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Modern American Myth-Making in Mass Media Texts

by

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Introduction

What is an American myth? “Myth” can have many meanings and can refer to many different types of works. For example, Edwards and Klosa refer to *Frankenstein* as “an important mythic text” (Edwards and Klosa 34), which provides a middle point between ancient myths (e.g. the *Odyssey*) and current myths, showing that myths have continued to be produced and establishing myth-making as a continuous process. This process continues into the present, all over the world, so it stands to reason that the United States of America has its own myths. The identity of those myths is less certain. While ideas such as Manifest Destiny and the American Dream are frequently referred to as American myths, there is a difference between ideological concepts and myths that tell a representative story. Those representative stories, and what constitutes such narratives for the United States, are the focus of this paper.

Various works spanning many media continue to construct specifically American modern myths. To look at these constructs, this paper will examine five mass media texts of the late 20th and early 21st century. To start with, Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods* (2001) is a natural choice, given that it tells the story of a man who gets caught up in conflicts between the gods living in in the United States around the turn of the millennium. However, Gaiman is originally from Britain, though he now lives in the United States, which gives him an unusual viewpoint on the topic. Leslie Marmon Silko, on the other hand, is a Native author (specifically, Laguna), and so her novel *Ceremony* (1977) that deals with a young Laguna soldier who returns home and interacts with the myths of his culture, offers a viewpoint that is almost diametrically opposed. Gaiman is an outsider because he is originally from somewhere else and has immigrated to the US, whereas Silko belongs to a group of people who are originally from America and yet are forced outside of the main culture of the United States by their ethnicity. Thus, reading the two

novels together offers *Ceremony* a chance to illuminate what is left out of Gaiman's somewhat Euro-centric novel. Meanwhile, comic book heroes are frequently referred to as modern pantheons, and Captain America is therefore a "god" of the United States. The recent Marvel movies that the character has been featured in (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Avengers*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*) highlight how Captain America is constructed as a myth both in the fictional world he lives in and as a character. Lastly, *Supernatural* has many of the same trappings of *American Gods*. The two main characters hunt monsters and encounter a variety of mythical creatures as they travel the country in an overarching road narrative that stretches across all episodes of the television series that has been running since 2005. While these are not by any means all the works that touch on ideas of American myths, they are examples that point to specific themes of interest as well as connect with each other in ways that are mutually revealing.

In contrast to the works just mentioned, *The Lightning Thief* is the first book in a young adult series by Rick Riordan that features gods in 21st century America is not essentially American, nor is it a myth, which helps reveal what about the others does qualify them as both specifically American and mythical. While Riordan's book does use existing gods, it has none of the other shared themes. By not adapting those gods or creating any new myths, nothing about the book makes the mythical qualities specifically American. At the same time, belief is a non-issue in the book, which eliminates the element of a living and changing system of myths. Therefore, though *The Lightning Thief* is an American book that references myths, it shows that those qualities alone are not enough to make a work an American myth and thus reveals what about the other works does make them fit that description. The four major themes that classify these works as specifically American myths are the importance of belief in creating gods, the use

of existing mythical characters and structures, the adaptation of existing myths to become peculiarly American, and the creation of entirely new myths that are American to begin with.

Belief is a necessity for myths to endure, not just in the United States, and because of that, an emphasis on belief links these modern stories to myth traditions of the past. In several of these stories, belief actually creates mythical figures within the fictional universe of the stories. While it is always true that people create stories to believe in, many of these texts, because they are works of fantastic fiction, have physical characters that only exist because people believe in them. Not only does belief create characters, it also contributes to the use of existing mythical figures by ensuring their continued existence. Not all of the existing myths that these works use are specific gods. For example, many of these texts also work with the idea of a road narrative, a quintessentially American genre that serves as an American myth in structure and content. The necessity of belief in these stories means that some myths die out because no one believes in them, while others must change to reflect how people believe in them, which could be substantially different than when they first existed. Both the prominence of belief and the use of existing mythic elements contribute to these stories' status as current myths.

The way that some characters are changed by belief also reflects the general way in which the stories adapt existing properties to support their myths. Some of the works use the existing mythical characters to show this change, such as *American Gods*, which clearly marks the difference between the original version of the gods and the Americanized versions. Others view the change as a process in the myth stories they tell. *Ceremony* views the ability to change as a natural and necessary part of myths, and incorporates old stories that can be changed as well as new ideas to create a mythos for the setting of the story. This variety also shows the different ways these works conceptualize this change they work through. Some see it as a product of the

tension in the United States, just as Mason questions the idea of one singular “American culture,” saying that it only works as an ideal held up in many American works or as a the sum of all the different and sometimes opposing ideas that actually make up the United States (Mason 19-20). The conflicting views of different parts of America means that having one monolithic story to represent it all would be impossible and so these changes and contradictions are necessary. The prominence of both belief and change in other works makes it even more clear that *The Lightning Thief* is not an American myth: the Greek gods exist in the United States, but they have not changed from their ancient incarnations and belief in them seems to have no effect on their existence.

The ultimate change is, of course, the creation of new myths that are unique to the United States. This creation can occur in many different contexts, such as the new gods of *American Gods* that represent new technologies and innovations such as the Internet. *American Gods* also references cultural heroes of America that have been intentionally created as legends, such as Paul Bunyan. Similarly, Booker says that all American heroes have to be invented because it is an equally invented nation (Booker 51). Booker does not seem to explain why he says that America is an artificially constructed nation in contrast to other countries, which makes it hard to know how to interpret this statement. Ultimately, it seems that this would be the same for any country in the Americas, since groups of other people settled the lands and founded the nations (to the exclusion of indigenous peoples) as opposed to developing out of older traditions in the same location. The United States is peculiarly exceptionalist and builds upon the myth of the self-made man as a foundation of the culture. Given these characteristics as well as its comparative youth as a country, the United States needs newly created myths to fully represent the reality of the nation.

These themes seem to come up over and over again because together they demarcate the most essential parts of an American myth. Belief allows these works to create living mythic traditions, while the use of existing myths connects these works to ancient representations of myths. This use also allows the stories to be more than just located in the United States, as they can employ specifically American cultural myths. Likewise, by adapting narratives of one sort or another, the texts link themselves even more firmly to distinctively American representations. Ultimately, the creation of unique stories to help construct a mythical American tradition is the most distinctive feature of these texts. The use of this collection of ideas lets each of these texts display a different facet of American myth and the texts work together to show what qualities are necessary for constructing those myths.

Belief

By highlighting belief, works such as *American Gods* firmly link themselves to mythic traditions in a multitude of ways. Early on in *American Gods*, Shadow (the protagonist) has a dream of a buffalo-headed man, who tells Shadow that changes are happening and to survive, Shadow must believe in everything (Gaiman 17). It is not clear until much later what the buffalo-headed man is, but he is clearly important from the start and he introduces the importance of belief to both Shadow and the reader. He also specifically refers to indiscriminate belief: he does not tell Shadow to believe in what is right, or any specific gods, or for any definite goal, but rather to believe in “everything” (Gaiman 17). This instruction introduces the theme of belief early in the novel and suggests the importance it will play through the whole story. Belief is not just for the gods in this story, but all of the characters, reinforcing the mythic status of the whole text. The importance of belief for Shadow makes it clear that the story is not just some average people interacting with gods and fantastic beings, but a myth itself that draws all of its characters

into this mode of belief. If belief was only important for the gods, then only the god characters would be linked to the mythic tradition. Instead, belief is important for all of the characters, and in this way, the book gives mythic status to its entire contents, not merely certain characters in it. Sam Black Crow's speech about belief has a similar effect. It takes up more than a page of text, and enumerates all the things that Sam can believe, including many different sorts of belief and some that contradict each other, and some of the concepts that she says she believes in include Elvis, the Easter Bunny, and "a woman's right to choose" (Gaiman 348-349). These varied beliefs reinforce the buffalo-headed man's message of indiscriminate belief. There is equal importance given to serious moral stances and pop culture references, which establishes the wide range of beliefs that can make up American myths, as well as helping link this to America as they are in many ways specifically American beliefs. While most of the beliefs in the novel are visible because of their result (the gods, for instance), this speech only tells us the belief and does not show any evidence that the belief leads to anything real happening. Despite this, it is one of the most memorable sequences in the book, and shows how even the human characters of the novel value belief, and thus how the book as a whole represents that same importance.

