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Artikel

Lisa Seuberth*

Anti-Supremacist Speculations: George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017)

Abstract: While the prevalence of White supremacist groups in the US seems to be on the rise during the 21st century, popular cultural productions of this period suggest an increase in awareness concerning the social construction of Whiteness and its dependence on the degradation of non-Whiteness. As a test case for this hypothesis, the fantastic ghost story *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) is examined in terms of its engagement with the discursive practice Toni Morrison termed American Africanism, a specific form of White supremacist discourse that targets African Americans in particular. Morrison's analytical categories are applied to the contemporary novel to verify whether its anti-supremacist program at the story level matches its own discursive practice.

Keywords: White supremacy, historical fantasy, American Africanism, Africanist presence, contemporary literature, USA

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1 *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a Fantastical (Re-)Writing of History

Kleinberg describes historical accounts as "a replacing of this sort where the past event or figure is silently determined by the telling that replaces it. But the telling in the present is haunted by the ghost of the past, which is neither present nor absent, neither here nor gone" (2007, 2). Accordingly, as cultural productions, historical accounts do not merely reflect the prevalent ideologies of a certain place or moment in time but participate themselves in complex interactions and exchanges among narratives of the past and the present. According to LaCapra, the interpretation of dominant accounts of history "engages us as interpreters in a particularly compelling conversation with the past" (2018, 28).

In reference to Michel Foucault's theory of power circulation, history is determined by this constant dialogical exchange between discourses, which he claims to be at the core of the circulation of power (1980, 93). Thus, by writing about the past, historians engage in certain discourses and thereby promote, consciously or unconsciously, their own culturally shaped points of view, render-

ing their own interpretations of history more powerful (Kleinberg 2007, 114). Following Foucault's argument in "Orders of Discourse" (1971), the exchange of discourses and ideas constitutes the complexity and dynamics of history (23). In order to unravel this entanglement of discourses and exchanges, the cultural dependency of the historical narrative must be made visible. By treating historical accounts like literary texts that need to be interpreted, as narrative pieces of fiction, new historians like Hayden White demonstrate their skepticism toward the traditional assumption of an objectively accessible history (2014, xxxi). Based on the "poetic nature of the historical work" (2014, xxx), White proposes an analysis of historical accounts by methods of literary analysis, bridging the gap between historiography and literature. Thus, historiography relates to fiction through their shared systems of meaning production. While historiography focuses on the narration of 'facts' and fiction on the narration of the imaginary, they both produce meaning through narration (White 1995, 44-45). Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" (1988, 105) also highlights this common ground between historiography and fiction. Her concept refers to fictional texts that comment on the impossibility

of an objective rendering of history by explicitly calling attention to their own cultural construction (Hutcheon 1988, 112).

According to this postmodern understanding of historical accounts as subjectively and culturally biased narratives, historical novels can just as well serve to “re-write or to re-present the past” (Hutcheon 1988, 110). Spaulding argues that, even when historical fiction is not governed by the realistic principle of verisimilitude – or exactly because it does not seek to construct narrowly realistic depictions – it can offer possibilities for a reconstruction of history that factual accounts cannot. The retelling of the past with imagined and fantastic elements opens another space of reflection, a space of the imaginary in which hypotheses can be tested. This freedom of imagination enables texts not only to reveal the ideologies that remain latent or covert in traditional historical accounts, but also to “claim authority over [...] the historical record” (Spaulding 2005, 2). Even though fictional narratives sometimes seem disconnected from historical reality, they are nevertheless always connected to a dominant version of history through their cultural dependency (LaCapra 2018, 9-10). Every narrative must position itself within the network of past narratives to be able to engage in the circulation of discourse and power (Foucault 1971, 23). This is how the past continues to haunt the present.

