

The Role of Intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

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Abstract

The American cultural identity and the essence of modern America are concepts difficult to describe and define. Neil Gaiman, a highly acclaimed British writer, tried to capture, in his award-winning novel, American Gods, the "real" America, and its elusive cultural identity. This article aims to uncover the intertextual references in American Gods, since Gaiman's work is renowned for its extensive intertextuality. It also attempts to analyse the role and the importance of references in the creation of the American identity, and its cultural representation in Gaiman's novel, by examining the types, functions, and effects of intertextuality.

Keywords: intertextuality, transtextuality, American cultural identity, cultural representations of America.

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) is a highly-acclaimed, Hugo and Nebula award winning novel, which tries to represent America, and to capture its identity. *American Gods* is renowned for its rich intertextual references to poetry, prose and popular culture. The novel contains a variety of old myths, tales, stories and legends presented in a new context. It "uses myths to define what makes America" (Rimmels 2001). Considering these, one can claim that Gaiman is an author - *bricoleur* as defined by Lévi-Strauss (1966: 16-33), who creates improvised structures by appropriating pre-existing materials. According to Lévi-Strauss, the author - *bricoleur* works with signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and conveying his message "through the medium of things" - by the choices made from "pre-constrained possibilities". In *American Gods* Gaiman plays with countless references, allusions and quotations from earlier sources to mould new stories and myths, and express his views of America and its identity.

In discussing American cultural identity, one should start by defining the concept of cultural identity, which, according to *Dictionary of Media and Communication* is: "The definition of groups or individuals (by themselves or others) in terms of cultural or subcultural categories (including ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and gender)" (Chandler, Munday 2011: 84). Thus the concept of cultural identity is closely related to that of national identity. When it comes to national identity, this is determined by a number of shared traits, like: inhabited territory, ethnicity, language, religion, customs and traditions, and

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history under the form of a shared memory (Bell 2003), and it is a “collective cultural phenomenon”, and a “multidimensional concept” (Smith 1991: vii). In the case of the United States of America, a polyethnic state, characterised by multiculturalism, globalisation, and consumerism, the American cultural identity, becomes a complex concept, a jigsaw puzzle, formed of hundreds of disparate pieces connected together by the same territory and politics. As stated by Lyotard: “traditional notions of national identity and culture are superseded by global forms deriving from transnational corporations in control of the media, of scientific research and other technological and commercial areas of life” (Allen 2000: 183). All these make the task of representing American identity even more daunting and difficult than it may seem at first. Gaiman succeeded in representing the concept by using intertextuality to convey its complexity.

The concept of “intertextuality” was introduced by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960 in discussing Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, and the term first appeared in Kristeva’s essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in 1966. The concept was further developed by many twentieth century literary theorists, like Barthes, Derrida, Riffaterre, Genette, Culler, and others. Intertextuality is a flexible concept, used by structuralists (Genette, Riffaterre) to locate and fix literary meaning, and by poststructuralists (Barthes, Derrida) to disrupt notions of meaning (Allen 2000:4). According to Kristeva intertextuality is “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1986: 37), and a text is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text”, in which “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another” (1980: 36). These texts according to Kristeva are made up of “the cultural (or social) text”, which includes “all the different discourses, ways of speaking and saying, institutionally sanctioned structures and systems which make up what we call culture” (Allen 2000: 36). According to this definition the text is a compilation of cultural textuality.

The framing of texts by other texts has implications not only for the *writers* of these texts, but also for their *readers*. In 1968 Barthes formulated “the death of the author” and “the birth of the reader”, stating that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1977: 148). Once written the text is detached from its author, its meaning reconstruction depending upon the reader’s previous readings, experience, cultural formation that form important intertexts. The meaning thus becoming a dynamic concept, constituted during the reading process, making the authorial intent irrelevant.