While this focus on belief seems help represent the diversity present in the United States, it can also show disrespect toward other traditions. Shadow visits a hall of forgotten gods and learns that when gods are forgotten, they die (Gaiman 54). When Wednesday (Odin, also known in the novel as Mr. Wednesday) gives a speech to the other gods at the House on the Rock, he explicitly says that the gods survive through belief in them and when people began to forget, the gods' power waned (Gaiman 123). The idea that gods need belief to survive both helps emphasize just how crucial belief is to this myth, but also makes the gods dependent on humans in some ways. It dramatizes the way mythic texts are created and spread and lost. Wednesday

also refers to a drink that is “Concentrated prayer and belief” and describes the gods as literally feeding on belief to sustain them (Gaiman 254). Belief becomes a physical object, allowing it to be measured in some ways and making in clear what people do and do not believe in. This concept of gods needing belief is also used in *Supernatural*. As in *American Gods*, the gods are being forgotten, but unlike in the novel, this lack of belief forces them to take human sacrifices (“Time After Time”). Nearly all the gods in the television series display a tendency toward human sacrifice, and supposedly the reason is that their power is weak from lack of belief, so they take more sacrifices than they did previously. In the episode “Hammer of the Gods” alone, there is a room full of humans intended as food for the assembled gods. This portrayal is repeated over and over again in the show, and it shows a lack of respect to the other cultures and beliefs these myths come from by reducing all of their deities to pagan gods that require human sacrifice regardless of whether the culture they come from actually practiced/s such sacrifice. “Hammer of the Gods” also makes it explicit that the belief in the old gods is waning, and this is true for all of the deities that appear in the series (it should be noted that the Judeo-Christian god has never explicitly made an appearance). However, some of the gods who are present, such as Kali, should have plenty of believers given the many people in the world who practice Hinduism, so it is unclear why they are also in danger because of reduced belief. This diminished status of all the non-Christian gods, especially when combined with other events of the episode, puts the Christian mythologies above all others. So while *Supernatural* and *American Gods* both use this same mechanism of gods living off of belief, only in *Supernatural* does it become a tool for blatant discrimination against other cultures. While this is a mostly unquestioned portrayal in the television series, it does in fact reveal a facet of American culture by privileging it over all other traditions. Gaiman’s work is much more respectful to other traditions, but that does not make

either of these inaccurate myths, instead illustrating the tension and contradictions present in the United States that myths should reflect.

Gaiman provides two direct explanations of what it means to be a god in *American Gods*. The first is from Loki: “It’s about being you, but the *you* that people believe in. It’s about being the concentrated, magnified essence of you. [...] And then one day they forget about you, and they don’t believe in you, and they don’t sacrifice, and they don’t care” (Gaiman 395). The second is from Jesus in an extra scene only present in the Author’s Preferred Text: being a god “means you give up your mortal life to become a meme: something that lives forever in people’s minds [...] everyone gets to re-create you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity anymore. Instead, you’re a thousand aspects of what people need you to be” (Gaiman 528).

These two scenes are surprisingly similar, given the very different characters they come from, and so it seems this is meant to be an actual description of how the book imagines these gods. Both quotes emphasize the power believers have over the gods, and Loki’s specifically addresses the need for belief, while Jesus’s highlights the fragmented nature of the gods’ identities because so many people believe so differently in them. The tension and incoherent nature of American culture is also implicitly brought up with the “thousand aspects” Jesus refers to, and the statement is particularly loaded coming from the only representative of Christianity in the book, who only appears in an outtake, despite the religion being a highly influential part of the United States’ identity.

While *Supernatural* features sacrifice much more prominently in its discussion of belief, *American Gods* does present instances of sacrifice as a form of belief. Loki mentions sacrifice in his description, which is mentioned several other times in the novel, most explicitly with Bilquis, who needs the man to worship her to be powerful again and then consumes him as a sacrifice

(Gaiman 26). While it is unclear if all of the gods work the same way, for her, it seems that just being believed in is not enough, or perhaps she is not being believed in on her own, so she must create situations where someone believes in her. Her method is much more active than the way many of the other gods seem to keep power, and also similar to Wednesday and Loki's overall plan to create war and thus the environment they both feed off. The one other example of sacrifice is in the town of Lakeside. Lakeside is a seemingly perfect small town, which it turns out is so wonderful because there is a god who lives there and he keeps it economically healthy and pleasant to live in by sacrificing a child every year (Gaiman 501). Other than Bilquis, then, it seems that sacrifices are associated with villains. These sacrifices seem to be one of few areas in which the novel explores the different moral stances taken within one side of the conflict. Those taking sacrifices are all old gods, but some are villainous and some are helpful to the protagonist, so the presence of sacrifice becomes divested from any evil association readers might bring to it, allowing the gods to be as varied as the humans in the story. Bilquis's role is also similar to *Supernatural's* use of waning belief to justify gods' needing more human sacrifices to keep their power. However, Bilquis remains a sympathetic character unlike the gods in *Supernatural*, who are almost always pure antagonists.

Explicitly stated belief is not the only form of belief demonstrated in these works. Some of the new gods, the antagonists, in *American Gods* are described as existing "because everyone knows they must exist," thus suggesting that even unconscious belief can bring things into being (Gaiman 273). Relatedly, "Hell House" is an episode in the first season of *Supernatural* that depicts the inception of a myth, which is fitting for an episode in the first season of a show that explores aspects of American myths. In this episode, the Winchesters, the main characters of the show, investigate what appears to be a haunting but instead is a tulpa, a Tibetan thought-form

that only exists when people believe in it. The story of the “haunted house” was put online and so the thousands of people reading the website believed in the tulpa and thus gave it power, which is similar in some ways to the unconscious belief that supports the new gods in Gaiman’s novel. The Winchesters come up with a plan to use the legend on the website to be able to get rid of the tulpa, but the website’s server crashes and so they are forced to get rid of the house, hoping that if they can eliminate that part of the legend, the rest will become ineffective. “Hell House” suggests that it is possible to change or destroy a myth by intentionally changing people’s beliefs, which is unique among these portrayals of myth. At the end of the episode, one of the characters wonders, “Of all the things we hunted, how many of them existed just cause people believed in them?” (“Hell House”). The case seems to be wrapped up at the end of the episode, and it is never mentioned again in the series, but the episode suggests the possibility that the tulpa was not completely destroyed and therefore it could be used in a new episode in a new form. Both the idea that more of the monsters could exist simply because people believe they do and the impossibility of knowing whether the legend will not simply change again suggest a much wider effect of myths on the world of the series than what the characters realize. This potential has never been realized in the series (though the series is still airing), but the possibility of beliefs affecting far more than just this one episode leaves the viewers to wonder themselves what other stories are predicated on belief. While “Hell House” does not have the same connection to gods and established mythology that some other episodes do, the way the tulpa works seems to be very similar to the way the gods function in *American Gods*. It only exists because people believe in it and it changes its physical aspects based on what people believe about it. It is also notable that the episode uses the Internet to disseminate the information about the tulpa, something *American Gods* generally dismisses as the domain of the new gods. The

tulpa is also the antagonist of the episode, but the Internet is used both positively and negatively, making it more of a tool in this usage, than the antagonistic entity it becomes in *American Gods* because of the new gods. The episode uses the exact same tactics as *American Gods* to create this being, but instead of seeing it dying because belief in it has waned, as we do with gods in both *Supernatural* and *American Gods*, we see its creation and growth, something not seen in *American Gods* at all.