Historical novels thus engage in the circulation of power by promoting their own perspectives on past events, responding to previous versions of history, and contributing to the (re-) definition of what Lyotard calls “grand narratives,” i.e. prevalent discourses of a culture that provide and legitimate a point of view in a specific place and time (1984, xxiii-xxiv). The historical fantasy *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) is one instance of such a performance of power. It casts the 19th-century US-American history of enslavement in the light of a 21st-century perspective, while also including historical quotes that, in the sense of historiographic metafiction, continuously remind the reader of the novel’s own construction. Through combining historical fact and fantasy, the novel engages in what Saldívar calls “speculative realism”: “a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, meta-fiction, and genre fiction, including science fiction, graphic narrative and fantasy proper” (2013, 13). According to Saldívar, this combination

links the past, the present, and the future, as well as the fantastical and the real, by opening spaces in between to act out criticism and possibilities: “historical fantasy [...] works [...] as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today” (Saldívar 2011, 595). Accordingly, the fantastical space in *Lincoln in the Bardo* serves to display and question the culturally established dichotomy between Whiteness and Blackness as an overarching system that structures the narrative, the past, and the present. Its retelling of slavery from a 21st-century perspective casts a new light on this part of American history, as well as on its importance to the present. Although such a (re-)writing of US enslavement history cannot dissolve deeply anchored structural racism, it can work toward this objective by disrupting patterns of racialized imagination: It can add new voices and images to the circulation of discourses, it can foreground what has been hidden, and it can name injustices committed in the slavery system, the “wake” (Sharpe 2016) of which stretches into the present moment.

Part of this “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007, 6) involves the division of society into the social constructs of Black and White, into inferior ‘subhuman’ and superior ‘prototype-human’ (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 84). Afropessimist scholars, such as Wilderson, Hartman, and Sharpe, see a linearity between the social structures produced within the slavery system and those found in present-day American society, which tie race to a socially ascribed status: “The means and modes of Black subjugation may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjugation remain” (Sharpe 2016, 12). Wilderson diagnoses not only a transtemporal persistence of anti-Black violence, but also a “parasitic” (2020, 16) relation between humanity and anti-Blackness. According to him, Black people work as “implements for the execution of White and Non-Black fantasies” (Wilderson 2020, 15) and are therefore “instrumentalized for postcolonial, immigrant, LGBT, and workers’ agendas” (Wilderson 2020, 15). This instrumentalization is what Morrison refers to when she describes the “parasitical nature of white freedom” (1992, 57). In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison argues that the dominant slavery-era discourses that divided society into White masters and Black slaves still dominate discourses of the 20th century

(1992, 11). She locates this dichotomy in a discursive practice she calls “American Africanism” (Morrison 1992, 6-7), tying the persistence of anti-Blackness in the US to the construction of a dominant White identity. White Americans established an image of an Africanist persona as savage, inferior, and powerless in order to form their own identity as civilized, superior, and powerful (Morrison 1992, 52). Even though this defining “act of violence” (Levine-Rasky 2016, 16) allowed White Americans to minoritize Black people to the extent of complete omission from their literary writing, it is inextricably linked to White American identity, and thus is always, consciously or unconsciously, present in their cultural productions as the “Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992, 9-17).

With her focus on the construction of Whiteness and its reliance on discursive anti-Blackness, Morrison can be situated as an Afropessimist within the field of Critical Whiteness Studies. However, Morrison proposes a more optimistic outlook to the future than Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* in stating that a race conscious reading of US-American literature can help to detect and challenge the discursive practices that maintain an ontological relation between White norm and Black other (1992, 14-15). As Yancy observes, White supremacy is constructed through ritualized performances, a set of well-established practices that “may come to represent the ‘natural’ order of things” (2004, 15) and grant “epistemic authority” to Whiteness (Mills 2007, 34). Those performances “create an illusion of substance that appears bodily” (Warren 2003, 29) when Whiteness is nothing more than an imaginary construct, however with real effects on American society and culture (Frankenberg 2001, 76). Detecting the imaginary Africanist presence in literary works therefore also reveals the absent, meaning invisible, omnipresence of an imaginary Whiteness (Garner 2007, 34). By making the invisible visible, literature and literary criticism can help to acknowledge and to unlearn the silent acceptance of Whiteness as norm from which Blackness deviates.

Morrison analyzes canonical texts written by White Americans during the 19th and the early 20th centuries to point toward literary performances of Whiteness and anti-Blackness. With her exem-

