

ARTICLE

# At Home in the World Tree: A Somaesthetic Reading of the Body at Home in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

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At its core, Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* is a story about homes, lost, found and imagined. As homes and homelands are left behind, the characters in the novel must fashion new homes and homelike spaces within a new country and thus recast themselves in the territory of America through acts of creative self-fashioning. This article will focus on the concept of the characters' bodies as represented in the homes that they occupy. To do this my argument is predicated on a somaesthetic reading of the body as the locus from which the characters begin to construct ideas of home. Somaesthetics, as conceived by Richard Shusterman, has three facets: analytic, pragmatic, and practical. This paper interrogates the diverse ideas of home in the text, from the backseat of a limo to a small midwestern town, and explores how the idea of home is portrayed via Gaiman's use and description of his characters' bodies. The characters within the universe of the novel (broadly divided between old gods and new gods) provide an interesting focus for investigating, via analytic somaesthetics, the use of native and non-native bodies with respect to the construction of homes or home-like spaces. Gaiman constructs a new definition of what home means for his characters and how, via these characters' bodies, the home is a site of comfort and resistance to the events of the novel. In addition, several of the gods in this story occupy spaces that are constructed to make the reader aware of the nature of the character while preserving some qualities of their fictionalised homelands, places of power and, in the case of the old gods, their newly adopted home.

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Swiss-French designer and architect Le Corbusier once stated that 'A house is a machine for living in' (2007: 151). Over one hundred and seventy-five years earlier, Julien Offray de La Mettrie similarly posited that 'Man is a machine' (2012: 3). As this article will examine the body in isolation as well as within a series of homes or home-like settings, I would like to open by considering these two analogies of the machine. For La Mettrie, man is a machine in that the complexity of man's nature and the non-dualistic conception of body-mind means that 'it's initially impossible to get a clear idea of it or (therefore) to define it... Our only way to discover the true nature of man is *a posteriori*, i.e. on the basis of empirical evidence, trying to isolate the soul, as it were disentangling it from the body's organs' (La Mettrie, 2012: 3). Thus, for La Mettrie the only clear way to understand the physical shell of the body is by likening it to a machine. On the other hand, Le Corbusier takes the view that the house is a machine in the same way that an 'armchair is a machine for sitting in' and an 'Ewer is a machine for washing oneself' (2007: 151). This double-sided presentation of both homes and humans as machines leads to a curious world of automata. For, if we consider homes and those of us that inhabit them as machines, we must then look at how the machine-of-man functions within the machine-of-the-home and it is this idea that will guide my reading of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) in this piece. This article puts forth a reading of Gaiman's novel that explores the key relationship of the body-mind to the home or homes that some of the characters inhabit.

La Mettrie suggests that in order to understand the body and soul connection we must have *a posteriori* knowledge of the subject. The characters that Gaiman creates function as lenses, in this case, machines to focus on the relationship of the body to issues of divinity and experience. These machines need the protection and stability provided by the various homes within the text. Alongside a focus on the mechanist nature of the human body and homes, the question of how myth and legend from the old world are transported (or not) to the new world is also a central theme. For instance, the book's epigraph, itself a quote from folklorist Richard Dorson, suggests that the demons from the old world could not cross the ocean in order to take up new residence in America. For Gaiman, those old gods (and demons) did indeed arrive in

the minds, hearts, and practices of immigrants. More importantly, they took up residence and created homes in their new country. This can be seen in the opening to the novel, which presents a description of Shadow's first home, a prison cell, that he shares with Low Key (Loki) Lyesmith. The cell is not given much description, only that it was decorated with 'a *Songbirds of North America* calendar, which was the only calendar they sold in the prison commissary' and a few books: one on coin tricks the second a copy of Herodotus's *Histories* a gift from Low Key to Shadow (Gaiman, 2012: 3, 4). While this home is temporary for both of the characters the message is clear that these immigrant gods can and do exist in every strata of American life. Some of the characterisations of these gods are decidedly nationalistically stereotypical. The seven-foot-tall leprechaun Mad Sweeney, for example, is first seen in Jack's Crocodile Bar and gods from eastern Europe occupy spaces that are little more than tenements, constructed to evoke the past association of inner-city ghettos commonly home to immigrant populations within large cities (Gaiman, 2012: 33, 72). Thus Gaiman utilises familiar stereotypes to align the immigrant gods from the old world with the communities that would have considered them important or venerable.