There are other examples of non-traditional avenues of belief besides unintentional belief. Shadow sees the ancient Egyptian afterlife when he dies, and he asks why, since he never believed in it. Mr. Ibis (Thoth) tells him that “It doesn’t matter [...] We believed in you” (Gaiman 428). This statement is one of the only hints that belief goes both ways- that the gods believing in something can make it real in the same way that they are real because people believe in them. In some ways this extends to Captain America, especially in the recent movies. The myth of Captain America is not simply of a patriotic hero, but one who can be looked at as a moral example for all people who theoretically encourages Americans to be better. Both in the movie and out, Steve Rogers (aka Captain America) inspires belief. In *The Winter Soldier*, he inspires employees of the agency he brings down to stand up to their corrupt superiors. Instead of being created through belief, he produces belief, in himself and thus in the morals he stands for, in others. Fans of the movie have also used him as a motivational tool: images with both “What would Steve Rogers do?” (“You’re braver than you think”) and “You are not acting like the person [Steve] Rogers knows you can be” circulate on the Internet (“people should just reply...”). This is the power of a myth: it can reach outside of the story it is contained in and inspire people who read or watch it through the same tools of belief that are used inside the story. At the climax of *American Gods*, Shadow realizes that “It’s what people do. [...] People

imagine, and they believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen” (Gaiman 477). These works use belief to link what may seem like inconsequential pop cultural texts to longstanding traditions of myth.

Use of Existing Myths

As with belief, these works use parts of existing myths to put themselves into conversation with older and continuing mythical traditions. They also put themselves into conversation with American popular culture, using myths of a different sort. “Hell House” in particular highlights the importance of pop culture to *Supernatural* because the plot hinges on one of the characters recognizing a symbol from a Blue Öyster Cult album, leading them to realize that the haunted house legend was invented. While obviously this is very different from the use of gods to place a work in conversation with other mythical traditions, it is similar to the ways that *American Gods* uses features of American culture like roadside attractions, incorporating them into the mythology of the work. Both *Supernatural* and *American Gods* suggest that seemingly frivolous aspects of pop culture are, in some ways, woven into the overall fabric of American myths. In fact, featuring classic rock music is a staple of *Supernatural*, emphasizing the show’s existence in the continuum of American pop culture. Rock music is linked to America not just by virtue of being produced in America but by being quintessentially American (“Is Rock ’n’ Roll All About Reinvention?”). One of the other most obvious American cultural myths that *Supernatural* uses is the road narrative, and “Hell House” works well as a representative episode for the rest of the series in this respect. The Winchesters’ car is showcased at both the beginning and the end of the episode. Sam and Dean drive a 1967 Chevy Impala that their father passed on to them, and the importance of that particular car to the story is highlighted again and again in the series, being described in another episode as “the most important object in

[...] the whole universe” and directly linked to the love of family that allows the brothers to stop the apocalypse (“Swan Song”). *Supernatural* is a much more traditional road narrative than *American Gods*, with an attachment to the specific car, typical white male protagonists (Primeau 107), and the use of driving to explore character development (Lackey 149). In this episode, many of the scenes in which Sam and Dean interact and talk about things other than the plot occur in the car, and this is very typical of the series. The mythical road narrative aspects of the show are linked to revelations of the characters’ nature and to their development, as well as linking the series to the long tradition of road narratives. The series directly links itself to *On the Road*, one of the most famous representatives of the road genre: the main characters of the series, whose names are Sam and Dean, are once referred to as Sal and Dane (“The Monster at the End of this Book”), and the original owner of their car is later revealed to be named Sal Moriarty (“Swan Song”), in comparison to *On the Road*’s Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. By linking itself with this tradition, *Supernatural* firmly establishes itself as not just set in the United States, but quintessentially American in content and form.

Much of *American Gods* also involves travelling across the country, frequently by car. By page 40, Shadow is already on his second car trip of the story (Gaiman 40). Clearly, there is an element of a road narrative in the novel. Primeau explicitly refers to road narratives as mythic many times throughout *Romance of the Road*, so even the structure of *American Gods* links it to myths of a sort. This use of a road narrative frame in *American Gods*, even though it is somewhat atypical, also allows the book to implicitly connect to an established American tradition, both from the history of the genre as well as the logistics of road trips necessarily involving travel across and connection to the land. Gordon Slethaug explains that “the road is not confined to American culture, but [...] in the USA it is inextricably linked to claims of national identity,

among them exceptionalism” (ed. Slethaug and Ford 13). This allows the road narrative to be linked to various types of identity, or rather, different scales of identity, from individual discoveries to examinations of American identity. *American Gods* upholds the road narrative’s ability to comment on American identity, both with characters explicitly discussing the self-conception of America as well as the book’s presentation of specifically American things such as roadside attractions.

Shari Roberts says that road narratives specifically question the validity of the American Dream (and thus, the national identity that is based heavily on that ideal) and what it means in the current culture (qtd. in ed. Slethaug and Ford 214)¹. While these ideas about identity and road narratives seem contradictory, there is a way for them to coexist. Primeau discusses Charles Kuralt’s search for a national identity in *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*, and concludes that Kuralt does not define one, but instead lists things that seem particularly American, such as roadside attractions, “the music of American place names,” and “the small town’s agelessness and continuity” (Primeau 52). Gaiman explicitly sets out to define America and ends up with a series of contradictions and peculiarities that he does not try to fit into a coherent whole, simply leaving them as they are and labeling the overall collection as America. This collection of contradictory traits allows *American Gods* to express potential critiques of America while not condemning it as a whole because it never portrays a coherent whole, thus incorporating both the expression and questioning of an American ideal. This contradictory nature also allows the “change through belief” that characterizes the book’s view of America, since there is no guiding narrative. Instead, the narratives in the book are at the whims of whatever people happen to believe. This disjointedness is also particularly appropriate for the road narrative pattern, which

¹ She compares them to Westerns that promise a happy ending of the American Dream, whereas road narratives, question the American Dream by continually passing out of civilization.

necessarily travels through different places and episodes in the story as the characters move through their journey. Lackey plainly states that “mobility and space have come to be the most familiar distinguishing qualities of America,” and Gaiman’s extensive use of travel as well as his emphasis on the land as the most important force seem to line up with this idea (Lackey 75).

Primeau says road fictions allow people to “celebrate heroes and places and values that were never there except in our hopes, our imaginations, and our ability to construct myths” (Primeau 14). *American Gods* takes the values that Primeau sees in road narratives and imagines them as personified, something that Gaiman can do in the novel because it is also fantasy, unlike many road narratives. Lackey describes the idea that often in road narratives, a traveller thinks they can “create a new vision of America, reinvent the land” but that this is a false hope (Lackey 31). In the context of *American Gods*, it is clear that actually, beliefs very much can “create a new vision of America” through the gods that Americans believe in.