plary analyses of works by Poe, Hemingway, and Twain among others, she claims that the Africanist presence has been continuously inscribed into the national canon. Investigations of works by other canonical authors, such as William Faulkner, resulted in a more ambivalent picture of racialized discourses in US-American literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. The sometimes contradictory interpretations of the racial imagination enacted in Faulkner’s texts, collected in Fowler and Abadie’s *Faulkner and Race* (1987), illustrate the covert operation of American Africanism. While a rather clear consensus seems to be found among scholars on the White supremacist imagination of Poe (Brown 1937, 11; Sundquist 1987, 25), Faulkner’s texts are more difficult to situate. Blyden Jackson and Pamela Rhodes, for example, see both a stereotypical representation of Black people and a more nuanced attempt to depict Black consciousness in his texts, while Thadious M. Davis diagnoses “the burden of inadequate racial assumptions” (1987, 85) in both modes of characterization (Fowler and Abadie 1987, viii-xi). Sundquist arrives at a balanced conclusion about Faulkner’s texts’ racial discourses, claiming that the texts visibly attempt to challenge anti-Black stereotypes without successfully freeing themselves from an underlying White supremacist thought (1987, 3). López’s claim that “there remains in the early twenty-first century a *postcolonial* whiteness struggling to come into being” (2005, 6), meaning a still missing “spirit of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition between postcolonial whiteness and its others” (2005, 6), highlights the continuing prevalence of White supremacy and its cultural practices. As Mills puts it, the “original fusion of personhood – what is to be human – with membership of a particular race will continue to shape white perception, conceptualization, and affect in unconscious and subtle ways even in apparently nonracist contexts” (2003, 46). In order to approach the question to what degree this dimension of slavery’s “afterlife” continues to manifest itself in US-American literature as an Africanist presence, this article outlines an analysis of George Saunders’s award-winning novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a test case. I argue that this contemporary novel renegotiates the White American discourse informed by the Afri-

canist presence, disclosing its constructedness and confronting it with a visible, complex, and powerful African American presence. *Lincoln in the Bardo* insists on the need for a disruption of African Americans' "narratively condemned status" (Wynter 1994, 70) and a persistent deconstruction of the Black-White dichotomy in the White mind in favor of transcultural¹ enrichment.

As Sue Park indicates, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is filled with dichotomies and their transgressions (2018, 81). One major dichotomy is the division between fact and fiction that is found in this historically informed ghost story (Moseley 2019). The novel portrays the story of Abraham Lincoln's son Willie's death in 1862 and imagines his ghost's proceeding to a transitional space between the afterlife and the living world, called the Bardo.² In this intermediary space, situated in the graveyard where Willie Lincoln is buried, he encounters other ghosts who are themselves unable to proceed from the Bardo to the afterlife. Believing to be merely sick and not dead, they want to help Willie exit the Bardo and return to his father, who moves the ghosts with his affectionate mourning over his dead son in the graveyard. However, the ghosts do not succeed in their endeavor and eventually come to realize the truth of their deaths. Through an event called the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" (Saunders 2017, 296), which is triggered by the ghosts' realization of being dead, the ghosts individually exit the Bardo and proceed to an unknown afterlife. While the main sections are composed of dialogue between the characters in an experimental, drama-like arrangement, other sections include quotations from fictive and non-fictive historical texts to capture the discursive atmosphere of the Civil War. The historical citations, as well as the historical setting, connect fiction back to fact

and the past to the present. By mixing historical sources with invented ones in the documentary parts of the novel, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred (Moseley 2019, 6-8), which highlights the constructedness of both the novel and historical accounts in the manner of historiographic metafiction. The fantastical is used to open spaces of possibility, or as Morse puts it, to offer "a fantastical continuation" (2018, 26) of the present space of the living. The Black-White dichotomy that existed in the world of the living persists in the Bardo. Fantasy, however, permits the deferment of this binary opposition and allows the possibility for boundary transgression to be displayed. In this way, a Black character can enter Lincoln's body, and a dialogue between the free and the unfree becomes possible (Morse 2018, 29). *Lincoln in the Bardo's* historical setting of 1862 Georgetown in Washington, D.C., along with its implanting of the Bardo within this setting, enables the novel to transmit a message about both the past and the present: the need to continually expose and resist culturally constructed dichotomies (Moseley 2019, 1-7; Park 2018, 31). The dichotomy of White and free versus Black and enslaved is depicted through the novel's representation of the Africanist presence in White Americans' minds. The critique on this cultural construct is articulated through the exposure of Whiteness and Blackness as social constructs and the introduction of an African American presence as a central, powerful, and free counter-image to the marginalized Africanist presence.