At its core, however, what these initial moments of the text demonstrate is that Neil Gaiman's novel, *American Gods*, is a story about homes lost, found and imagined. As homes and homelands are left behind, the characters in the novel must fashion new homes within a new country and thus through acts of creative self-fashioning recast themselves in the territory of America. Many of the gods upon which the text focuses are immigrant gods, brought to America by the strong beliefs of earlier generations. There are also the new gods, those that have risen up and are fighting for what they feel is their rightful place atop a new pantheon. In order to explore this relationship between homes, gods and performative belief, this article focuses on the concept of the characters' bodies as represented in the homes that they occupy. To do this my argument is predicated on a somaesthetic reading of the body as the locus from which the characters begin to construct ideas of home. Somaesthetics as conceived by Richard Shusterman has three facets: analytic somaesthetics, which 'describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices

and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality'; pragmatic somaesthetics, which proposes 'specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique'; and practical somaesthetics, which entails 'intelligently disciplined body work aimed at somatic self-improvement' (Shusterman, 2000: 271, 272, 276). This paper will look primarily to the analytic elements of somaesthetics as they have the greatest import with respect to Gaiman's novel. This is not to say that pragmatic and practical somaesthetics are of no use to literary studies more broadly. It is rather that their practical usefulness to a primary text like *American Gods* is limited. Within its analytic framework this paper will explore how the characters in the novel construct and come to know their reality. Somaesthetics provides a theoretical framework and vocabulary to discuss the role of the body in a literary context. There are of course numerous other theories and theoretical/philosophical writings about the role of the body in the cognitive process, however, many of the key authors such as Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error* (1994) and *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999) as well as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and their text *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), do not provide adequate scope with regard to discussing the body-mind continuum. This is not to say that these theories hold no value in relation to the aims of somaesthetics (Shusterman himself acknowledges the "encouraging... recent research related to embodied cognition as exemplified in the work of... George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Antonio Damasio" among others) but simply that aims and objectives of somaesthetics are indeed more suited to this type of literary analysis (2008: 23). Additionally, as somaesthetics as a field has grown it has been used to explore such diverse artistic and somatic practices as photography, dance, performance art and architecture, and is the most relevant theory of the body-mind relationship for a project of this nature.

This article interrogates the diverse ideas of home in the text, from the back-seat of a limo to a small midwestern town, and explores how the idea of home is portrayed via Gaiman's use and description of his characters' bodies. The characters within the universe of the novel (broadly divided between old gods and new gods) provide an interesting focus for investigating the use of native and non-native bodies

with respect to the construction of homes or home-like spaces. As a British immigrant to America, Gaiman constructs a new definition of what home means for his characters and how, via these characters' bodies, the home is a site of comfort and resistance to the events of the novel. In addition, several of the gods in this story occupy spaces that are constructed to make the reader aware of the nature of the character while preserving some qualities of their fictionalised homelands, places of power and, in the case of the old gods, their new adopted home.

This piece is not the first to suggest that Gaiman's work is connected to notions of nation, identity and home. Siobhan Carroll, for instance, uses Gaiman's novel to interrogate the idea of national identity, or more specifically the fiction of an American identity, and in so doing places *American Gods* within the category of urban fantasy and suggests that the novel's failure to 'locate a stable, "real America"' is one of the ways in which Gaiman can be seen to be 'dramatizing the importance of fiction to social constructions of place and nation' (Carroll, 2012: 308). Thus, for Carroll, the fact that there is no one place that can be pinned down and claimed as the real America in the novel makes the larger and more important point that cultures often rely on stories and myths to create their sense of identity. Instead I suggest that the 'real America' that Carroll finds fleeting and unstable is, in actuality, a product of the characters' bodies and the spaces that they consider home.

When considering space more broadly in order to include the home we should turn to the work of Gaston Bachelard, specifically to his work *The Poetics of Space* (1958, translated to English 1969) where he notes that 'the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (1969: 6). Thus, as they struggle for recognition, both old gods and new gods (as representations of belief systems) are connected and drawn to places of power where people can imagine them and are free to imagine and invoke their influence and providence. In this way the central importance of the home, as the cornerstone of America, is reinforced via the protective power and the ability to invite fantasy and imagination. In addition, one need only consider that for Americans churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are not simply buildings, they are 'houses of worship.'