Both *Ceremony* and *American Gods* draw on Native traditions of land deities and spirits, which is a part of America that often gets ignored in discussions of American myths, but the specific ways that the two texts do this is markedly different. By reading them as part of a tradition of American myth-making, the differences become clear through looking at the way the two books use similar ideas. After the climax of the book, Shadow dreams of the buffalo-headed man again, and it is finally revealed that he is not a god, but “the land” and that everyone in America, gods and humans, is there because “it suits us that they are here” (Gaiman 488). Following the logic of Gaiman’s many accounts of coming to America, it makes sense that ultimately, the “god” that actually determines what happens is the land itself. If, as Wednesday says, no one is actually American, then the land itself is the only true American in some sense. The buffalo-headed man does not change like the rest of the gods. It seems that *American Gods*

suggests the land itself is the foundation that everything else builds upon, and while the rest of the country can change, the underlying land does not. It seems notable that Gaiman chooses a bison for the representation of the land, since the bison were nearly hunted to extinction by those living on the land, and humans have undoubtedly changed the landscape of America. However, the novel seems to imply that the essence of the land will still remain. Whether that is an optimistic reading must be decided in the future, but the separation of the physical presence America is built on and the ideals and myths that make up the country seem essential to how Gaiman conceptualizes the nation and is an important facet of the tensions presented in the novel. *Ceremony*, on the other hand, fits into a Laguna tradition of a direct link between the land and stories “and a tribally specific geosacred relationship with the land,” including the earth and sky and living things (Holm 243). *Ceremony* demonstrates the sort of tradition Gaiman is drawing on for the buffalo-headed man, but the portrayals are rather different.

While examining *Ceremony*, Holm looks at views of the importance of land and oral traditions as a “nationalism” of sorts that often leads to the ignoring of the issues of sovereignty with Native lands by readers and interpreters (Holm 246-247). Readers take the importance of land and connect it to Native cultures without acknowledging the fact that in many ways, Native peoples’ lands have been taken away from them. This lack of acknowledgement has implications for *American Gods*, because of the prominence of the buffalo-headed man, who ‘is the land’. Gaiman, writing as a non-American, non-Native, creates a representation of ‘the land’ and marks it with a specifically Native symbol (the bison), but very rarely addresses Native myths and traditions, therefore ignoring the potential problems with Native lands. In *Ceremony*, Ts’eh is a “more-than-human being who represents the land’s own life” (Nelson 15); is the gender significant? Is it coincidence that the book written by a female Native author has a female land

deity whereas the book written by an Englishman has a male land deity? Or is it because Silko is specifically Laguna and it would be different for other Native authors? Whether or not there is an answer to this is unclear, but this is the value of reading the two texts together: *Ceremony* provides a contrast and a critique, in some ways, of the things *American Gods* espouses implicitly. Silko also specifically locates Tayo's story as Laguna, which she also is. Gaiman creates the buffalo-headed man as a generic deity and does not pay a whole lot of attention to the differences between Native traditions. It could be argued that Gaiman is trying to represent the entire country, and thus uses more broad generalizations. However, there is another viewpoint, which is that Gaiman is ignoring the vast and complex variety of Native traditions in favor of lumping them all together into one monolithic ideal of Native American-ness.

Sean Kicummah Teuton points out that using the term myth to describe Native texts is always problematic since myths are a Western idea and do not fit with Native concepts of experience (Teuton 140). Despite this warning, *Ceremony* seems to fit with the description of myths as stories that express how people are supposed to fit into the world. Silko uses a continuing myth of the creation of the world inspired by traditional Laguna stories as a break between the sections of the novel, and myths play an important role in Tayo's healing process. In fact, Wallace points out that "The structure of the narrative is thus self-referential and conspicuous, pointing to ritual" (Wallace 97) and the myth that runs through the book clearly parallels the story of Tayo while remaining distinct, until the end when "Tayo's story enters the mythic framework" (Wallace 96). This structure informs the use of the myth at section beginnings: they explain the myths being enacted in the plot. Mitchell also illuminates the reason the myths in between the story are less specific than might be expected: "the ritualistic stories and chants are given in poetic form, but descriptions of traditional rituals are not set off from the

story, for they are the actions that accompany the ritual of the story” (Mitchell 30). This interconnection also means that the story in the myths is unfinished until Tayo’s story resolves it: they can’t be separated (Mitchell 31). *Ceremony* uses traditional stories to structure the novel as well as letting them weave into the content of the narrative, making it very clear that the book is interacting with the mythic tradition.

Gaiman links *American Gods* with other established mythic traditions by using gods and legends from older mythologies. These mythic figures include Loki and Odin, Czernabog, the Queen of Sheba, leprechauns, Bast and Thoth, Kali, and Anansi, among others. By including these figures, Gaiman establishes that the novel is set in a world rich with mythology from all over the world. The story does tend to privilege the European and Mediterranean figures in some ways, with Norse mythology being the most prominent, but the idea that this is a global set of characters suggests both that this is part of a larger world of myths and the narrative of the American melting pot. By incorporating many traditions, the book marks itself as explicitly mythological and sets up an implicit comparison with these ancient myths. In contrast, *Supernatural*, especially in early seasons, references urban legends frequently, and more generally there are recurrent references to “lore” and other forms of legend/folk tale/myth in almost every episode (ghosts, vampires, demons, and werewolves are among the most prominent). The Winchesters do also encounter actual gods over the course of the series. The first episode that deals with a god is heavily reminiscent of Lakeside in *American Gods*—the town sacrifices a couple every year to a fertility god to keep the crops growing well and the town prosperous (“Scarecrow”). Later, the Winchesters encounter a long list of gods, including Chronos (“Time After Time”), Odin, Kali (“Hammer of the Gods”), and Osiris (“Defending Your Life”).

“Hammer of the Gods” specifically is similar to *American Gods* in some ways. They both feature a gathering of gods trying to prevent a disaster, and both gatherings are dealing with newer gods than themselves (media and the internet and other created deities for *American Gods* and the angels and demons of Judeo-Christian mythology for *Supernatural*). This is one of the few episodes that acknowledges the cultural differences between the Christian myths featured in later seasons and those of any other culture they refer to. Kali says that the impending apocalypse is “Your story. Not ours. Westerners, I swear. The sheer arrogance. [...] There are billions of us. And we were here first. If anyone gets to end this world, it's me” (“Hammer of the Gods”). This line seems to position Kali as powerful, while also calling out the Western bias the show usually has, though the rest of the episode contradicts this. It also establishes a distinction between different religions and faiths that is not present in *American Gods*, which does not specifically address Christianity except in the postscript. While *Supernatural*'s Christian bias will be discussed later, it is worth noting that by leaving it out, *American Gods* does imply that Christianity is somehow outside of the scope of the book, despite other belief systems (such as Hinduism) being represented at least cursorily in the book. This avoidance of modern religions on the part of *American Gods* seems to draw a line between them and ancient mythological traditions, something that seems not to fit with the ‘belief creates myths’ theme of the book.

Counter-Example

In contrast to these other works, which all display themes crucial to American myths, *The Lightning Thief* only uses existing mythic figures. It does nothing with belief, which eliminates the possibility that the myths can change, and indeed, they are utterly unchanged by being in America. Because the book also does not create its own myths, there is nothing in the book that makes it an American myth, despite the text's seeming similarities to the others discussed here.

The Lightning Thief uses the basic premise that the Greek gods are still in existence but they move with the “heart of the West,” so now they live in New York (Riordan 72). They still have affairs with mortals that lead to children and these children are “half-bloods” who either become heroes or die. The main character, Percy Jackson, discovers that he is one of these half-bloods and ends up being the focus of an important prophecy. Similarly to *Harry Potter*, each book has a main adventure while also revealing the overall plot, which culminates in the fifth and final book. *The Lightning Thief* introduces Percy and thus the reader to the world of the gods and other mythological beings, and even features a road narrative as part of the main storyline (the characters travel from New York to Hollywood, mostly hitchhiking and riding buses). Despite these trappings, the book does not offer any revelations about how myth works in America. Belief is not at all important in this book, though the characters do sometimes sacrifice burnt offerings of their food to the gods and continue other such ancient traditions. Unlike in *American Gods*, the gods have not changed since coming to America, though they have, in some cases, adapted to using modern technology. The series only utilizes the Greek gods, though Riordan has written another similar series featuring the Egyptian gods. While this is one of the most popular and visible series to transport ancient gods to modern America, it is actually very different in execution from *American Gods*. And while plenty is revealed about the system of gods in the series, there is not a whole lot of emphasis on how the gods relate to America, instead seeming to focus on introducing young readers to the myths of the Classical world. The book merely takes existing mythologies and sets them in the United States, and there are no real changes made to these mythologies and therefore nothing to make them uniquely American. This failure of a text that is seemingly somewhat similar to *American Gods* to display any of the themes that made

these other works American demonstrates that the classification does not come just by putting mythological characters into America.