Although on the surface the story seems to hinge on the fate of a White American father mourning his son, the issues of slavery and the Civil War resonate deeply throughout the novel, accompanied by the discourse of the Africanist presence. With its contradictions and multiple perspectives, the novel represents the various discourses of slavery, using the fantastic context of a ghost story to broaden the possibilities surrounding narration, representation, and criticism. This opening of narrative possibilities is already visible in the discursive form of the novel. The story is not told by one single narrator but conveyed through multiple homodiegetic narrators. The different voices belong to the story's various characters, whose pieces of dialogue are arranged in fragments with the respective speaker's name indicated at the end of each part. This

¹ I understand the term "transcultural" as referring to the transgression of "classical cultural boundaries" (Welsch 1999, 198), acknowledging the "mixes and permeations" (Welsch 1999, 198) of cultures. In Wolfgang Welsch's terms, "[t]ransculturality is, in the first place, a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures. These encompass [...] a number of ways of life and cultures, which also interpenetrate or emerge from one another" (Welsch 1999, 198).

² The etymological origin of the word *bardo* lies in Sanskrit and means 'transitional state' (Morse 29). It further refers to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation (Moseley 2019, 10; Morse 2018, 29).

collage of voices resembles more a theatrical play than a continuous narration (Selejan 2019, 109), increasing the impression of immediacy for the reader. Initially, there seems to be no narrative authority at all, because the story is told through an assemblage of characters' quotes. As the story continues, however, the impression of mediacy occasionally increases, thereby revealing the novel's narrative guidance of the reader. This fragmentary arrangement of multiple perspectives and voices allows the reader further insight into each character (Thompson 2019, 300). S/he is confronted with various and often contradictory opinions, mirroring the unreliability of individual accounts and the diversity of discourses present in the highly polarized Civil War era, divided broadly into pro- and anti-slavery.³ Through the multiplicity of narrative voices, the reader is seemingly left to his/her own judgment regarding the narrated events. However, the novel's critical exposure of the Africanist presence reveals its own bias in favor of an anti-supremacist discourse as well as its aspiration for a society that internalizes not an Africanist but an African American presence.

2 The White Other and the African American Persona

The indication of the characters' names in lower case printing implies the equality of all characters, thus strengthening the impression that the text deliberately avoids lending one or several positions more authority than another. How this narrative situation works to criticize discriminatory practices becomes clear when looking at the distribution of the characters' portions of speech. At first the novel seems to engage in Africanism because, although all of the characters are given a chance to speak, the White characters' speech dominates the narrative. The White characters are placed into the narrator's position more frequently than the Black characters and thereby hold more power over the discourses promoted in the novel. Concerning the distribution of speech

parts and the number of characters, the first part of the novel distinctly privileges the White characters. The principal characters, Willie and Abraham Lincoln, Hans Vollmann, Roger Bevins, and the Reverend Everly Thomas, are all White. This privileged representation of White characters works to reproduce and display the discriminatory practices operating in American society that rely on the image of the marginalized and 'absent' Africanist presence. This changes significantly, however, in the second part of the novel. The display of White supremacy and a sense of frustration in the first part is then followed in the second part by a much stronger presence of Black characters and a disruption of entrenched modes of depiction. As Sue Park claims, the novel is structurally divided into two parts: The first relates to "frustration and urgency" (2018, 81) and the second consists of "escape and a tentative convergence" (2018, 82) of dichotomies. The marginalization of Black characters is redressed through their shift from the narrative margins to the center of the novel, most prominently in the case of Thomas Havens. Initially being positioned as a minor character who contributes just another small part to the fragmentary collage of narratives, he later fuses with Lincoln to become the President's inner self and voice, thereby drastically transforming into the most important figure for the continuation of the story and of history. Notably, the President is the only character whose speech is always mediated through other characters, therefore depriving one of the most powerful White American men of his discursive power. The novel thus progresses from well-known patterns of White dominance to a replacement of the Africanist divide between Black and White with an acknowledgment of the mutual construction of both concepts.

In terms of character constellation, the initial display of White domination is further undermined by the characterization of the White ghosts as peculiarly deformed, creating an alienation effect that is also transported by the fragmented, elliptical syntax and the unusual punctuation in Willie's description of Roger Bevins:

'Bevins' had several sets of eyes All darting to and fro Several noses All sniffing His hands (he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hands were so quick they seemed to be many) struck this way and that, picking things up, bringing them to his face with a most inquisitive

³ This is also a metafictional reference to the postmodern understanding of the genre of historical novels as presenting no 'facts' but versions of the past.

