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Lost in Grand Central:

Dystopia and Transgression in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

(Melville 46)

Dystopia never appears all at once. One does not stumble upon the “bad place” out of the blue, like an island in the middle of the sea. Rather, one slowly apprehends that she or he has been living there all along. Famously, some dystopias emerge from the attempts to form some sort of utopian society (as in the notorious visions of Zamyatin's *We*, Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, or Huxley's *Brave New World*), but more often the dystopian aura envelops a reality that has simply proceeded along in its quotidian ways. One goes about one's everyday life and work, while as time passes noting this or that odd occurrence that might be a sign; a creeping suspicion evolves towards certainty, a gloomy presentiment congeals into visible shape, and dystopia appears, right here and right now, where it has been for a while. Like a shadow, suggestive of simultaneous absence and presence, the

gathering darkness of dystopia colors our perception of the world, even when we cannot be sure it is really there at all.

If “dystopia became the dominant literary form” of the twentieth century (Sargent 29), it is at least partly because of a pervasive dystopian mood or anxiety that increased its momentum throughout that century. By the beginning of the 1990s, in the United States as elsewhere, clouds congregated on the horizon, and the final decade of the twentieth century brought with it a deep sense of foreboding and unease. The triumphal rhetoric that accompanied the “end of the Cold War,” spectacularly represented by the fall of the Berlin Wall in December 1989, was inflated by the optative mood of early criers for a “borderless world” of free trade, globalization, and multiculturalism (see Ohmae, for example). At the same time, however, these very victories appeared to auger greater calamity, as the aftermath of crumbling Soviet Bloc brought not only new freedoms but intense sectarian violence, war, even genocide; the economic *glasnost* and burgeoning world market provided hitherto unimagined productivity and wealth, but also bred greater economic instability, transforming communities and restructuring worldviews. If the industrial age had already created the conditions under which “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 207), then the postmodern moment of multinational capitalism and global finance in the final years of the twentieth century compounded this situation immeasurably. This generalized unease and social malaise characterized the public mood during the debates over the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s, as the promise of fluid, cross-border movements of goods and services was necessarily

tempered by a nameless fear of the radical, likely unforeseeable transformations such free trade would engender or entail.

Neil Gaiman's 2001 fantasy novel, *American Gods*,¹ explores the sorts of anxieties that typify the NAFTA era. *American Gods* offers a portrait of "U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties" (to use Phillip Wegner's phrase in *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989–2001*), and it dramatizes the era's dystopian atmosphere by highlighting the role of transgression or transgressivity: movement, border-crossing, illicitness, and indeterminate danger. Although most readers would place *American Gods* in the genre of fantasy, rather than utopian or dystopian literature, Gaiman's use of the fantastic mode—more specifically, his blend of fantasy and realism—helps to vivify the dystopian narrative in the novel.² Gaiman's fantasy thus provides a more visceral, though less overt critique of the contemporary scene, while also maintaining a pervading spirit of ambiguity and vague menace. The ominous suspicion of a potential conspiracy amplifies the unease, and the inability to map the shifting landscape and one's place in it becomes the most persistent form of existential anxiety for North Americans at the end of the millennium. In *American Gods*, the dystopian moment of the post-NAFTA United States is illustrated in the transgressive movement of its tenebrous hero in his attempt to make sense of the "bad place" he inhabits. In the conclusion of the narrative, the dystopian condition and the method by which to counteract it coalesce into a single conception, that of transgression itself.