Change and Adaptation

By using existing myths and emphasizing belief, these works are linked to longstanding traditions of myth. To become specifically American, however, these stories must also change to fit into a new culture. It has become relatively common to compare modern superheroes to the gods and heroes of ancient mythologies, making them a modern pantheon of heroes and ‘gods’ (Morrison 15). The continuity between the stories both of any specific superhero as well as all of the other heroes that share their studio is reminiscent of the full mythologies that link various gods to each other (Reynolds 43). Marvel Comics wholesale adopted the Norse pantheon and used Thor as one of their main heroes (Reynolds 57). *Captain America: The First Avenger* was released in 2011 by Marvel Studios as part of their ongoing connected network of Marvel movies. This film brings the continuity of comics to the movies for the first time, meaning that any discussion of Captain America is implicitly in a world where Thor and Asgard also exist, so a clear mythological link is present. In fact, *The First Avenger*’s villain obtains the Tesseract, which is a relic from Asgard in the world of the movies. This crossover demonstrates both the interconnectedness of the separate stories or myths as well as the aspects that are adopted from ancient myths themselves. The structures and tropes of ancient mythologies that modern readers are familiar with are used to construct superheroes as mythical figures. It follows that Captain America is the perfect example to see how these gods function in American society.

When dealing with the mythologizing of a country, the country’s history plays an essential role. In *American Gods*, Loki lends Shadow a copy of Herodotus’s *Histories*, which establishes a link to the Classical world, as well as history as a narrative constructed by people,

something that reappears with Thoth (also known as Mr. Ibis) (Gaiman 5). When Shadow talks about Herodotus later, he says that Herodotus did not make things up, “He wrote what he’d been told” (Gaiman 151). This reinforces the conception of history as a human creation and not an impartial narrative of what has happened. Mr. Ibis writes that “American history” is a children’s story and only “a representation of the thing” (Gaiman 85). Both of these statements are ways of highlighting the idea that what most people know as history is in fact another myth, and the way in which myths are always a symbol of something else. While it is not addressed much in the book, this conception of history as another myth does become important when looking at other works, such as *Captain America*. Captain America was created in 1941 as “the ultimate superpatriot,” famously punching out Hitler on the cover of his first issue (ed. Duncan and Smith 101). Captain America is the costumed identity of Steve Rogers, who wanted to enlist in the army but was declared physically unfit, until a government experiment transforms him into a supersoldier (Hayton and Albright 15). The comics title was hugely popular until the late forties, and the character mostly died off, being brought back temporarily in the fifties as a “commie smasher” but this was poorly received and the title stopped publication (ed. Duncan and Smith 103). He was brought back again in the sixties after being frozen in a block of ice for 15 years and he quickly ended up leading the Avengers (ed. Duncan and Smith 105). In this era, instead of fighting external threats, Captain America comics focused on defining America, often highlighted by the man out of time status of Rogers (Dittmer, “Fighting for Home” 109). As Dittmer says, he “serves less as a top-down propaganda tool than as a device for questioning assumptions about American behavior, politics, and society” (“Captain America” 135). In general, *Captain America* often represents the mythologization of history, interacting with real world events after they happen and paralleling events taking place when the stories were written.

In many ways, this representation of history is similar to the use of mythological traditions in other works, and, as *American Gods* points out, histories are just another form of myth that changes inherently with each retelling.

In the 21st century, the *Civil War* comic storyline sees Captain America as the leader of the movement against the government decision to make superheroes register as a means of protecting the public in a storyline clearly responding to the post 9/11 loss of privacy (ed. Duncan and Smith 107). The main plot of *The Winter Soldier* involves Captain America finding out about a massive conspiracy in the government organization he has been working for (SHIELD). His response to this revelation is not to try and eliminate the conspiracy but to destroy SHIELD completely and expose it to the world because the organization was corrupt enough to have let this threat exist within itself. The threat is ultimately visualized through Project Insight, a program that would target supposed threats to the government and “neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen” (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*). The data is being secretly collected to facilitate this project, and ultimately, it is exposed through a massive information leak by the protagonists. These are clear allusions to recent political issues in the United States; drone strikes and Edward Snowden, in particular, seem to be obvious parallels (Suebsaeng)². With this movie, not only is Captain America criticizing the fictional government of the United States within the storyline of the movie, the movie is also criticizing the actual government of the United States through the figure of Captain America. As Attewell points out, Rogers’ function in the story in the modern era is not “to be startled by our progressive values. He’s here to judge us for falling short of his—and that’s the entire crux of Winter Soldier”

² The directors mention these topics specifically in the interview, with drone strikes being a subject of public discourse prior to them pitching the movie, and Snowden leaking documents while the movie was shooting.

(Attewell). Captain America's transportation to the modern day allows the movie to mythologize current events in the same way that history is mythologized in earlier comics. Other works use mythology and link it to the real world with American structures such as the road narrative, while *Captain America* uses the real world and links it to mythology in the same way that *American Gods* refers to history as a different type of myth.

Adaption and change can be seen in several different ways in the different works, but many are related to the ways in which they use existing mythology. According to Lackey, numerous travelogues suggest that Americans "cannot properly view themselves as living in the stream of history because they ignore or reinvent the past," which seems to reinforce the idea that history is another myth, especially the personal histories frequently used in *American Gods* (Lackey 63). Many of the "Coming to America" digressions in the novel are a conflation of personal myths and history, and the novel clearly rests on such amalgamations since all the gods are reinventions of the past, so *American Gods* seems to have a positive view of such reinventions. Similarly, the ideas classically associated with the road narrative are not simply repeated in *American Gods*, but are actually being molded and changed to fit the book, just as Lackey talks about individual Americans' view of history being reinvented. Unlike many road narratives in which the specific car is an essential part of the process (such as *Supernatural*), Shadow and Wednesday often travel by airplane and change cars very frequently: Shadow has to get rid of one old car to buy another one that he refers to as a "piece of shit" car (Gaiman 143). In fact, late in the novel, Wednesday suggests that the highways may themselves be enemies—new gods (though whether the new gods are enemies needs to be addressed more fully, and will be later on) (Gaiman 377). Thus the novel has a road narrative structure that is then stripped of many of the expected trappings and moves of a traditional road narrative, allowing it to both

reference the tradition and move beyond it. If the book just used the road narrative structure, it could still be effective in other areas, but because it adapts this as well, the novel presents even more of its unique qualities and views of American myth.

Lackey discusses how pervasive the idea of ‘finding yourself’ on the road is in the genre (Lackey 149). While *American Gods* is a journey of self discovery for Shadow, the sections of the novel where he is travelling tend to advance the plot rather than his development and it is his stationary moments (in Lakeside and during the vigil on the tree) that bring about the most self revelation. The timing of character development is not the only change to the road narrative conventions. Primeau (and other writers) rightly point out the overwhelming skew of road narratives to white males (Primeau 107). While *American Gods* does not deviate much from that pattern, it is valuable to note that Shadow is racially ambiguous and this fact is frequently brought up when he meets new people (Gaiman 148). It contributes to his overall outsider status, which is another common theme in road narratives. Roberts also points out the ability of the road narrative to take the characters outside of the main culture in some ways (qtd. in ed. Slethaug and Ford 214), which is something that Shadow often expresses in *American Gods* (Gaiman 326). That outsider status (however temporary) allows them to see what the patterns that run through the culture they live in are, something else the narrative in *American Gods* alludes to (Gaiman 468). In this case, the changes to the road narrative conventions actually reinforce a classic theme of the genre, which would seem to be a change for the better to the narrative type as a whole.