Little bit scary

In telling his story he had grown so many extra eyes and noses and hands that his body all but vanished
 Eyes like grapes on a vine Hands feeling the eyes
 Noses smelling the hands (Saunders 2017, 27)

Willie's struggle to express the White character's fantastical deformation with ordinary language underlines the latter's alterity. By assigning otherness to the White perpetrator of Black othering, the novel subverts the racial hierarchy implied in the American Africanist discourse. Equally defamiliarized are the characters of Hans Vollmann and the Reverend Everly Thomas. Vollmann's unfulfilled desire for the "consummation of marriage" (Saunders 2017, 28) with his young wife results in him appearing to have a constant erection in the Bardo. The Reverend preaches a life without sin but is himself on the verge of entering the hell of afterlife, which is why his face is frozen in a terrified look. While the physical deformation of these characters is a consequence of their unfulfilled happiness and their longing to return to life, it also represents their punishment for denying the undeniable, both in the Bardo and during their lifetimes. In the Bardo, they deny their deaths, convincing themselves that they are merely sick, which prevents them from being released from the transitional space. The denial of death can be seen as parallel to the denial of African Americans' humanity. The White characters' deformed image of African Americans as an othered presence in the world of the living is thus mirrored by their own captivity and deformation in the Bardo. Unless they gain consciousness about their deaths and their reliance on an Africanist presence, they will remain captured in an eternal transition. The novel therefore performs a kind of poetic justice that transfers the stereotypical role of an othered, enslaved Blackness over to Whiteness in order to reveal the arbitrariness of both constructs.

In contrast, the Black characters are markedly not presented with an alienating physical appearance. The way that Thomas Havens and Elson Farwell are portrayed, for instance, focuses more on describing their fates and relationships to their masters than on their physical traits (Saunders 2017, 214-220). Mrs. Francis Hodge is physically 'deformed' in respect to the bloody stumps she possesses instead of hands and feet, while Litzie

Wright's 'deformity' relates to her having gone mute following of her traumatic experience of multiple rape. Litzie's silence not only refers to the collective trauma of slavery but also to the erasure of the African American voice from American history. However, these deformations are not presented as alien, fantastic features but as a realistic result of their lives as slaves, which is again transported in the novel's syntax:

[...] her feet, worn to nubs, left two trails of blood behind her, and as she placed her hands (also worked to nubs) on the mulatto's hips, in support, she left bloody prints in two places there on the ale smock, as the mulatto continued to thrum and shake (Saunders 2017, 221)

In contrast to Willie's description of Bevins, the Reverend uses coherent and unmarked sentences to portray the two women. He offers causal connections, for example between Mrs. Hodge's nubs and hard slave work, rather than disjointed fragments. Consequently, the defamiliarization of the White characters as fantastic, alien others is opposed to a realist portrayal of the Black characters. The novel's characterization techniques therefore highlight the inversion of the Africanist pattern of Whiteness as norm and Blackness as deviation from that norm, revealing this division to be not "the 'natural' order of things" (Yancy 2004, 15) but a social invention.

Although many of its characters engage in the discourse of American Africanism, the novel manages to embed the practice in a way that does not promote but, on the contrary, exposes and subverts its racist implications (Farsi 2020, 319). A poignant example of this is represented by the scene in which Lieutenant Cecil Stone is introduced to the reader. Working against the Lieutenant's perception of himself as White, and therefore human in opposition to the non-human Africanist presence, the novel portrays him not as a nuanced individual but as a static and isolated type, aptly captured by the telling name "Stone." He defines himself very overtly in opposition to his "SHARDS" (Saunders 2017, 82), a name that he uses as a metaphor for the collective of Black slaves, objectifying and reducing them to a homogenous assemblage of minor splinters. The Lieutenant explains his choice of name by drawing a parallel between the color of coal and the slaves' dark skin: "they were, indeed, dark as

Night, like unto so many SHARDS OF COAL, which did give me abundant Heat" (Saunders 2017, 82). Here, coal is used as an image that conjures up the long tradition of stereotyping, uniting both a devaluation of darkness and a desire for it in an ambivalent Africanist other.