* * *

As Hank Wagner, Christopher Golden, and Stephen R. Bissette argue in their *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, “*American Gods* is a novel that only Gaiman could have written [...] The novel reflects his deep fascination with and love for his adopted country, but also subtly reflects its harshness, and strangeness, and flaws” (331). In an interview appended to the text of *American Gods*, Gaiman describes the tortuous paths he took in first conceiving, then writing the novel, which he labels “a contemporary American phantasmagoria.” At that point, he is speaking strictly as a writer of imaginative fiction, and the twists-and-turns involve his many abortive attempts to create a protagonist (who will become Shadow), latch onto a novelistic concept, orchestrate multiple movements, flesh out the other characters, and so on. But pointedly, Gaiman’s own peripatetic biography asserts itself in subtle ways in how he imagined this book. A descendant of Polish Jewry, whose ancestor emigrated to England from the Netherlands, Gaiman grew up in England, began his career in London,³ and moved to Minnesota in 1992. In response to the question in the same interview of how his life and work changed now that he lives in the United States, Gaiman refers to his early comic book series, *The Sandman*, and replies: “I wrote about America a lot in *Sandman*, but it was a slightly delirious America—one built up from movies and TV and other books. When I came out here I found it very different from the country I’d encountered in fiction, and wanted to write about that. *American Gods* was, in many ways, my attempt to make sense of the country I was living in” (n.p.). Even at this personal level, then, *American Gods* represents the perspective of the transgressor, the border-crosser, who moves into a foreign domain while retaining a hybrid identity (old and new, native and foreign, etc.). America appears as both a real and an imaginary place, or perhaps in Edward Soja’s

appropriately hybridized notion, a *real-and-imagined* space (see *Thirdspace*, 11–12), in which the author represents both the mental and material spaces of the place simultaneously. *American Gods* is in some respects Gaiman’s attempt to map the spaces of his newly adopted but still foreign territory: a stranger *at home* in a strange land.⁴

Such transgressivity animates the whole of *American Gods*, which is if nothing else a story of immigrants, border-crossers, travelers from afar. The foundational concept of the novel is that those people who immigrated to the United States brought their gods with them as they traversed oceans and national boundaries. Moreover, the old gods native to that North American soil remain, and Gaiman duly records aspects of Native American or First Nations myths and religions, such as when Shadow encounters a deity like Whiskey Jack (Wisakedjak), the Buffalo Man, or the Thunderbird. What is more, the gods carried over by the transients and settlers are not necessarily the same as those left behind in their old worlds. In the novel’s postscript, for instance, Shadow meets an Odin character rather different from the Wednesday he had worked for in the United States; these two (and many others, of course) are the “same” god, but they are also imbued with a different character specific to their current time and place. Such characteristics, like their powers *as* gods, derive from the force of belief on the part of those who worship them. A god is only as powerful as the belief in him or her that the faithful maintain, and “gods die once they are forgotten” (514).⁵ Retaining many aspects of their immortal identities, these gods also take on new forms in the changing society; Cairo (pronounced “KAY-ro”), Illinois, home to several Nile Delta deities, is not Cairo, Egypt, after all. America, which one character claims “has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more” (196), is a metaphysical free-trade zone in which fluid economies of belief alter

the social landscape of the continent. Displaced from their native soil, put into circulation in a spiritual marketplace, subject to metaphysical competition from new and more powerful objects of faith, the gods experience a kind of perpetual crisis. Beliefs, like goods and services, are also subject to the vicissitudes of international trade.

It follows that, if the old gods are given life through the faith of their believers, new believers will engender new gods who will be nourished by the power of their adherents. In *American Gods*, we find a haughty cadre of young, powerful deities, some displaying open disdain for the ancient gods. The new American gods include “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. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance” (137–138). A large part of the drama in *American Gods* comes down to a putative war between the old and the new gods, between gods on the brink of extinction, eking out some meager existence at the furthest margins of their former glory (like poor Bilquis, Queen of Sheba, whose erotic powers are reduced to the prostitute’s wiles in the quest for worshippers), and those thrilling to the ecstatic rush of their novel and seemingly limitless power (like the gods of television and computers). Upon this unstable ground, the apparent plot of *American Gods* unfolds.