Ceremony draws on different narrative traditions and then adapts them into a new form of myth that brings the reader into the process of carrying it out. Wallace points out the use of a bildungsroman combined with traditional or oral storytelling elements to create the same sort of

adapted traditions (i.e. both White and Native) as Tayo must come up with in the story (Wallace 116). Another aspect of form to consider is the link to fantasy as understood in a typical genre fashion: Lacey says that “the novel does not resolve into either realism or fantasy; instead, Silko’s novel defies white American culture’s need to distinguish between the two” (Lacey 135). The form of the narrative also reinforces the mythical nature of the story since both the content and form have the same idea: they work on three planes (human, culture, and myth) and so to understand the novel properly, it has to be approached on all three levels (Mitchell 27).

Mitchell argues that *Ceremony* institutes a new approach in which the novelist is a sort of shaman/healer and the reading of the book constitutes a new ritual itself (Mitchell 27). She also emphasizes the use of the book as the sort of healing ceremony necessary in the story to make the “old ways understandable and relevant” (Mitchell 28). In this way, the myth in the plot makes the book a myth in itself even more literally than the other works being discussed. The novel draws readers into the ritual by repetitive phrases (“It has never been easy,” for example) and by including more direct ritual chants toward the end of the book when readers have learned through Tayo the importance and practice of rituals (Mitchell 32). Coltelli examines how “In recalling the story the patient assumes, in the ritual, the role of the mythical hero and in the end achieves complete identification” which is necessary for the ritual to work (Coltelli 176). This can again be applied both to Tayo and to a reader of *Ceremony*. By adapting the narrative form of the novel, Silko changes the story from purely being passively read by the reader to actively engaging the reader and bringing them into the ceremonial action of the novel. The particular way of adapting the form that draws on both Native and White narrative forms mirrors the type of adaptation that Tayo must use in the novel to create his new ceremony/myth.

Ceremony also has the same sort of adaptation process as *American Gods*, in which the book takes existing myths and changes them for the culture they now exist in. However, this process comes from the existing traditions Silko is drawing on. One of the key concepts in the book is that if ceremonies do not change to reflect everything that has changed in the world, then they are dead and do not work (Silko 126). According to Mitchell, the “need for changing, growing ceremonies” comes from Laguna history of losing some of their traditions completely and having to adapt and conserve those they have (Mitchell 28). This adaptation is similar to the importance of change in *American Gods*, but what seems like instability in *American Gods* is more of a process of natural change in *Ceremony*. This natural evolution makes it much less obvious what in particular is changed and what is carried over from traditional versions of the stories. It also places less emphasis on the changes in some ways since the tradition views changes as natural and expected. However, that acceptance of change is notable in comparison with the other works. Wednesday’s abrupt pronouncement in *American Gods* that “This is the only country in the world [...] that worries about what it is” (Gaiman 105) suggests an essential instability about America and the gods in it. When Shadow and Wednesday go to San Francisco, Shadow says that it seems like a whole different country from Lakeside and Wednesday announces that it is, saying they only share cultural signifiers across the country but otherwise they are all different (Gaiman 270). This again points to an instability in the country, which fits very well with the tensions between all the gods. If the gods represent what Americans believe in, and those gods are fighting, this suggests that the beliefs Americans hold are in contest with each other. Booker interprets this tension as between reinforcing the status quo and being dissatisfied with it (Booker ix). While reducing the complicated facets of American culture to simply for or against the status quo seems overly uncomplicated, *American Gods* does seem to

present those tensions, but instead of reconciling them, the book plainly leaves them as they are, as if to say that they are essential to our identity. Gaiman does not attempt to reduce America to a single concept or representation, instead showing a variety of its facets all of which collectively represent America. The book does make these tensions a source of changes, so they do affect the myths, which allows this reason for change to be directly compared to the natural evolution of myths in *Ceremony*.

Ceremony also emphasizes a combination of White and Native culture, although not in the way that might be expected. Betonie, the medicine man, is a model for Tayo, the main character, in his marginal role (outside both White and Native culture), and, significantly, he understands the use of material signifiers in “Anglo culture”: his collection of calendars, etc. (Wallace 99). Wallace describes the importance of Tayo’s adaptation of the “Laguna culture” he relearns to the circumstances he is in at the time, without dismissing the original use of the rituals (Wallace 102). Instead of instability, *Ceremony* presents natural change and interconnectedness; thus, for example, the book ends with Tayo’s grandmother saying that she has heard all the stories they tell her before, only the names were different (Silko 260). Like *American Gods*, this book directly addresses the myths of America, but does so from a different cultural perspective. Tayo has to accept his own power and his place in tradition to heal himself and fix the problem, in a way that specifically calls for his “assimilation of those elements of himself that are modern and/or “American” “ (Wallace 96). This fusing process is specifically designated as American, though in a way that questions what exactly that means. Silko originally intended the book to be published in 1976 to resonate with the bicentennial of the nation and the dual American history of Euro-centric settlers and Native peoples. It ended up being published in 1977, but the intention to connect the publication of this book that deals with Laguna myths and conflict with

White ideals with the mythologized history of America is fascinating. The connection to 1776 suggests a somewhat colonial history, but *Ceremony* actually proposes the incorporation of White culture and acknowledgement of changing lifestyles into Native rituals and traditions, as opposed to the other way around. This portrayal is very much in contrast to *American Gods*, in which Native traditions are mentioned and mostly dismissed, except in a few instances, and the main characters are predominately from European and Mediterranean cultures. While it could be argued that Gaiman uses European myths because cultures must be understood from the outside, *American Gods* does not portray the myths this way. The book deliberately locates Native myths as equally immigrant-based (although much earlier historically) as the European myths it incorporates. Beyond that mention, the culture that *American Gods* examines does not privilege Native tradition, but mainstream American culture such as small towns and road narratives, which would also locate Native culture as outsider. Although both novels use the same basic concept of fusing separate traditions, the end result comes across differently.

American Gods draws from many different traditions to create its cast of mythic characters. However, it has several aspects that give it a distinctive view on the myths of America, and one of those is that the myths and gods do not remain the same forever, but adapt to the conditions they are in. Mad Sweeney is a leprechaun who doesn't have an Irish accent because he's "been over here too fucken long," which is one of the most basic, surface-level changes that the text displays (Gaiman 33). Mad Sweeney's accent is also notable because it is not just a change that happened since he was in the United States, but one that makes him seem specifically more American. Other changes are not so surface-level. Wednesday tells Shadow that Thor "put a gun in his mouth and blew his head off in Philadelphia in 1932" (Gaiman 341). Not only does this make it clear that gods can die (therefore changing their very state of

existence), it also is surprising that Thor, one of the best known of the Norse pantheon, commits suicide, presumably rather than live in the new world of America. His inability to adapt (which may not be exclusive to him, since the novel tells readers over and over again that America is a bad land for gods) is what makes him commit suicide. The postscript of the novel features Shadow going to Iceland and meeting the original Odin, who makes it clear that Wednesday “was me, yes. But I am not him,” and actually acts rather differently from Wednesday—he is much more honest and makes no obvious references to cons or tricks (Gaiman 521). Wednesday says that “Nobody’s American [...] Not originally,” which is a provocative statement given what the book shows us of how Wednesday himself did not begin as American but is also significantly different from his non-American self (Gaiman 96). This discrepancy seems to indicate an unresolved tension, something that shows up in other places in the novel. At the House on the Rock, Kali speaks, and she makes it clear for the first time in the story that she has an “incarnation” in India that is separate, but also still Kali (Gaiman 124). The idea that there are actually new versions of the gods in different places is something that is essential to Gaiman’s conception of them and allows him to explore how they interact with America separately from how they have always been portrayed, though they are still inextricably linked. While this allows Gaiman to create new Americanized versions of the gods, this separation also makes it clear that the original gods have not gone away—America is not privileged in this way, but merely another arena for the gods to exist in. This acknowledgement that America is not the only place in which the gods exist, or even the most important, makes *American Gods* far less exceptionalist than it could be.