Through its caricature of the Lieutenant, the novel criticizes the delusional character's adherence to the Africanist belief in White superiority over Blackness. Right from the beginning, his self-aggrandizement is made explicit when he enters the scene by interrupting Willie with his self-characterization: "When in my merry red Jacket of Velvet I moved past Flower-bright Hedges in the full Flush of my Youth, I cut a fine Figure indeed" (Saunders 2017, 82). The overly poetic speech used for his narcissistic glorification stands in opposition to his aggressive and vulgar innuendos such as "that SHARD would be made to give off SPARKS" (Saunders 2017, 83), referring to rape. The random capitalization reveals his lack of self-control as well as his obsession with power, which exposes his self-description as that of a "fine Figure" to be a ridiculous delusion. The caricature of Lieutenant Stone progresses through the discrepancy between his distorted self-perception and the characterization implied in the other characters' annoyed reactions to him, such as Vollmann's "Good Lord" (Saunders 2017, 82) or Bevin's ironic comment "He's in fine form tonight" (Saunders 2017, 82). Although the other White ghosts disapprove of the Lieutenant's Africanist claims, the lack of intervention shows just how established such racialized discourse is in the Bardo. Nevertheless, the Lieutenant's exaggerated form of American Africanism seems to surpass the generally accepted racist language in the ghosts' frame of reference and is therefore criticized. Like the other White ghosts, the Lieutenant is also portrayed as deformed, turning "pencil-thin in places, tall as the tallest of our pines" (Saunders 2017, 83) while articulating his racist thoughts. The growth in height represents the Lieutenant's superficial grandeur, which proves to be unsubstantiated, as he becomes as thin as the foundation upon which he bases his White superiority. His usual physical appearance is described symbolically as "of average size, beautifully dressed, but with terrible teeth" (Saunders 2017, 83), hence contrasting his superficial, "beautiful" appearance with the deteriorated "terrible" per-

sonality that is revealed as soon as he opens his mouth. The novel's caricature of the Lieutenant, achieved through discrepancies and exaggerations in characterization, effectively reveals, criticizes, and even ridicules his White supremacist construction of an Africanist presence.

As yet another example of a racialized mindset informed by the Africanist presence, the Barons' discourse demonstrates that all social groups found in the Bardo society are determined by the White supremacist belief system. Eddie and Betsy Baron are a poor White servant couple, buried in the same mass grave as the former slaves who occupy the Bardo. Although they are portrayed as uneducated through their vulgar speech, they are also shown to be open-minded, as they are the only White characters in the Bardo who are friends with Black slaves. Despite this friendship, it becomes clear that these two characters also define themselves in opposition to an Africanist presence: "He's one of them, but he's still our friend" (Saunders 2017, 215). By objectifying Elson Farwell as a means of entertainment (Saunders 2017, 216), debasing his eloquent speech as "so G----- complicated" (Saunders 2017, 214), and simultaneously ignoring their own intellectual insufficiencies, they treat Elson as an Africanist persona in order to build an empowered White identity for themselves. Instead of unlearning the "epistemic authority" of Whiteness (Mills 2007, 34), they perform it.

This explicit performance of American Africanism is undercut by the discrepancy between the Barons' self-perception and the text's portrayal of them, which ridicules their groundless belief in their own superiority. The disparaging behavior of the other White characters toward the Barons serves as an indirect characterization of these characters, revealing their lowly position and reputation within the White community. For example, the Reverend directly rejects their request to talk to Willie and repeatedly attempts to silence them (Saunders 2017, 83-87), while Bevin's remark "These were the Barons" (Saunders 2017, 87) closes the caricature of them as if they were performing a theatrical play. Just as Elson was used as an 'entertaining object' by the Barons, the novel appropriates this powerplay by placing the Barons into the same position. The transfer of the role of the objectified onto Whiteness, which usually does the objectifying, thus expresses the novel's condemnation of American Africanism.

The Barons are further ridiculed through the way in which the individual segments of their speech are presented. Their elliptical speech fragments alternate in rapid succession, creating a tangled impression rather than providing a compelling story of their past (Saunders 2017, 83-87). The numerous expletives and repetitions make the Barons' story redundant and reduce its importance: "F---- them! those f----ing ingrate snakes have no G---ed right to blame us for a f----ing thing until they walk a f----ing mile in our G---ed shoes" (Saunders 2017, 86-87, 211). The frequent censure of words not only marks the inappropriate character of the Barons' language but also diminishes their narrative agency. The direct contrast of these vulgar expressions to Elson's eloquent language collapses the Black-White dichotomy implied in American Africanism by depicting the White couple as inferior in knowledge and intellect. The White characters' engagement in the racialized discursive praxis is thus criticized further by drawing a caricature of them at the levels of both story and discourse.