Thus, the very act of prayer that gives the titular gods of Gaiman's novel strength is most often associated with Bachelard's primary function of the home. While Bachelard provides a bourgeois reading of space, cultural Geographer Doreen Massey provides a more nuanced interpretation. For Massey, places 'in fact, are always constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not only internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere' (1995: 183). This linking of internal and external relations, combined with the notion that 'there is or has been some kind of disruption between the past of these places and at least some elements of their present or their potential future,' would seem to suggest that the gods and their places of power, both in America and the old world, are representative of change within immigrant communities and the tension between loyalties to the old country and the need to adapt and assimilate (Massey, 1995:183). It is through the cultural memory of the characters in this text that these tensions can be examined. The character Czernobog (Gaiman's version of a Slavic deity whose name translates to black god) states that 'All our countrymen go to New York. Then, we come out here, to Chicago. Everything got very bad. In the old country, they had nearly forgotten me. Here, I am a bad memory no one wants to remember' (Gaiman, 2012: 76). This suggests that there has been some form of disruption as Czernobog and his family continually move in an effort to reclaim their power yet ultimately settle in a place where the populace has some cultural memory, even if the community does not want to remember, which pushes those memories deeper into the cultural unconscious.

The repressed memories of these immigrant communities frequently manifests in the way that the gods often speak to Shadow, via dreams or dream like experiences. There is an often-unreal quality to the interactions Shadow has with many of the gods (old and new) in the text. Dreams play an active and important role in the narrative of *American Gods* (and, of course, of the mythologising of the American dream), notably in the recurring dreams that the protagonist (Shadow Moon) has throughout the novel. In this way, Gaiman's text can be read as both an embrace and a challenge to the home as the fundamental building block of America. The protective and evocative qualities of the home, for Bachelard and also for Gaiman,

allow for a place that is not fixed geographically but rather is created by the interaction of a person or character within the space. As the characters move about the landscape of America they create new homes and those homes allow for the dreams (and nightmares) that portend the coming conflict. The bodies that Gaiman constructs in his text are constantly moving and rarely seem to be comfortable in any of the spaces that they inhabit. Thus, in order to analyse the relationship of the body, the home and America it is necessary to look at current thinking on the role of the body as it pertains to perception, concentration/mental functioning and imagination.

### **Somaesthetics, the Body and Drugs**

Shusterman has stated that 'Somaesthetics, roughly defined, concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning' (Shusterman, 2012: 26). It is my contention that as the characters in Gaiman's novel fashion their identities and interact with the landscapes and buildings where the action takes place, Gaiman can be seen to choose words and phrases that evoke specific somatic reactions in the characters and perhaps even in his readers. By drawing attention to his characters' bodies as they come in to contact with and react to (and are constructed by) the various spaces that serve as homes in the novel, Gaiman embeds these connections at the centre of his text. These concerns are deployed in an analysis of the body's (or soma's) relationship to architectural space. As the home is one of the key locations where identity is formed it seems crucial to interrogate the special relationship that the soma has to this most important space.

The relationship of the body, or soma as Shusterman prefers, to the home is inherent throughout the history of architecture, so much so in fact that we can see that

the body – as a composite structure through which we live – is itself symbolically understood through tectonic notions. This symbolic connection extends from ancient Greek philosophers like Plato, Roman architects like Vitruvius, and early Christian thinkers like St. Paul through Renaissance writers like Henry Wotton, and all the way into modern scientific critics of religion such as Freud (Shusterman, 2012: 223).