Related to the reconstruction of meaning, Kristeva referred to texts in terms of two axes: a *horizontal axis* connecting the author and reader, and a *vertical axis*, connecting the text to other texts (Kristeva 1980: 69). In the horizontal dimension “the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee”; in the vertical dimension “the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus” (Kristeva 1980: 66). These two axes are united by shared codes: every text and every reading depend on and are mediated by prior codes. Developing this idea Barthes itemised five codes employed to communicate

meaning in literary texts: hermeneutic (narrative turning points), proairetic (basic narrative actions), cultural (prior social knowledge), semic (medium-related codes), and symbolic (themes) (1974: 18-20). The codes, part of such textual systems, are involved in dynamic patterns of dominance between them, which contributes to the generation of meaning. Moreover, they are not always in complete accord with each other; their interaction can reveal incoherence, ambiguities, contradictions and omissions that may offer the scope for deconstructing the text (Chandler 2007: 205). These codes, which frequently appear simultaneously, offer the text a plural quality, making it polyphonic. Furthermore, out of the five codes, "only three establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constraint of time (the semic, cultural, and symbolic codes); the other two impose their terms according to an irreversible order (the hermeneutic and proairetic codes)" (1974: 30). What Barthes called cultural codes in *S/Z*, is further developed in his collection of essays *Mythologies* in the terms of myth or ideology (Silverman 1984: 41). In *Mythologies* Barthes discusses the orders of signification, and alongside denotation and connotation he introduces the concept of myth (1972: 127-128). Denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology or myth. Myths, according to Barthes, are the dominant ideologies of our time. They express and serve to organise shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture (Chandler 2007: 144). In the text, myth serves the ideological function of naturalisation (making dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely "natural", "normal", self-evident, timeless, obvious "common-sense") (Barthes 1977: 127-130). Similarly, myths can be seen as extended metaphors, helping us to make sense of our experiences within a culture (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: 185-186). Subsequently, myth was referred to, as a higher order of signification (Hjelmslev 1961: 125), or as the third order of signification (Fiske, Hartley 1978: 43). In *American Gods*, one can find numerous cultural references belonging to the order of myth or ideology. For instance, in the fragment: "I didn't think there was anywhere in the world that was fifty miles from McDonald's" (Gaiman 2001: 345), McDonald's stands for globalisation or even for the Americanisation (Danesi 2009: 20) of the world.

In analyzing intertextuality one can follow one of the models elaborated by such theorists like Genette (1992, 1997), Fairclough (1999, 2003), Halliday (2002), Widdowson (2004), or Bloor and Bloor (2007). However, for the purpose of this article we will only focus on Genette's concept of transtextuality and its analysis. Genette (1997: 18-19) proposed the term transtextuality, for the concept of intertextuality, as a more inclusive one. He names transtextuality the "*textual transcendence* - namely, everything that brings it into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts" (Genette 1997: xv). These new texts are "written over" the older ones, inviting a double reading.

His model of transtextuality analysis implies three types and five subtypes of transtextuality. The three types of transtextuality are: explicit and formal transtextuality (quotations), non-explicit hidden transtextuality (plagiarism), implicit transtextuality (hidden elements of other texts, offering clues - references

and allusions). *American Gods* offers both instances of explicit transtextuality, and implicit transtextuality. For example, there are numerous quotations, to illustrate explicit transtextuality, as in: "Call no man happy, till he's dead" - Herodotus, *Histories* (Gaiman 2001:5). There are also numerous allusions, as examples of implicit intertextuality: "Or has Timmy fallen down another well?" (Gaiman 2001: 123), an allusion to the American TV series *Lassie*; or as in: "Somehow, Toto ...I don't believe we're in Kansas anymore" (Gaiman, 2001: 337), an allusion to Dorothy Gale in *Wizard of Oz* movie. Since, we are dealing with a novel, we have no hidden transtextuality in the text. The five subtypes of transtextuality according to Genette include: intertextuality formed of quotation, plagiarism, and allusions; paratextuality comprising titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements; architextuality, which designates a text as part of a genre or genres; metatextuality composed of explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text; hypertextuality which transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends the previous text (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation) (1997: xviii).