And, yet, this is not really the main narrative in the novel. Rather, as is hinted at by the many coin-tricks and confidence games in the text, the metaphysical war is a diversion, a sleight-of-hand ploy to distract attention from the much more powerfully dystopian theme in the novel. *American Gods* is a fable of transgression, and transgressivity is eventually disclosed to be not only the state of things in the dystopian, end-of-the-millennium United States, but also the means by which to navigate the spaces

of dystopia. America, which in so much of its nationalist ideology, going all the way back to the earliest settlements, had been conceived as a utopia, is fundamentally dystopian. In *American Gods*, the state of transgressivity within the United States is a dialectical reversal of the utopian prospects of transgressive movements across porous national and social boundaries. With its tenebrous hero Shadow winding his way around the continental United States on his odyssey to find himself, the novel's mood is anxious and foreboding, consistent with Peter Fitting's view that the dystopian mood is "a sense of a threatened near future" (140), but without the science-fiction projection of a future tense at all. *American Gods* is set very much in the present, and the otherworldly aspects of that present are not technological but, in the language of Darko Suvin, metaphysical (Suvin 61). But the dystopian mood is quite fitting as the action seems to be leading up to Ragnarök, the *Götterdämmerung*, and the final doom of all creation. Amid the gloom, the utopian impulse to carve out new spaces of liberty unfolds as a dystopian confrontation between the new and old, which reveals the country to be "a bad place for gods" (586). "Bad place" is, after all, what the very word *dystopia* means, but the dystopia in *American Gods* will have more to do with the movements of the shadows than with the twilight of the gods.

American Gods is ultimately about transgression. The original meaning of the word, from its Latin root, is a "step across" and had a specifically spatial sense. As Bertrand Westphal notes in *Geocriticism*, "Among the Romans, one transgressed when passing to the other side of a boundary or a river [...] The *transgressio* could also be an infraction: one does not cross a boundary without departing from the norm. But the Romans did not give priority to that sense of the word" (41–42). The foundational

conceit of *American Gods* (i.e., that gods and legends accompany their believers who cross into new territories) requires this image of transgression, and the primary narrative trajectory, Shadow's circuitous travels that ultimately lead him to his own identity, repeatedly enacts Shadow's boundary-crossing. However, the more modern meaning, with its moral valences, is also pertinent. Not only is Shadow a shady figure (ahem), with a criminal past and engaged in continuing illicit activity in abetting Wednesday's swindles, but the generalized lawlessness of the narrative, the sense that all characters are somehow operating outside or only on the margins of the national *nomos*, and the almost constant allusions to trickery, illusion, and deception, mark *American Gods* as a transgressive text in even the less than literal sense. Indeed, most transgressive of all is the novel's clever insinuation that transgressivity is itself an essential constitutive feature of America, the grounds upon which dystopia discloses itself as dystopian. Shadow's transcontinental itinerary merely traces some of the contours of the transgressive space that is the dystopian United States at the end of the twentieth century.

The novel announces its theme of transgression from the start. In the opening pages, the protagonist is completing his prison sentence, time served for a crime he most certainly did commit, so the commonplace definition of transgression is established as a theme even before Shadow's peripatetic movements begin. He is released from prison early because his wife has died; as he discovers later, she dies in a car crash while performing a sex act upon Shadow's best friend and business partner, as the "transgressions" begin to pile up in the novel. (His wife proves more faithful in the liminal, living-death existence she maintains after her funeral, as she frequently comes to his aid throughout the narrative.) With no one to return home to, he agrees to work for a

mysterious stranger he meets on an airplane, a Mr. Wednesday who we soon discover is Odin, the All-Father of Norse mythology. True to the multiple meanings of *transgression*, Shadow follows Wednesday as he engages in a series of illegal or morally questionable activities, all while traveling to different places to meet with odd persons (who are themselves the avatars of various deities). These movements are punctuated by a few layovers in which Shadow is able to pause, and the reader is able to gain greater insight into the overall scheme of things. First, in his time with the Egyptian deities (working as undertakers) in Cairo, Illinois, Shadow discovers the breadth and depth of the metaphysical free-trade zone that is North America. Then, in the town of Lakeside, Wisconsin, Shadow experiences a sort of utopian space outside of the flows of commerce and history; in the end, he discovers the dark secret behind the town's timelessness and resistance to change. Finally, in his suspension—literally, as he is hanging by ropes from the World Tree—between life and death, Shadow discover his own origins and identity, and prepares himself (and the reader) for the final conflict between the new and old gods, a battle that turns out to be little more than an elaborately orchestrated confidence game. At the conclusion of this apocalyptic ruse, Shadow returns to Lakeside, where he helps to return that anomalous site to the spatiotemporal flux of American dystopia, before eventually moving on further, “transgressing” beyond those national borders, to Iceland, and thence ... beyond.