This long and varied history of the relationship of the body to the buildings we construct to house and protect them is not confined only to the physical structures but also often cross-pollinates into the imaginary world of the arts and literature. When considering what impact any of this may have had on Gaiman as an author, I will first consider the role of the “technical boy” in *American Gods* and that character’s relationship to the author William S. Burroughs, a writer who was equally concerned with the body and home (Lydenberg, 1987; Nelson, 1991). The technical boy, who in the fictionalised America created in the text is both the god of and a personification of the internet, has a deeper and more complex role in the story and the connection to Burroughs is revealed in two distinct ways. The first is the essence of the electronic nature of the worship that the technical boy collects. Burroughs noted that ‘Anything that can be done chemically can be done in other ways,’ suggesting that all drug-induced states and, by extension, spiritual states can be manufactured via the proper stimulation of the electromagnetic signals in the brain (Burroughs & Odier, 1989: 131). If transcendent religious experiences are the product of brain chemistry and electromagnetic signals we can consider the role of brain chemistry in the creation of these experiences. The chemical N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and its role as (potentially) the spirit molecule (responsible for near-death, and religious-like, experiences) is of particular interest because of the presence of sigma-1 receptors in mammalian nervous systems. Indeed, recent research notes that ‘biochemical, physiological, and behavioral experiments indicate that DMT is an endogenous agonist for the sigma-1 receptor’ thus suggesting that human beings are capable of a hallucinogenic or psychedelic experience in response to the presence of DMT in the nervous system simulating transcendence (Fontanilla et al., 2009). Additionally, the technical boy is smoking something that Shadow notes is ‘not tobacco...not pot either...It smelled a little like burning electrical parts’ (Gaiman, 2012: 52). The substance is revealed by the technical boy to be, ‘synthetic toad skins’ further adding ‘You know they can synthesise bufotenin now?’ (Gaiman, 2012: 53). Bufotenin is an entheogenic substance closely related to DMT and they are nearly functionally identical. In *American Gods* the technical boy, via his fluency in Burroughs’ ideas of electro-neuro-chemistry, can



be read as a being who gains power by consuming the worship of those who traverse the internet, thus providing a similarly religious-like experience online. This transmutes his home, physically represented by a rolling limousine and sub contextually by the zeros and ones of binary code manifested on screens across the world as bits of data, in to houses of worship. These flickering computer monitors could then activate the pineal gland in ways that trigger the release of DMT or its requisite precursors in accord with Burroughs' philosophy. Burroughs and his colleagues explored this idea in depth via experimentation with flicker machines and alpha wave stimulation, which are not unlike the flickering computer monitors through which the digital boy collects his strength (Geiger, 2003).

The nod to Burroughs is made explicit when the technical boy tells Shadow to give a message to his employer Mr Wednesday 'Tell him that language is a virus and that religion is an operating system and prayers are just so much fucking spam' (Gaiman, 2012: 53). The phrase that 'language is a virus' comes directly from Burroughs' own personal philosophy on language and thought control. On this topic he states, 'my basic theory is that the written word is a virus that made the spoken word possible' and he extends the idea to a scientific conclusion by citing the work of 'Wilson Smith, a scientist who really thinks about his subject' (Burroughs & Odier, 1989: 12). The virus, however, is incredibly resourceful in that it is not classified or recognised as such. Quoting a chapter from Smith's book, *Mechanism's of Virus Infections* (1963), he notes that 'Viruses...are thus wholly dependent on the integrity of the cellular systems they parasitize' as is the technical boy to his followers and users (Burroughs & Odier, 1989: 12). As the new god of the information superhighway, the technical boy's home is naturally a stretch limousine that is almost constantly in motion like the bits of information that fly over the so-called information superhighway.

The idea of the technical boy as the internet personified, which naturally needs connection and a flow of information in order to function properly, is heightened later in the book. A series of events leads to the need to exchange a dead body, and upon arrival the technical boy is cut off from the conveniences of the modern world. He complains about the location for the meeting saying, 'This place is such

a fucking dump. No Power. Out of wireless range. I mean when you got to be wired, you're already back in the stone age,' thus setting up this temporary home as being unsuited to his particular somatic constitution (Gaiman, 2012: 437). After this pronouncement the technical boy joins Shadow (the protagonist) in his room and appears scared by the lack of technology and the general isolation that the location provides. After a moment of conversation the technical boy returns to his room and begins to throw himself against the walls. This act of the somatically personified internet using its body in an attempt to start moving suggests that the information superhighway (or at least the god of it) is only at home while in motion, even if that motion is not essentially productive.

Returning to the connection of somaesthetics to architecture and space Shusterman states that

If architecture involves mass as well as space, then the soma likewise provides our most immediate sense of mass and volume. We feel the solid mass and thickness of our body; we also feel the liquids and gases that move through its volume (Shusterman, 2012: 224).