In addressing the subtypes of transtextuality, according to Genette's model, the first subtype is intertextuality. In the text it is illustrated by: onomastic allusions, quotational allusions, literary and cultural allusions. As stated above, Gaiman uses old myths to create new ones. He introduces elements from African, American Indian, Irish, Norse, and Slavic mythologies, as well as, numerous urban myths, phenomena and objects of worship. Among these elements the characters represented by the gods, have suggestive names, as pointers toward their cultural origins, which function as onomastic allusions: *Czernobog*, *Zorya sisters*, *Mr. Ibis*, *Mr. Wednesday*, *Mad Sweeney*, *Mama-ji*, etc. As in the example: "They brought me, and Loki and Thor, Anansi and the Lion-God, Leprechauns and Kobolds and Banshees, Kubera and Frau Holle and Ashtaroth, and they brought you" (Gaiman 2001: 107). The effect produced by their names is reinforced with cultural stereotypes related to their origin, expressed through clothes, food, traditions, and manners of speaking. The Old gods represent in the novel multiculturalism and pluralism of the United States of America. Modern gods have suggestive names, as well: *Media*, *Mr. World*, *Mr. Town*, or *Technical Boy*. The new gods represent another level of intertextuality parallel to what the old gods represent. They are modern world myths, representing a dominant ideology. For instance *Mr. World* stands for globalisation, *Mr. Town* - for urbanisation, etc. Among quotational allusions we can distinguish marked and unmarked allusions. For instance, we have marked quotational allusions, as: "No man, proclaimed Donne, is an Island" (Gaiman 2001: 252), overt allusion to John Donne. As examples of unmarked quotational allusions: "Say 'Nevermore', said Shadow" (Gaiman 2001: 123), an allusion to *The Raven* by E. A. Poe; "We were discussing the ways to deal with the coming paradigm shift" (Gaiman 2001: 318), allusion to Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; "That's all she wrote" (Gaiman 2001: 461), an allusion to an American saying, coming from a country song titled "That's All She Wrote", recorded by Ernest Tubb in 1942. Among the literary allusions, we

encounter: "Friends, Romans, countrymen" (Gaiman 2001: 420), an allusion to Marc Antony's speech from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; and "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the center cannot hold..." (Gaiman 2001: 349), quoted from W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming*; or: "holding out his gold-filled cap with both hands like *Oliver Twist*" (Gaiman 2001: 170), allusion to Dickens' *Oliver Twist*; or as in: "'Mostly folk just take the thrillers and the children's books and the Harlequin romances. Jenny Kerton, Danielle Steel, all that.'" The man was reading Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*" (Gaiman 2001: 233).

The category of cultural allusions is represented in the novel by such examples, as: "*This country has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more*" (Gaiman 2001: 153) and "*Ah, Lady Liberty. Beautiful, is she not?*" (Gaiman 2001: 82), both alluding to the cultural symbols of New York. This is a rather special category of intertextual allusions. In the novel these become signs with real equivalents recognizable worldwide, due to the Americanisation of the world. Some of these signs, however, represent inexistent realities. This concept was introduced by Baudrillard in his essay "*Simulacra and Simulation*" (1988: 166). According to Baudrillard there are four phases of the image/sign: 1. the sign as a reflection of a basic reality. 2. the sign marks and perverts a basic reality. 3. it masks the *absence* of a basic reality. 4. it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1988: 170). Baudrillard argues that when speech and writing were created, signs were invented to point to material or social reality, but the bond between signifier and signified deteriorated. In time, the sign began to hide "basic reality". The simulacrum "copy" came to replace the "real". In the postmodern age the "reality" is "created" through media: radio, television, newspapers, film, literature, becoming a *hyperreality*. This hyperreality is only an illusion, only seeming very real; signs hiding the absence of reality and pretending to mean something (Baudrillard 1988: 171). In the novel *Hollywood or Disneyland* stand as signs for United States of America and "American Dream", while being simulacra. Similarly, in the novel we have references to the very concept of simulacra and simulation:

The important thing to understand about American history ... is that it is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself. It is a fine fiction ... that America was founded by pilgrims, seeking the freedom to believe as they wished, that they came to the Americas, spread and bred and filled the empty land (Gaiman 2001: 73).