Supernatural, on the other hand, has complicated portrayals of the gods by introducing Christian mythology as a heavy influence on the series, to the point that in later seasons, it often

drives the plot. While this does bring in an aspect of American culture that *American Gods* does not deal with, it has some unfortunate implications. While most of the angels who appear in the series are not any better than the demons the Winchesters often fight, in “Hammer of the Gods”, Lucifer (who is technically an angel according to the series) is able to kill a whole group of “pagan” gods, including Odin, Ganesha, and Baron Samedi (“Hammer of the Gods”). The idea that an angel from Christian mythology can overpower all of the old gods seems to set the Christian mythos above all others, and indeed, none of the gods appear sympathetic, but several of the angels do. As in *American Gods*, where we are told that the new and old gods are equally right but we only ever see new gods as antagonists, *Supernatural* often claims that all mythological beings are equally variable just as humans are, but only allows Christian mythical beings to actually act as anything other than antagonists. There seems to be a dissimilarity between what *Supernatural* wants to say about other gods and what it ends up showing, just as Gaiman does not fully seem to write the new gods as actually equivalent to the old ones. As mentioned earlier, Kali is present and should have believers in other parts of the world, and yet is completely overpowered by Lucifer. This is an Americanization of the gods, but it only results in showing one version of America: a Christian-biased one.

This particular episode also is directly involved in a major change to one of the gods in *Supernatural*. Gabriel, the archangel, disappears from Heaven in the mythology of the show, and goes into “witness protection” as Loki, the Norse trickster god (“Changing Channels”). The other gods know him as Loki, meaning that he is not pretending to be Loki but that he is Loki, and the other angels do not know of his existence. This is a very different process of adaptation than is seen in *American Gods*, but it functions similarly in some ways. Loki in *American Gods* pretends to be working for one of the new gods (masquerading as Mr. World), which is the reverse of

what Gabriel does in *Supernatural*. However, unlike in *American Gods*, this is not a change because the beliefs about the entity changed but a deliberate choice on Gabriel's part. This particular version eliminates Loki as a true Norse god and instead privileges a Christian angel, just as when Lucifer kills the other gods. It is fair to say that many of the angels in the television series are portrayed as antagonists, but when the angels are still given more screen time and more power in the narrative, a bias is clearly being displayed. *Supernatural* does display an adaptation of sorts, but unlike the other examples, it makes myths more homogenous by privileging Christianity. This is, of course, a rather American thing to do in many ways, but it does not represent the whole spectrum of American identity that *Ceremony* and *American Gods* do.

Creation of New Myths

As mentioned earlier, Booker says all American heroes must be invented because the nation itself was invented (Booker 51). While this logic seems somewhat flawed, in that this seems no different from any other country, there are in fact mythic qualities of these stories that are created wholesale both for the United States and these works. *American Gods* introduces the new gods fairly early in the book: the Internet god abducts Shadow and uses him to send a message to Wednesday that the old gods are outdated (Gaiman 48). The new gods are portrayed as almost universally negative, if not evil, and despite Shadow's eventual realization that neither the old or the new gods are right or wrong, there are some old gods who are helpful and kind to Shadow, while the new gods mostly offer to bribe him or they attack him. This discrepancy makes it unclear how the readers are supposed to feel about these characters. Wednesday certainly comes across as intensely disturbing in some scenes (i.e. in many of his interactions with and descriptions of women) and his ultimate goal is clearly immoral (or at least amoral), but he is a much more nuanced character than any of the new gods. Media is the second of the new

gods to appear, and unlike the Internet (or “the technical boy” as she refers to him), she does not physically visit Shadow, but instead appears to him through a television (Gaiman 155). She offers him rewards to work for them, and while she seems nicer, she also is literally projecting an image of herself to appeal to Shadow, allowing her no semblance of truth. Again, neither of these portrayals is terribly nuanced or good, and this imbalance can make it hard to accept the novel’s pronouncement through Shadow at the end that all the gods are equally important. Wednesday also mentions, as discussed earlier, that the highways may be new gods, which complicates the use of the road narrative in the novel by aligning it with the gods that seem to be evil, but are nominally just the same as the old gods. Given Gaiman’s approach of simply displaying and describing America and its contradictions, perhaps this contradiction is inevitable. There can be no reconciling of these ideas because Gaiman does not actually try to reconcile them. In this way, the newly created myths of the book lead to another understanding of the way it sees America as contradictory.

Not only does *Ceremony* mythologize itself, it also uses stories created by Silko interchangeably with traditional myths (Mitchell 29). Throughout *Ceremony*, Tayo refers to the importance of stories, saying that he told the other men “a story to give them strength” during the war (Silko 12). Lacey says that in *Ceremony*, “stories are elevated to a status usually reserved for concepts like history, memory, and truth” (Lacey 127). This explanation both sums up and misses the point entirely, in that the book figures all of those concepts as the same thing. It also leads to an emphasis on the way that words in the Laguna language convey a story, and how not having the proper words to express oneself can lead to problems (Silko 35). At one point, Tayo is talking to Ku’oosh, another medicine man, and Ku’oosh uses a specific Laguna word to refer to how fragile the world is, a word that carries a whole paragraph of associations with it including a

spider's web (Silko 35). One specific example that Todd focuses on is this "fragile": Tayo remembers the interconnectedness and how that can create problems, but he forgets the strength of the fragile spider webs (Todd 9). The emphasis in the novel is on how the words used change meaning, and thus belief. The myths are stories and stories must be told using the proper language, so the focus on words is another facet of the mythological nature of the story. Coltelli expresses how "words are transformed into reality as they are pronounced" (Coltelli 177), and that is essential to the mythology within the story and of the novel itself. As previously discussed, *Ceremony* makes itself into a myth, and so the creation of these new stories are important to how the book affects readers and their participation in the myth ceremony of reading the novel. While in some ways, the new story is constructed from old traditions and is an adaptation, there is also an understanding that creating new myths is equally essential and the emphasis on creating stories and using language precisely contributes to this understanding.

Ceremony is not the only work that both adapts and creates anew at the same time. Grant Morrison, a prominent comics author, claims that superheroes are a uniquely American creation and that "this glorification of strength, health, and simple morality seems born of a corn-fed, plain-talking, fair-minded midwestern sensibility" (Morrison 49). This claim seems to overstate things, but the superhero does seem peculiarly American, playing off the Western hero type. Frank Miller, another well-known comics author/artist, says that "the superhero [...] focused and defined real-world situations and issues in a way that was clearer and more direct than a simple recitation of the facts could" (qtd. in Knowles 19). Miller's is a general argument that can be applied to fiction, but the larger-than-life nature of comics does allow these moral issues to be extra obvious. Alex Ross, a notable comics artist, puts it this way: "superheroes have that, a sense of ethics that would never change—they would never be less than perfect, fighting for their

ideals” (qtd. in Knowles 207). If this is the role that comics are to fill in a new mythology, then there should be specific ideals created with a character that are identifiable and admirable in some way, since that seems to be what the purpose of comic is said to be.