An additional, fascinating feature of *American Gods* is its use of brief interludes labeled “Coming to America” (or “Somewhere in America”), which depict scenes of immigrants and their gods finding, and in some respects, creating themselves in the New World spaces. We learn that Mr. Ibis, the Egyptian deity and Illinois undertaker, is the

author of these vignettes. In addition to breaking up the narrative trajectory of Shadow's journey, these scenes (most of which do not bear directly or at all on that plotline) help to populate the American world with gods, legends, and folkloric figures, as well as showing the ways in which strangers in this strange land long for the connections to their ancient gods even as they experience the wonders of a brave new world. Yet the punctual interventions that these episodes provide help to color the entire world of *American Gods*, demonstrating both the ongoing desire for an evanescent tradition and the transformative force of movement and displacement. The dystopia of America is thus tied to its utopian aspects. In "coming to America," the horrors of transgression, of crossing over the borders, are mitigated by the old spirits, but a new god—first and foremost, the mythical entity that is "America" itself—tortures the past and shapes it into something barely recognizable. In these "Coming to America" passages, the admixture of transgression and dystopia is dramatized, and the reader's pause in these moments makes the headlong rush of the Shadow narrative more meaningful.

"This country has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more" (196). Early in the book Mr. Ibis, who provides so much background information to Shadow and to the reader, asserts the astonishing proposition that voyagers over several millennia of years have traveled to and around North America, leaving their remains and establishing their gods upon this new soil. According to Ibis, the city of Cairo, Illinois, was once a trading post, visited by people of the Nile Delta over three thousand, five hundred years ago. Indeed, a kind of free trade is the basis for all of these improbable—Ibis calls them "impossible"—voyages to America, which include those of the aboriginal race of Japan, the Ainu, nine thousand years ago, of Polynesians to California two

millennia later, of the Irish during the dark ages, of the Welsh and the Vikings, of West African traders in South America, of Chinese adventurers exploring the Oregon coastline, of Basque fishermen tending their nets off the coast of Newfoundland in the eighth century, and so on. Indeed, the primitive conditions of transoceanic travel were no impediment. As Ibis continues in his lecture, “My people, the Nile folk, we discovered that a reed boat will take you around the world, if you have the patience and enough jars of sweet water” (198). What mattered was not technology or transportation, but goods and services to trade. “You see, the biggest problem with coming to America in the old days was that there wasn’t a lot here that anyone wanted to trade” (198). But after Columbus, so the story goes, the traffic within this Grand Central becomes heavier, as the North American trade zone expands. With all this movement and circulation, the long-hidden dystopian character of place creeps into view as well.

As another incarnation of Odin notes late in the novel, America “is a good place for men, but a bad place for gods” (586). There are several reasons why this may be, and one lies in the formulation itself. If it is a “good place” (or *eutopia*) for humans, then it may be because America favors the present, the material, the novel, the living, and the mortal; as visitors have long known, whether Alexis de Tocqueville or Jean Baudrillard, Americans have little open regard for the traditions of the past, the intellectual sphere, or—nonwithstanding (or, perhaps, owing to) the profoundly potent forms of religious observance and zeal—matters of spirit. These play small roles in the public spaces of the national culture in the United States, although, as its literature frequently reveals, such ideas becomes quite powerful in the dream world of America. *American Gods* also makes great use of dreams, as omens, portents, or merely vistas into times and places not

always available to the waking mind. The shadowy and liminal sphere of that space between conscious thought and unconscious flows provides yet another figure of transgression in *American Gods*.