This idea complicates how a character such as the technical boy can ever "feel at home" since the very material that he would be made of is mostly insubstantial. That is not to say that the material of information on the internet has no mass; in 2007 both Discover magazine and Scholar Russell Seitz produced estimates of the mass of the internet of between the smallest grain of sand (Cass) and two ounces (Seitz). However, these masses are so low that a personified internet, the technical boy, would have a difficult time staying still, thus he chooses to ram himself into the walls of his room. Shusterman further explains that

the architecture of the body (the fact that we are essentially top-heavy – our heavier head, shoulders, and torso resting on our significantly less massive legs) is part of what impels the soma to move because its vertical equilibrium is more easily sustained in motion than in standing still (2012: 225).

Thus, as the internet is personified by the technical boy, it only stands to reason that he might become an exaggerated somatic being so that not only is stillness difficult, but it is nearly impossible.

In Gaiman's novel, not every character responds negatively to stillness and lack of environmental stability. Where the technical boy's response can be attributed to his separation from his source of power and in essence his home, other characters are able to adapt to new spaces more calmly and in so doing create new places of stability and power. The main character, Shadow, occupies several different domiciles, a prison cell, a series of motor vehicles, a funeral parlour in Cairo, Illinois, a temporary home in the Idyllic town of Lakeside, Wisconsin and finally in the world tree (yggdrasil). In each of these different homes Shadow has a unique somatic response that not only informs the location but also, in many ways, creates them. We are introduced to Shadow in prison and he is described as 'big enough' and in shape in such a way that other inmates did not bother him. The prison of the story seems almost as though it is constructed around Shadow and therefore his responses are linked to this environment. He is somatically aware of a coming storm (both literal and metaphorical) even though he exists in a box with no windows so that 'the sun went down and he didn't see it and the sun came up and he didn't see it' (Gaiman, 2012: 5). In this way, Gaiman conveys the sense that Shadow's body mirrors the dense dark walls that make up the prison. The character is also connected to the structure in other ways; his last several weeks of incarceration were plagued with 'a hollowness in the pit of his stomach... he found himself watching the body language of the guards, of the other inmates, searching for a clue to the bad thing that was going to happen' (Gaiman, 2012: 7). Here, when Shadow stays silent and waits for the impending storm his body reacts (the hollowness), yet he ignores it due to the somatic training he has endured as a prisoner. In this way Shadow's body is as Shusterman describes the soma: a 'docile, malleable site for inscribing social power.' This, in turn, then 'reveals the crucial role that the soma can play in political philosophy and social justice' (2008: 21). This concept of a docile malleable soma is naturally related to Foucault's ideas of a 'docile body' that 'may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved' which in turn Foucault developed as an extension of La Mettrie's 'Machine Man' that 'joins

the analysable body to the manipulable body' (1991: 136). Thus, when provoked by guards, sensing impending doom, or given devastating news, Shadow chooses to stay quiet and keep his head down, just like a model, disciplined inmate.

The second primary home that Shadow occupies is a small apartment in the town of Lakeside. Importantly, the first sense of the apartment that Gaiman conveys is that it is dwarfed by Shadow's own stature. Everything in the space is described in terms that are diminutive: a tiny kitchen, a small bedroom, and a tinier bathroom and as he falls asleep, Shadow hears the hum of the refrigerator and a radio in the building. Both of these sounds suggest that not only is the apartment smallish but that the building itself is small compared to the heightened sensory perception possessed by the protagonist, which is most likely a by-product of his days as an inmate. His first real experience with the town comes via his body's response to the cold Wisconsin winter, the cold made him 'cough, a dry thin cough, as the bitterly cold air touched his lungs' his 'ears and face hurt and then his feet hurt' (Gaiman, 2012: 262). His body is, therefore, trapped between two biological imperatives: the need for food (that caused him to leave his apartment) and the need for warmth. His journey continues as he catalogues various body parts and their reaction to the conditions 'froze his bones and the marrow in his bones, froze the lashes of his eyes, froze the warm place under his balls, which were retreating into his pelvic cavity' (Gaiman, 2012: 263). In addition, for the character of Shadow this attention to the extreme of temperature (even if uncomfortable) is instructive in a somaesthetic fashion. As Shusterman notes, 'attention to bodily movements and feelings can be useful in the learning process' (Shusterman, 2012: 64). Thus by bringing focus to his somatic condition, Shadow (once he is rescued by a kindly police officer) is able to focus on his body as a way of getting his bearings in the town and as a means by which to subvert the memories of the last time he was in a police cruiser. In this way Shadow is 'able to monitor the unreflective ways [his] our body performs' as Shadow is learning to function in his new role as a free man (Shusterman, 2012: 64).