Or as, in the following example: "the Lookout Mountain he had left was a painting on a backdrop, or a papier-mâché model seen on a TV screen – merely a representation of the thing, not the thing itself" (Gaiman 2001: 418).

These cultural allusions serve to "anchor" the preferred readings of an image. Barthes developed the concept of "anchorage" used "to fix the floating chain of signifieds" (1977: 38-41) primarily in relation to advertisements, where

texts and captions were used to anchor the interpretation of meaning, and serve an ideological function. The term is applied in literature, as well, to "anchor" signification by privileging certain terms over others, in order to determine a preferred reading of a text. *American Gods* contains numerous allusions that are used to anchor the meaning in the text. For instance: "'And what are you? A spic? A gypsy?' 'Not that I know of, sir. Maybe.' 'Maybe you got nigger blood in you. You got nigger blood in you, Shadow?'" (Gaiman 2001: 10), where terms like *spic*, *gypsy*, *nigger* are derogatory and racist. These are allusions to the constant fight against racism, and the history of slavery in America. On the one hand, there are old gods as a representation of multiculturalism and pluralism, and on the other hand, there are these discriminatory terms as allusions to racism, in a binary opposition, representing American identity. The idea is further developed in: "Nobody's American," said Wednesday. "Not originally. That's my point" (Gaiman 2001: 83), alluding to the history of United States, as a land of immigrants.

Other cultural allusions are to famous American landmarks: World's Largest Carousel, statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, House on the Rock, Disneyland, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Grand Central Station New York alluding to "American Dream", and "land of unlimited possibilities" myths. Additional cultural allusions are to American brands, like: Burger King, KFC, McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Chrysler, Ford, Chevrolet that became recognisable worldwide due to globalisation and the Americanisation, as well as, to the increasing consumerism. Allusions to American history, like: Fourth of July - Independence Day, Civil War, 1830s Andrew Jackson's Indian Relocation Act, alluding to important landmarks in American history, as steps in the evolution of "world's greatest democracy", part of another myth that characterises modern America. All these recognisable American landmarks, brands, historical events are used to anchor the meaning interpretation to America, considering the fact that all these are recognisable solely due to globalisation, Americanisation and consumerism, thus carrying an identifiable, "natural", "normal", "self-evident" American ideology. The American culture heroes, mentioned in the novel, are allusions to folktale and popular culture, together with allusions to real personalities of American culture and history. American popular culture heroes, like: Whiskey Jack, Johnnie Appleseed aka John Chapman, Paul Bunyan, Canada Bill Jones, and outstanding American personalities, like: Frank Lloyd Wright (renowned architect), Jackson Pollock (influential painter), George Devol (famous inventor), Abraham Lincoln (one of the three greatest U.S. presidents), Gutzon Borglum (famous sculptor, creator of the monumental presidents' heads at Mount Rushmore), that came to be considered culture heroes of sorts, are used to reference the diversity of America. The novel also abounds in American media references, to TV, newspapers, film, music: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *M*A*S*H*, *Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Cheers*, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood", *Indigo Girls*, *Jay Leno*, *The Tonight Show*, *Carrie*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Reader's Digest*, *Newsweek*, *Marilyn Monroe*, *Liz Taylor*,

Judy Garland. These audio-visual references enrich the text, have a cinematic effect, and give the impression of on-going reality or even hyperreality. As stated by Chandler: "Intertextuality blurs the boundaries not only between texts but between texts and the world of lived experience" (2002: 209).