Another reason why America may be a “bad place” (or *dystopia*) for gods is that “America” is itself a kind of religious artifact, a totem or mythic, an imaginary construct to which natives and immigrants alike must imbue with divine substance and bow down before. Whether in the old Puritan rhetoric of the “city on a hill” or a New Jerusalem, or in the providential decree of a Manifest Destiny, or even more strongly perhaps in a twentieth-century America as a utopian space of freedom in a world beset by totalitarianism or terror, the entity known as “America” becomes something to be “believed in” (see Tally). As far back as 1693, Cotton Mather had suggested that the early pilgrims had hoped to find Thomas More’s Utopia, but ended up creating one instead, and this vision colors the national rhetoric even in the twenty-first century. Indeed, even the critics of United States policies often launch their criticism from this quasi-religious and utopian view of America as a place of freedom, bemoaning the “fact” that America is not living up to its purported mission. What gods could be more powerful than this mythic, national deity who can unite all parties arrayed along its political spectrum under this divine banner? In this, the utopianism of America is also its most dystopian feature, as the dissatisfaction with a failure to be utopia is felt more strongly than anything else.

Thus, in its own somewhat apolitical way, *American Gods* launches its own critique of the state of the United States’ national identity as a technological and political pseudo-utopia, one that welds together individual freedom, economic opportunity, and

collective harmony. Shadow's apparent disgust with several of the new gods (such as the god of television, who appears as Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and offers to show him "Lucy's tits" [176]) registers his indifference to these modern achievements that are supposed to make the New World superior to the Old. *American Gods* is not utopian, then, but it is not really anti-utopian either, and the distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia ought to be made. As many critics have argued, dystopia (rather like utopia, in fact) is fundamentally critical. Even in offering what seems an ambiguous or bleak image of the threatened near future, dystopian narratives are not really critiques of utopian schemes so much as critiques of the *status quo* itself. Often, in dystopian narratives, the future disaster is extrapolated from a present condition, and the critical edge of the text lies in its ability to identify and challenge the state of things. Fitting notes that the "critique of contemporary society expressed in the dystopia implies (or asserts) the need for change; the anti-utopia is, on the other hand, explicitly or implicitly a defense of the status quo" (141). Similarly, Tom Moylan has introduced the concept of "critical dystopia" to emphasize how, "[f]aced by the delegitimation of Utopia and the hegemonic cynicism of Anti-Utopia," certain recent dystopian texts "do not go easily toward that better world [of utopia]. Rather, they linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it" (Moylan 198–199). In *American Gods*, the dystopian mood of the millennial moment is suffused with a sense of movement and change, transgressions that simultaneously render the present both a "bad place" and a site of possibility.

Some readers might legitimately object that *American Gods* is not exactly a dystopian novel, and since it is not likely to be confused with utopian fiction either, the

traditional association or binary opposition between utopia and dystopia is not entirely apt. However, Jameson's description of a key, categorical difference between the two genres indicates the degree to which *American Gods* might be called a dystopian text. Tacitly drawing upon Georg Lukács's distinction between narration and description, Jameson observes that "dystopia is generally a narrative, which happens to a specific subject or character, whereas the Utopian text is mostly nonnarrative." Jameson goes on to posit that, in general, whereas the utopian text "does not tell a story at all" but "describes a mechanism," "the dystopia is always and essentially what in the language of science fiction is called a 'near-future' novel: it tells the story of an imminent disaster—ecology, overpopulation, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident—waiting to come to pass in our own near future, which is fast-forwarded in the time of the novel" (*Seeds of Time* 56). Assiduously narrative even in its few descriptive scenes, *American Gods* certainly fits the bill here, with Shadow's own personal story dominating the plot even as the broader depiction of a dystopian America at spiritual war provides the necessary context.