The final home for the protagonist in the text is the tree that Shadow hangs from as a remembrance for Wednesday (who at this point is revealed as an emanation

of Odin). This home takes Shadow through various stages of somatic consciousness; day one is filled only with discomfort as his body adjusts to his new home and the idea that he is hanging from a rather large tree. Shadow notes, 'if he flopped forward, then the rope around his neck would take up the slack and the world would shimmer and swim' and that 'the bark of the tree was rough against his back' (Gaiman, 2012: 457). What Gaiman is doing is writing in a fashion that moves the reader to a point where they can potentially feel some level of these somatic responses. In a sense, Gaiman is using the reader's visceral cognition (or interoception) as a way to solidify the connection of reader to character. Oliver Cameron describes this sort of interoceptive response as 'the ability of visceral afferent information to either reach awareness and/or to directly or indirectly affect behaviour' (2002: 3). As such, with regards to interoception, when the viscera are influenced by external stimuli, their reaction to said stimulation reaches the level of consciousness in the experiencer. Shadow's body is transformed and reduced in this space from a cognitive sensory object, one that became the sensation as when he 'no longer felt the cold, or rather, he felt only, but the cold had now become part of himself, it belonged to him and he belonged to it' (Gaiman, 2012: 459). In this way the cold helps Shadow towards an eventual transcendence since this new relationship with his surroundings challenges some dominant notions of the body, such as when Shusterman suggests that, 'As an object of care, the body will be representationally exteriorized as a mere physical thing...in contrast to the inner living spirit' (Shusterman, 2008: 27). Shadow's body is not simply 'the dead thing, the 'corpus'', but rather has become part of one of the forces of nature and via this transformation, the world tree that he is strapped to eventually gives way to a more interesting realm that is constructed from his pain and sensation (Shusterman, 2008: 27).

### **Space, Bodies and Gods**

Space and place are at the heart of how the characters known as the "old gods" make the transition to their new places of (much reduced) power in Gaiman's America. When Shadow first travels to meet Mr Ibis and his associate Mr Jaquel

(himself modelled on the Egyptian god Anubis) who is rendered at times as a talking black dog with a long snout, we are told that the city called Cairo, IL (pronounced kay-roh) mirrors the river delta structure of Cairo in Egypt (Gaiman, 2012). In addition, Ibis and Jaquel work as funeral home attendants, which is in line with Anubis' association with mummification and the afterlife and Thoth who is the scribe of the underworld (Gaiman, 2012: 180). In this way these old gods parallel the functions they performed in the old world and thus recontextualise their importance and function in America. Their work with the bodies of the dead is also a clear link to the importance of the soma for Egyptian gods of the underworld and suggests that they must stay close to this trade in order to maintain what little power they have left. The jackal is a renowned hunter and is more famous for its scavenger like behaviour and the eating of carrion. The Ibis's relationship with scavenging is perhaps a bit more complex. As a bird that feeds on carrion eaters it too is directly dependant on death to sustain life. Thus the corporeal forms of these gods are closely linked with the functions they perform and as these forms are mimicked in their American representations they can be read as closely aligned with these same somatic functions. By having both a body, a job and a home that are connected to the ideas of the afterlife and the preservation and veneration of the dead these old gods are more than simply powerless echoes of their past, they are their own embodied history.

