the rhizome-assemblage of the world – but through a sacrifice to the World Tree, which is suddenly seen as "against itself," refusing to be a tree and instead forming a rhizome of the clouds, the ground, the hawks, squirrels, and spiders inhabiting it, and of course, Shadow himself, refusing to be singular without multiplicity:

> He was the tree, and he was the wind rattling the bare branches of the world tree; he was the grey sky and the tumbling clouds; he was Ratatosk the squirrel, running from the deepest roots to the highest branches; he was the mad-eyed hawk who sat on a broken branch at the top of the tree surveying the world; he was the worm in the heart of the tree. (Gaiman, 503)

In the end, Wednesday is (mis)appropriating the nomadic intensity of modern myth. In sacrificing the nomadic intensity embodied in Shadow and himself (or rather making Shadow sacrifice himself) to the World Tree, Wednesday seeks to dismantle the current State form, to create the State anew, with Shadow caught in the middle. The final battle and the ensuing chaos become a sacrifice to the All-Father, which would restore Wednesday's power. Consequently, multiplicities would become Ones and Twos, all bowing to the World Tree. This misappropriation, with the purpose of propagation and systemic continuity, ultimately backfires on Wednesday, as even the intent of forming trees ends up a rhizomatic form. His attempts at monomythic calmings only intensify the quivering and restless vibrating of the rhizomatic.

What ultimately defines the novel, both in thematics and poetics, is restlessness. We have seen it in the theme of national identity, in the spatial and material assemblages, but also in the way the novel constantly diverts itself away from the classic structure of The Hero's Journey – it becomes restless with its own traditional narrative form and needs to find new places and things that can fascinate. The monomyth becomes a disenchantment for the story, and so it chases the re-enchanting powers of the material world; like its gods, the novel revels in aimless intensity with an unformed purpose: "'This is the only country in the world,' said Wednesday into the stillness, 'that worries about what it is. (…) The rest of them know what they are. No one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or looks for the soul of Mozambique. They know what they are.'" (Gaiman, 128)

This worry and anxiety are exactly what animate the gods as well as the humans. In Wednesday's room at the motel, "[t]here were maps all over the room, unfolded, spread

out on the bed, taped to the walls. Wednesday had drawn all over the maps in bright marking pens, fluorescent greens and painful pinks and vivid oranges." (Gaiman, 62) Wednesday is on a mission of etching a map of the gods themselves, attempting to map their assemblage of intensity. But if anyone were ever to find America's heart, the country would lose its rhizomatic intensity. The gods exercise restlessness because *that* is the heart of the country: the carrousel-centrifuge of heterogeneity, the immigrant statue of rhizomatic paradoxes, the open highway of aimless intensity, and the in-between, the enchantments of discarded, nomadic things, the World Tree against itself.

In the novel, the never-ending travel of the gods across the country is a physical action expressing the vibrant materiality and elusive intensity of the modern myth as restlessness – paradoxical American freedom as a concept, then, is not just expressed in philosophical or political thinking but in topography, materiality, and culture in assemblage, constantly re-enchanting itself to maintain its own restlessness.

6. Intensity or Authenticity

The primary conflict of the novel and its mythic content is ultimately a choice between intensity and authenticity. Intensity (or presence) is the atemporal force that exists as the ever-present potential connection between subject and object – the possibility of conversing with the world as pure exteriority. Authenticity, on the other hand, is the ideal, the perfect conversation with ourselves, the romanticized past of culture, imagined through the eyes of the *modern* observer; a long-gone time where everything was better, including the gods. Ratá Irina, Mathilda Slabbert, and Jenn Anya Prosser, with their emphasis on monomythic structures (which are "cosmic" structures of the past, reaching into the present and the future) seem to be siding with a call for authenticity. This is problematic, especially considering their focus on narrative progression, as they seem to miss the final revelation of the novel, the revelation of the motive of the "Old Gods:" Wednesday is deceiving Shadow, and any nostalgic power or plea for authenticity presented throughout the novel is simply a deceptive power play used to subvert or derail cultural/material change. He promises fixed identity for Shadow (and the reader) in nostalgic authenticity but in return requires absolute submission to the order of the old World Tree, both of a Deleuzian kind and in the narrative – a World Tree which, as we saw, was not so committed to itself as it would seem. This demand of submission is something that Shadow ultimately refuses, choosing uncertainty, presence, and intensity over authenticity. He is himself a restless American, "easily bored."

Michael Key is more interesting to us, as he focuses on shifting cultural anxiety. But this anthropocentric method excludes what we might call a "material" or "spatial" anxiety. The battle exclusively between cultural centers/peripheries of god-paradigms is problematic because it ignores that culture is itself a center, which Key maintains is an illusion. This points to a general problem for the structuralist/poststructuralist and the monomythic: for the system to be intelligible, it is always necessary to maintain a third, symbolic (mythic) order outside the system itself. This is where the rhizomatic myth-structure, the "rhizomythic," becomes productive: by naming the center of the myth a non-stable figure, a "becoming," or a provisional, third-order *event* "in-between-things," it makes it possible

to map out the connections between cultural and material anxieties, without the need for a third-order center from which to make the systems and structures intelligible. In other words, Key's analysis, although working to eliminate the concept of authenticity by naming it an illusion, must create its own similar illusions to maintain itself and thereby sacrifices intensity for the illusion of authenticity. A reading for absolute authenticity (or even the illusion of it) instead of varying intensities leaves the novel stuck in binarities of old and new, mono- or multicultural, or locked in reductive cycles of The Hero's Journey, monomyth, or the center/periphery. Though certainly present, I believe these approaches cool the intensity and potential of the novel and, by extension, the modern myth. The cosmic energies that Campbell describes flowing through the myth cannot be authentic or strictly psychic. Materiality must be taken into account, and the modern mythic forces must be thought of as a question of intensity and not authenticity.

Wednesday, the novel's antagonist, promises the return of an authentic past, a re-enchantment of the old variety, the structure and content of the old myth. But following my analysis, the novel seems rather to invite a modern re-enchantment through a fascination with our "things" and the non-places we put them, an invitation to re-enchant the products of industry and globalization without reversing the change. A bankruptcy-sale of failed businesses becomes a magical exhibit of material diversity and aesthetic ambiance. The House on the Rock, a roadside attraction on the road to somewhere else, becomes an uncanny, schizophrenic museum of apparently nothing and anything, a place of secular magic.

In a world where meaning and interpretation – the psyche's conversation with itself, or as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls it, the "cartesian paradigm" (Gumbrecht 2004/2014) – are the primary paradigms of Western culture, *American Gods* offers a way to re-enchant our seemingly bleak capitalist consumerism and our disbelief in cohesive national identity, but only if we allow our pragmatic culture, and the things and places themselves, to challenge our grammar of being a culture, a citizen, and a nation. We believe that our restless consumption of things, and ignorance of the past, mark an end to "authentic" being. But *American Gods* seems to suggest that we might rediscover it if we immerse ourselves in the intense abundance and absence of semiotic matter in our society and allow ourselves to be distracted and fascinated.

University of Southern Denmark
jespersodemann@gmail.com

Notes

[1] This, of course, goes only for a narrative of the immigrants and explorers; Native Americans would probably, and rightly, not take kindly to being designated a roadside attraction.

[2] This, I believe, is one of the main points in the narrative, where monomythic readings gain traction, as the hero journeys to the underworld and returns reborn with power and knowledge to defeat the antagonistic forces and acquire the "ultimate boon." (Campbell 1948: 311)

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