More fantasy than any other genre, Gaiman's novel enables the reader to detect a dystopian aura inherent in the otherworldly, yet real, America presented through Shadow's tale.⁶ Peter Paik, in his exploration of the apocalyptic science fiction of certain recent comic books or graphic novels, argues in part that the combination of realism and fantasy in such works makes possible a clearer rendering of the dystopian conditions of the present moment and offers the possibility of imagining other conditions. "It is perhaps only such a fantastic realism that is at present capable of opening up a critical space for reflection between the alternatives of an enlightened obedience to a devouring

and deteriorating beast and a headlong embrace of fate that masquerades as a godlike freedom” (Paik 22). Gaiman’s fantastic realism in *American Gods*, while not as openly political as that employed in many other dystopian texts, nevertheless clears room for this “critical space for reflection” of the shifting social relations of the late-1990s’ United States.

The events in Lakeside, Wisconsin, offer one allegorical example. After the apparently climactic scene at Rock City, Shadow returns to Lakeside to uncover the town’s secret. From time immemorial, each year a child had gone missing, presumably runaways or possibly victims of kidnapping, Shadow discovered the terrible connection between such a regular misfortune and the annual “klunker” raffle, where everyone in town participates in guessing the date and time in which an old car will break through the melting ice and fall to the bottom of the lake. In each klunker’s trunk, a dead child sinks beneath the water annually, in what amounts to a macabre ritual; Hinzelmann, the old man in charge of the raffle, is an Old World kobold, a totemic spirit who re-enacts the yearly child-sacrifice in order to protect the town. Hinzelmann had hinted that the “good town” survived the insidious advances of economic turbulence through “hard work” (277), but in the end Shadow sees how this tiny utopian space was artificially created by a magic that, with Hinzelmann’s death, no longer has power. As he tells Lakeside’s police chief, “this town is going to change now. It’s not going to be the only good town in a depressed region anymore. It’s going to be a lot more like the rest of this part of the world. There’s going to be a lot more trouble. People out of work. People out of their heads. More people getting hurt. More bad shit going down” (573). In other words,

Lakeside will re-enter history, re-enter the late-twentieth-century's post-NAFTA world of economic uncertainty and dystopia.

A one-man (or one-kobold) scheme is not exactly a conspiracy, but the idea of some well-organized and often nefarious conspiracy to explain how all of these odd and threatening circumstances came to be is itself of pervasive feature of the late twentieth century. (In addition to the diffuse millenarian paranoia, the old-fashioned fears of one-world governments and Big Brother accompanied some of the louder, if marginal, debates over the passage of NAFTA in 1994.) The idea that the mysteriously swirling, seemingly unfathomable conditions affecting our everyday lives may be explicable in terms of some conspiracy is a paradoxically comforting thought. If nothing else, the vast conspiracy would explain the inexplicable, putting an (evil) face on the vague insecurities. *American Gods* is also suffused with various notions of false consciousness, if not in the strictly ideological sense, then in the more diffuse meaning attached to discovering that one is being "fooled." Illusions permeate the text, whether in the form of Shadow's good-natured sleight of hand magic and coin tricks, Wednesday's petty cons or his larger "two-man con" executed with the aid of Low Key (or Loki), or the menacing "men in black" agents of those vicious new gods. Of these latter mysterious figures, with names like Wood, Stone, Town, and World, the goddess Easter (or Eostre) explains: "They exist because everyone knows they must exist" (309). As Jameson has suggested in reference to conspiracy films, such a grand scheme may be one of the few ways in which individuals can imagine the global totality that is now the horizon of their existence; conspiracy then functions as a kind of allegorical or cognitive map by which individuals can imagine collective action at all (see Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*).

In *American Gods*, the elaborate confidence game pulled off by Wednesday and Loki is revealed in the end as a means of explaining Shadow's entire life, but this is also the moment at which he both fulfills his destiny and moves on. Again, the dystopia is transgressive, in both positive and negative senses.

Shadow himself, as well as the image of the shadow more generally, becomes the indistinct but defining feature of the transgressive dystopia in *American Gods*. Shadow is a liminal figure, assiduously occupying a space *in-between*, straddling presence and absence, here and there, life and death, and so forth. As in Herman Melville's deliberately ambiguous deconstruction of the black-and-white narrative in "Benito Cereno," the shadows (which are, after all, a mixture of black and white) only foreshadow deeper shadows to come. The conclusion of *American Gods* does not offer a clean victory for one side over the other, since the entire battle was a complicated con. Shadow in the final pages continues his wanderings, now in Reykjavik, where he does not really intend to stay, but nor does he intend to return to America or to go to some other particular place. The novel's final line—"He walked away and he kept on walking" (588)—suggests further transgression, perpetual motion, but no fixed state.