These old gods of Egypt are giving way to a new god from Jerusalem and so it is important to consider the way in which America's most powerful new god (Jesus) is rendered in the text. Gaiman notes in the Appendix to the revised author's preferred text that he had been, 'looking forward to writing the meeting of Shadow and Jesus for most of the book' but that the task was too grand and ultimately did not fit within the structure of the story. He refers to the scene (which is included in the appendix in the first version of the author's preferred text but is included in a 2012 reprint merged with the primary text) that takes place while Shadow is hanging in vigil as apocryphal. For this discussion we need only consider how Jesus' body and his surroundings interact. The now Americanised saviour is dressed in a fashion that is distinctly American (he is wearing a baseball cap) yet the description also evokes images of the Biblical Jesus, 'tanned, slender, a beard' but perhaps most striking is

the description of Jesus' hand as 'one callused hand—the fingers were etched with old chisel scars' (Gaiman, 2012: 464). The calluses and the chisel scars are clearly designed to be evocative of both his hardscrabble life in ancient Israel and they also seem to solidify the idea that he was a trained carpenter. These details are in keeping with much of the mythos of Christ; his earthly father (Joseph) is referenced as being a simple carpenter and in the traditions of the day Jesus would have followed in his father's footsteps. What is striking is the omission of the stigmata (or marks from the crucifixion), which would be the most tangible and visible marker of Christ's identity to be carried by his body. While it is true that, depending on the location of the gods in the world of the novel, nearly all of them can manipulate their bodies and appearances to either stand out or blend in, while certain aspects of their physical form seem to be almost unchangeable. For example, the character of Mr Ibis (modelled on the Egyptian god Thoth) is described as a 'crane-like man' thus showing how his appearance in the material world of the text mirrors his godlike appearance (Gaiman, 2012: 179). In this way the bodies of the characters are inscribed with elements of their mythologised personae yet they are often softened in order to not generate too much attention in the fictionalised America of the novel. This example seems to make the omission of the stigmata particularly interesting and while Gaiman notes that he had intended to write a much longer piece involving Jesus and Shadow one can not help but understand that a writer of Gaiman's calibre is an expert at leaving out details as much as he is about including them. The space that Christ inhabits is reminiscent of a late 1990s McMansion a 'Spanish-style building...adobe corridor...open courtyard...water gardens and the fountains,' the adobe colour while prominent in the southwest of America hearkens to the arid browns and reds of the middle east (Gaiman, 2012: 464). In addition, the material prosperity that is indicated by this home would be accurate given Christianity's privileged place in America. The opulent (or at least upper middle-class) home would place the figure of Christ among the group that, ideally, would wield the most power in the United States, thus reflecting the life and homes of his followers.

In *American Gods* the homes that these beings inhabit are not simply constructed as structures but rather, through the lens of somaesthetics and its connection with

architecture, we can see how these bodies-at-home shape and construct their spaces for literary and interoceptive effect. This effect is calculated to make the reader feel, or at least imagine, in a way that might strengthen the message's transmission but also creates a sense of closeness with the characters in the story. In different places and different structures these characters function in a way that is consistent with the realms of their godly dominion. It is through Gaiman's constructions and descriptions of their bodies in space that the narrative gets much of its power. While the characters construct spaces that are relevant to how the followers of their respective religions would understand them, they are also cast as completely American, with the ideas of home as a sanctuary, a place of power and in truly American fashion, a place of sovereignty and autonomy over both their surroundings and bodies. This allows the gods (both old and new) to create homes that are comfortable and familiar thus embodying the American dream, while the protagonist constructs his final home in an act of sacrifice that in itself becomes an act of power mediated through his body.

On the surface, *American Gods* is a tale of migration, assimilation and power, expertly cloaked within the confines of a fantasy novel. While all of this is certainly true it is clear that Gaiman's text has deeper resonances around the issues of home, identity and the body. A close examination of some of the points of connection between the various factions and characters in this novel reveals specific elements of the American experience, both native and immigrant. Characters in the novel embody many of the archetypal figures found in stories since time immemorial, however, by constructing a character like Shadow Moon, Gaiman gives the reader a figure who is engaged in somatic introspection from his incarceration through to his vigil in yggdrasil. Along his journey Shadow visits many homes and in each one a new physical and mental challenge emerges giving him the opportunity to utilise his docile, malleable body as a vehicle for true spiritual growth. Shadow becomes, by the end of the story, more human than human as he has achieved a level of transcendence that defies a dualistic understanding of the body-mind problem. His hero's journey is only possible because of the connections between body, mind and place (namely homes) that are clearly evident in *American Gods*. By using critical methods that are focused



on the use and importance of the body for mental and spiritual growth these crucial underlying and subtle points in the text have been examined in order to provide a new perspective on this novel.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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