Another type of transtextuality in the novel is paratextuality, represented by title, preface, dedication, acknowledgements, postface, and chapter headings. The title *American Gods* is highly evocative. It is simultaneously ambiguous and open to interpretation. The *gods* in the title can be understood both literally and figuratively. The preface called: "Caveat and Warning for Travelers", offers the readers an advance commentary on the text that they have yet to become familiar with. In it, the reader is warned that: "this is a work of fiction, not a guidebook", in a metafictional technique. "Only the gods are real", arousing reader's interest and pointing how one should read the text. The novel also has a dedication – "For absent friends—Kathy Acker and Roger Zelazny, and all points between", and three pages of acknowledgements, to friends and editors making the appearance of the book possible (Gaiman 2001: 463 – 465). In this subtype one has to include all the chapter headings, as well. Every chapter in *American Gods*, carries a marked quotation, each "anchoring" the meaning of the following chapter, in Barthes' terms, or pointing toward the meaning interpretation. For instance: "The boundaries of our country, sir? Why sir, on the north we are bounded by the Aurora Borealis, on the east we are bounded by the rising sun, on the south we are bounded by the procession of the Equinoxes, and on the west by the Day of Judgment. —The American Joe Miller's Jest Book" (Gaiman 2001: 3), referencing the "greatness of the United States of America", and the myth of America as "the greatest country in the world". These quotations are as diverse as the rest of the intertextual references in the novel. They come from prose, poetry, popular culture, and each of them mentions its source. The novel contains a postscript, functioning as an epilogue, where the reader gets a glimpse of Shadow's future, several months after the events of the book. It also contains a postface, called: "On the road to *American Gods*: Selected Passages from Neil Gaiman's Online Journal" (www.americangods.com), as well as, a short author's biography at the end of the book. In the entries the author addresses the reader directly, as he does in the preface, thus "breaking the fourth wall".

The architextuality in the novel is represented by the subtitle: "*A novel*". The assignment of a text to a genre provides the interpreter of the text with a key intertextual framework. However, *American Gods*, as a postmodernist novel, disrupts the genre boundaries in a melting pot of genres. At first glance it is a road trip novel, or an Americana (a novel about America), a fantasy novel, while simultaneously pertaining to speculative fiction, with elements of detective fiction, gothic fiction, science fiction, and horror. Usually, architextuality offers the reader clues and conventions of the genre, as pointers towards interpretation. While, *American Gods* contains clues and conventions of multiple genres, it follows them through the novel. For instance, during Shadow's stay in Lakeside, a child disappears. Shadow finds out that it usually happens in the winter. Throughout

the novel he gets clues, as to maintain the reader interested in unravelling the mystery. The Shadow's journey gets to a close, and the reader almost forgets about the mystery; however the culprit is uncovered in the last chapter, before the postscript, thus the reader's expectation are fulfilled and genre tropes are followed up.

Metatextuality presents the dialogic relation between the allusions and the novel, in such examples, as: "the father of lies" (Gaiman 2001: 132), talking about Herodotus, and then rectifying it was the Devil, thus allowing the dialogue between Histories and the Bible. "The sacrifice of a son" (Gaiman 2001: 414) is another Bible reference, alluding to Jesus, and permitting the comparison of Shadow's journey to that of Jesus. This comparison and contrast between Shadow and Jesus is reinforced, by constant references to Jesus, throughout the novel, like in: "I don't want to seem like I'm—Jesus, look ..." (Gaiman 2001: 123), "A man in a suit explained that these were the end times and that Jesus..." (Gaiman 2001: 135), "That boy was one lucky son of a virgin." "Jesus?" (Gaiman 2001: 161), "So, yeah, Jesus does pretty good over here" (Gaiman 2001: 162). The dialogue between the two gets even more interesting, when Shadow discovers that he was sacrificed by his father in an egoistic attempt to kill everyone for his own benefit.