Movement, displacement, relocation, translation, and above all transgression provide the conceptual underpinnings of the dystopian phantasmagoria that is *American Gods*. As I have argued, the transgressive dystopia of *American Gods* is also positive, insofar as transgressivity itself becomes the *status quo*. This is certainly not the *eutopian* state of happiness, nor is it a *outopian* or nonexistent no-place; rather, it is the "bad place" in which we move, struggle, and live. The state of transgressivity, which is also the state of dystopia, is the condition of our historical being itself, and no otherworldly Ragnarök

can impose celestial meaning upon things. The shadowy, inconclusive or open-ended ending allows for mere continuation or radical changes with no discernable clue, beyond Shadow's own personal revelations, of the new America about to emerge in the next millennium. The metaphysical free trade zone of "Grand Central" continues unabated, presumably, and the cosmopolitan Shadow continues his uncertain wandering. *American Gods* leaves us in the dystopia we were already in, but in the novel's attention to the transgressivity, both a distinctive feature of the American dystopia and a means of understanding, and thereby perhaps also transforming it, we see that other spaces are not only still possible, but we are already shaping them by our border-crossing movements.

Notes

¹ All references to *American Gods* are to the edition cited in the bibliography. This essay was written prior to the publication of *American Gods: Tenth Anniversary Edition* in 2011.

² Although all could be characterized as *fantasy* in a broad sense, Gaiman's novels range widely over various literary and marketing genres, partaking of both gritty realism and fanciful romance, and frequently operating within the subgenres of children's literature, horror, mystery, and so on. For instance, *Good Omens* (1990), co-authored with Terry Pratchett, was a comic end-of-the-world mystery, as a demon and an angel rush to avert Armageddon. *Neverwhere* (1996), which began life as a BBC mini-series before Gaiman turned his script into a novel, blends fairy-tale characters, such as Puss in Boots, with

somewhat realistic cityscape of present-day London. *Stardust* (1998) is an enchanting fairy tale in its own right. *American Gods* (2001) was followed by *Anansi Boys* (2005), a sort of sequel in that it is set in the same world, but which does not necessarily follow from the events of *American Gods*. His many children's books—although Gaiman does not always agree that they are meant for children exclusively—include *Coraline* (2002) and *The Graveyard Book* (2008), the latter a sort of re-imagining of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, in which an orphaned child is raised by ghosts, rather than wild animals. Thus, although the fantastic *mode* pervades Gaiman's entire corpus, Gaiman's work resists generic pigeon-holing.

³ Gaiman's early career reveals the breadth of his interests, as well as the roller-coastering fortunes of a would-be professional writer. His first books include a pop "biography" of the band Duran Duran, a critical study of Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, and a co-authored work of comedic fantasy, *Good Omens* (with Terry Pratchett). Beginning in 1989, his immensely well-respected comic book series, *The Sandman*, began its run of 75 issues.

⁴ Gaiman includes, by way of preface, a "Caveat, and Warning for Travelers," in which he writes: "While the geography of the United States of America in this tale is not entirely imaginary—many of the landmarks in this book can be visited, paths can be followed, ways can be mapped—I have taken liberties. Fewer liberties than you might imagine, but liberties nonetheless" (n.p.).

⁵ The same principle is evident in a number of key intertexts, among which I mention only Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods*, where the more powerful the belief, the more

powerful the god. In that novel, a formerly mighty deity is shocked to discover himself almost utterly powerless, since—even though the society of his purported believers is essentially a theocracy—he has only one faithful follower.

⁶ In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson makes the case for a clear distinction between fantasy and science fiction (or utopia), but I argue that the radical alterity of both enable similar critical programs, even where the methods are demonstrably different.

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