Captain America does, in fact, have specifically identifiable principles. He is consistently seen by all the other Marvel characters as the “guiding moral principle in the Marvel Universe” (ed. Duncan and Smith 108). The movies (especially *The First Avenger*, which makes sense, given its status as an origin story) emphasize over and over that the supersoldier serum did not make Rogers a hero—his innate goodness and moral values did—but the serum allows him to put that heroic nature into action. In the comics, Captain America has given up his role multiple times in protest to the government’s actions, emphasizing his commitment to the American ideal, not its government (Hayton and Albright 13). In fact, *The Winter Soldier* is the best example in the Marvel movie series of the quality that Captain America embodies in many of his best known comics, which is that he stands for the ideals of the country, not its government or reputation. One of the most recent frequently quoted examples comes in *Amazing Spider-Man 537*, where Captain America says:

Each must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong, and which course is patriotic and which isn't. [...] Doesn't matter what the press says. Doesn't matter what the politicians or the mobs say. Doesn't matter if the whole country decides that something wrong is something right. This nation was founded on one principle above all else: The requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or the consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree besides the river of truth, and tell the whole world-- -- No you move. (Straczynski)

One specific example of Captain America's morals is the historic commitment to diversity in the comics and movies. During the eighties, he worked with the Falcon, the first African American superhero, and "had a gay neighbor and a Jewish girlfriend," allowing Captain America to focus on problems such as racism and sexism in the comics (McDermott 51). He also handpicks his team in *The First Avenger*, and they include one Asian American, a Frenchman, an Englishman, and an African American who speaks French fluently, and all of them were in the group that was with Bucky Barnes³ in the Hydra facility. While they are from Marvel comics (the Howling Commandoes), other than Barnes, none of them originally worked with Captain America, and again, his intentional choice of them reveals the values that he visibly stands for. In *The Winter Soldier*, the team that works together for the climax is Rogers, two black men, and two women. While this is less intentionally chosen, it still helps emphasize the role Captain America has to display the characteristics America is supposed to uphold—in this case, diversity. The reason for referring back to the comics here as well as the recent movies is that Captain America's morals have not changed overall since he has been created (there are, of course, exceptions given the length of time *Captain America* has been around for and the number of different people who have been in charge of telling the story), giving the story credence as a myth. It fulfills this aspect of the myth role despite being artificially created.

Late in *American Gods*, Shadow meets Johnny Appleseed and Wisakedjak, or Whiskey Jack as they call him, who describe themselves as culture heroes, but seem to function just as the other gods do in the book (Gaiman 308). Johnny Appleseed rails against Paul Bunyan, which Wednesday explains is because Bunyan was created by an ad company, and is therefore not a true god/hero (Gaiman 310). This objection is similar to many of the arguments used by myth

³ Bucky Barnes is Steve Rogers's childhood friend who enlists in the Army in the storyline of the movies. In the comics, Barnes was Captain America's sidekick.

scholars to distinguish “myths” from “folk tales” or “legends.” Of course, these criteria would prevent *American Gods* itself from being a myth, and it seems to be an intentional nod to that scholarly argument. However, both Whiskey Jack and Wednesday disagree with this idea. Given that the narrative privileges belief over most everything else, it seems clear that this is pointing out that the distinction is an arbitrary classification. If people believe in you, then you are a god, no matter if you are created by a company or develop organically.

One of the issues with Captain America as an American myth is that he was created for that exact purpose in his own story, which makes him an analogue to Paul Bunyan in *American Gods*, the culture hero created by an ad company. When one of the characters dismisses Bunyan as “fake,” the others say that “it doesn’t matter. [...] if the truth isn’t big enough, you print the legend. This country needs its legends” (Gaiman 317). By being mythologized in his own story, Steve Rogers as Captain America fulfills the same role. When the experiment to create Captain America is completed in *The First Avenger*, he is immediately put to work making propaganda movies and going on tours to convince Americans to buy war bonds, leading to Rogers drawing a picture of himself as a dancing monkey in the Captain America costume (*The First Avenger*). He is being used explicitly as a propaganda tool, and he recognizes that. The people creating his propaganda movies turn him into a legend artificially, since Steve Rogers has done nothing so far as Captain America. When Rogers is prompted to do something else, he finds out that his friend (Barnes) is part of the captured troops he is visiting (supposedly to boost morale) and he decides to go after him. After this event, Rogers is allowed to take an active combat role and it marks when he becomes a participant in his own mythologizing: he helps design his new costume and handpicks his team (*The First Avenger*). After this development, the movie mostly descends into

action and plot, but these threads of the legend of Captain America continue in the other movies he is featured in.

In *The Avengers*, Captain America is described as “a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend” (*The Avengers*). In *Agent Carter*, a television mini-series about Peggy Carter, one of the supporting characters from *The First Avenger*, which is set a few years after the end of *The First Avenger*, there is a radio show called “The Captain America Adventure Hour” which is a fictionalized version of Captain America’s adventures (“Bridge and Tunnel”). In *The Winter Soldier*, there is a Smithsonian exhibit that Rogers goes to see about Captain America, including an interview with Peggy Carter and clips from his time with the Howling Commandos and props, such as his motorcycle (*The Winter Soldier*). The title of the exhibit is “Captain America: The Living Legend & Symbol of Courage” and it also has quotes from the current president in the universe of the movies as well as a memorial to Bucky Barnes (*The Winter Soldier*). Barnes is also relevant to this discussion of myth, since he appears in the movie mostly as the Winter Soldier, who is described as a “ghost story” (*The Winter Soldier*). Baker-Whitelaw points out that he functions as a dark mirror to Captain America himself: mythologized by an outside agency (HYDRA, in the case of the Winter Soldier) and his actions are said to have “shaped the century,” just as Captain America’s legacy and actions clearly influenced the America of these movies (Baker-Whitelaw). While there are many other aspects to the character, this focus on Rogers’ role as a propaganda tool and the ways the character of Captain America is created and turned into a legend in the world of the movies give an example of a mythology being artificially created, rather than developing organically as the gods in *American Gods* do. However, the myth that is created around Captain America in his universe fails to take into account his moral stance. Steve Rogers is not simply the government propaganda tool that he was intended to be, but

instead a moral example of standing up for his own beliefs, including criticizing (or destroying) parts of the government. This is why his constructed nature in the comic books works particularly well on the level of those reading: instead of being a representation of culture in the United States, as the gods in *American Gods* become in America, Captain America functions as a singular constructed narrative that Americans have created for themselves to aspire to. As referenced earlier, the function of bringing Captain America from the past to the present is so that he can be disappointed that society has not lived up to his morals, thus inspiring society to change itself, both in and out of the comics.

Conclusion

Though these works are quite disparate, they each manage to display a facet of American myths. Taken together, they reveal the processes and themes that make up American myths, in the context of mass media texts of the last forty years. While many works use existing mythological structures or figures in an American setting, that quality alone is not enough to make an American myth, as *The Lightning Thief* proves. There must be some element that ties the myths into America, such as the adaptation of the old myths to become American or the creation of entirely new myths that are somehow essentially American. There is also frequently an interaction of sorts, generally in the form of belief, that lets the myths change to reflect the changing culture, or that gives the myths power to inspire others. *American Gods* displays all of these characteristics, making it one of the most easily identifiable modern myths, though it is not without its problems. *Ceremony* does not have the same problems of appropriation and generalizing, but it has a limited scope, being set in a much more confined area and working off one specific tradition. *Captain America* creates its own myth, constructing a narrative to aspire to rather than one that represents the state of things as they are, which is why it engages less in the

adaptation process. Lastly, *Supernatural* has many of the same trappings as *American Gods* and it does draw on older myths and emphasize belief, but it also adapts the myths it uses to a narrow framework that does not allow other traditions the respect it affords Christian traditions. Just as Gaiman lets the contradictions of American culture the book represents coexist without trying to reconcile them, each of these versions of American myth is valid in its own way, and trying to limit the cultural imagination to merely one of them would defeat the purpose of their existence.

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