Another example of metatextuality in the novel is represented by the modern goddess Media, who describes herself as: "I'm the idiot box. I'm the TV. I'm the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I'm the boob tube. I'm the little shrine the family gathers to adore." ... "The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to." ... "Their time, mostly," ... "Sometimes each other" (Gaiman 2001: 136), followed by the next commentary in a dialogue between Czernobog and Mr. Nancy: "Media. I think I have heard of her. Isn't she the one who killed her children?" "Different woman," said Mr. Nancy. "Same deal" (Gaiman 2001: 338), making an allusion to Euripides' Medea, subsequently allowing comparison and contrast between the two characters.

Hypertextuality in *American Gods* is represented by parody. The Old World mythology, with its corresponding values, is parodied, by ironic inversion, through the American versions of the (altered) Old World gods and traditions. For instance, all American versions of gods are old, working odd jobs: Odin (Mr. Wednesday) is a grifter, Queen of Sheba is a prostitute in Las Vegas, Loki Liesmith is in jail, Czernobog is a former knocker (he used to kill cows with a sledgehammer in a slaughterhouse), Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel are morticians. They live in peculiar places, Odin in motels, Czernobog in an apartment smelling like overboiled cabbage, Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel in a mortuary house, etc. All of them are American versions of themselves, that do not feel like entirely belonging in America, and which cannot return to their homelands. Therefore they become caricatures of their old selves, coming together in a pastiche of discordant characters. Other instances of hypertextuality in the novel are: "You are an immaterial girl living in a material world" (Gaiman 2001: 293), "You are an analog girl, living in a digital world" (Gaiman 2001: 293), Technical Boy parodying Madonna's Material Girl.

Each of the above presented types and subtypes of intertextuality serve certain functions in the text and affect its interpretation. The general functions of intertextuality in a text, derived from previously examined theory, are: to give to the audience the interpretative codes for understanding the message; to “naturalise” the perceived ideology; to anchor the meaning for its interpretation; to compare and contrast different texts; to allow the dialogue between texts, engaging in a debate about what is important or dominant (Bakhtin 1981); to destabilise - disrupt the meaning, by adding another level of understanding to the text; to provide the reader with the reminder that he/she is a part of mediated reality.

Some defining features of intertextuality according to Chandler might include the following (2007:207): *reflexivity* (self-consciousness of the text); *alteration* (of sources); *explicitness* (recognition of sources); *criticality to comprehension* (importance of reader’s recognition of sources in text interpretation); *scale of adoption*; and *structural unboundedness* (text as part of a larger structure). The effects of intertextuality in *American Gods*, derived from these functions and features, as they are presented above, are: persuading the audience to believe in the on-going reality of the narrative; offering an extra-dimension to the novel; offering the readers the pleasure of recognition of sources, and new layers of interpretation, as well; providing alternative points of view on the “reality” of the everyday life, allusions to the mediated reality/hyperreality. The novel is also characterised by self-reflexivity and explicitness in its intertextual references, as an acknowledgement of the preceding literary tradition. Meanwhile, the implicit intertextuality is not essential for reader’s comprehension, thus leaving the seasoned reader enjoy the allusions, at the same time not affecting the understanding of meaning by an occasional reader.

Taking into consideration that the novel contains far more intertextual references than might be included in a short article, and that the text’s meaning is constructed during the reading process, one can fully agree with Foucault stating that:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network ... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands ... Its unity is variable and relative (1974: 23 cited in Chandler 2007: 201).

In *American Gods* Gaiman created a rich intertextual web of references, which creates a complex image of America and its identity. Gaiman’s America is a pastiche of discordant individual voices representing different cultures, values and nationalities, and their corresponding idiosyncrasies, combined into a representation of modern America, as a multicultural, polyethnic country, marked by its own strengths and weaknesses; yet, incredibly complex and rich in its diversity.

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