In contrast to the Lieutenant, however, the Barons seem to reproduce dominant discourses unreflectingly, without being aware of the racialized concepts they rely on. They seem less conscious of their performance of Africanism in that they hold a closer relationship to the Black characters than to the other White characters. When they exit the Bardo, the color of Eddie's "matterlightblooming phenomenon" is "not the usual luminous white, but, rather, a dingy gray" (Saunders 2017, 325). Reading the individual "matterlightblooming phenomenon" of a character as indicative of his/her identity, the color gray shows that Eddie is not White in the "usual, luminous" way but is instead a mix of Black and White. Already one step further than the other White ghosts to eroding the Africanist presence out of his mind, he eventually serves to represent an American society that still holds the prospect to think outside of the Black-White dichotomy in the future.

These examples demonstrate how White characters identify in opposition to a dark Africanist presence, representing one of the dominant discourses of the 19th century that established the marginal, inferior, and inhuman status of African Americans as naturally given. That the novel does not promote such a belief but rather engages in

anti-supremacist discourses shows further in the depiction of an empowered African American presence through the characterization of Black figures as powerful and free human beings. None of them is portrayed as inhuman, evil, or not "possess[ing] human emotions" (Saunders 2017, 320) as the Lieutenant describes them in a racist spirit. On the contrary, Elson, the first Black character to be introduced in the novel, is highly emotional when remembering the injustice done to him as a slave. With his death, the serviceable slave turns into the complete opposite. Recognizing his master's indifference to him, Elson becomes highly agitated and aspires to take revenge:

I regretted every moment of conciliation and smiling and convivial waiting, and longed with all my heart (there in the dappled tree-moonshade, that, in my final moments, became all shade) that my health might be restored to me, if just for one hour, so that I might correct my grand error, and enstrip myself from all cowering and false-talk and preening diction, and rise up even yet and stride back to those always-happy Easts and club and knife and rend and destroy them and tear down that tent and burn down that house. (Saunders 2017, 217)

When describing his own death in a romantically stylized way, the contrast between lightness and darkness in the metaphor "moonshade" turning "all shade" opens another semantic dimension. The progress from 'half-dark' in "moonshade" to 'entirely dark' in "all shade" points to his development from a Black slave who imitates and pleases his master into an independent and self-confident man. His literary language and open complaints emerge in contradiction to his former behavior of "cowering and false-talk and preening diction." Here, he reveals that imitating his master's "preening diction" was part of his strategy to rise in status, an effect of mimicry⁴ as described by Bhabha (86). Thus, he is portrayed as a man not just capable of emotions but also of complex and strategic thinking. This representation of the

⁴ Bhabha describes colonial imitation as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (86). According to Bhabha, mimicry displays the ambivalent relation between colonizer and colonized. Through the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized the division into inferior and superior is ruptured and colonial domination is therefore called into question: "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 86).

African American presence in Elson subverts the concept of the Africanist presence promoted by White characters.

The strongest counterforce to the Africanist presence is the development of Thomas Havens. Having been a submissive slave throughout his life and during most of his time as a ghost in the Bardo, he later transforms into a man with his own will and agency: an empowered African American presence. When he enters Lincoln's body toward the end of the novel, he first describes his subordinated position to his master's family as a "happy arrangement" (Saunders 2017, 311). The longer he stays in Lincoln's body, the more he distances himself from his internalized inferiority and thus from functioning as a projection of an Africanist presence. Havens's description of his and Lincoln's fusion is indicative of his development: "[...] we were the same size, and out, upon horseback and (forgive me) the thrill of once again riding a horse was too much, and I – I stayed. Therein. What a thrill it was! To be doing what I wished" (Saunders 2017, 311). The inserted apologies for acting according to his own will as well as the hesitation "I – I stayed" show that he still sees himself in an inferior position to White people. However, Havens's exclamation shortly thereafter indicates a change in attitude: The character is finally beginning to enjoy his freedom. From then on, he starts to feel more comfortable not only in Lincoln's body but also in his new position as a free and powerful man. Realizing his new position of holding power over a White man, he starts using it to persuade Lincoln to end slavery. Stepping out of his inferior position, he recognizes White Americans as the agents of the degradation of Black people and as responsible for their fate. He makes use of this insight to call out to one such White American:

Sir, if you are as powerful as I feel that you are, and as inclined toward us as you seem to be, endeavor to *do* something for us, so that we might do something for ourselves. We are ready, sir; are angry, are capable, our hopes are coiled up so tight as to be deadly, or holy: turn loose, sir, let us at it, let us show what we can do. (Saunders 2017, 312)

He calls upon Lincoln to continue the Civil War in order to break with the social order installed by the slavery system. The revolutionary spirit of

his rhetoric contrasts with his hesitations at the beginning of the scene, exemplifying his development. Through his elaborate speech, Havens actively influences Lincoln and the course of history. The once serviceable slave has become a revolutionary free man who shares his position in society with the most powerful White man in America. They both fuse into one person, another call by the novel to think outside of essentialist racial categories and, simultaneously, a fantastical reminder of the continuing inseparability of Blackness and Whiteness in the 21st century. Accordingly, the open ending states: "And we rode forward into the night, past the sleeping houses of our countrymen" (Saunders 2017, 343). Depicting Lincoln's and Havens's thoughts as one and the same while they proceed to the White House, the novel ends with the manifestation of an African American presence as the driving force of a White American man.

At the level of character constellation, the novel also conveys an impression of African Americans that is very different from the Africanist presence typically characterized as isolated and emotionless. The various relationships that the Black characters engage in, whether it be with other Black characters or White ones, function to reinforce their portrayals as attentive, emotional, and social human beings. Accordingly, Lizzie cultivates a close relationship with Mrs. Hodge, resembling a mother-daughter relationship, which disproves the Africanist belief that Black women lack the capacity for motherly love. Lizzie's affectionate connection to Mrs. Hodge becomes clear when she uses the recovery of her voice to thank Mrs. Hodge for her support all these years (Saunders 2017, 258). Furthermore, toward the end of the novel, Lizzie and Elson seem to bond by holding each other's hands while the secret of their death is revealed (Saunders 2017, 313). The Black characters not only keep close relationships with other Black characters but also engage in 'interracial' friendships. For instance, the Barons, a White couple, are friends with Elson, a former slave. Even if they are not able to escape the dominant discourses of the time, they still defend Elson and others in the Black community against the Lieutenant and his patrol (Saunders 2017, 223). This interrelation of African American characters stands far apart from an

Africanist conception of Black people as emotionless, isolated, and inhuman and builds a sociable African American presence in its stead.

3 Negotiating Freedom and Darkness

The scenes comprising *Lincoln in the Bardo* are set during nighttime on a graveyard in Washington D.C. The inhabitants of the Bardo exist in a separate sphere but are nonetheless able to observe the people in the living world. The setting casts a sinister atmosphere on the scenes that is dominated by darkness, as Isabelle Perkins describes it in the novel:

The moonlight shows the premises across the way littered far & wide with the detritus of yesterday's great storm – Mighty tree-limbs lay against crypts & across graves [...] [on the] yard of the Dead in the dark of night. (Saunders 2017, 183)

The personification of the dead trees with their limbs lying across the graveyard emphasizes the ghostly presence of the dead. The alliteration "Dead in the dark" establishes a connection between death and darkness, reflecting the novel's apparent "obsession with figurations of death and hell" (Morrison 1992, 5) as a sign of the Africanist presence. However, the darkness in the novel is not associated with 'evil' but is ruptured through humoristic depictions, as becomes clear, for instance, in Isabelle Perkin's personification of the cemetery's statue Morty or Lincoln's obedient horse (Saunders 2017, 183). The ghosts in the Bardo are portrayed in a humoristic manner – partly because of their unwillingness to accept their death and the resulting dramatic irony – which adds to the overall impression of the Bardo and the graveyard as dark but far from gruesome places. The connotative connection between darkness and 'evil', inherent in the concept of the Africanist presence, is thus renegotiated at the level of narrated space.

In general, the narrative features three spaces: the Bardo, the world of the living, and the afterlife. As the main space of the narration, the Bardo is divided further by a "dreaded iron fence" (Saunders 2017, 36), redrawing an imaginary color line between Black and White only to transcend it. The

division of the Bardo into a black pit and a white cemetery is an extension of the same division in the space of the living, where the Black slaves' mass graves border on the cemetery of White citizens, who are all buried in individual graves. However, this sign of White privilege is challenged in the Bardo. The White inhabitants within the limits of the iron fence are affected by nausea when approaching it, which prevents them from crossing the border (Saunders 2017, 223). The Black inhabitants of the Bardo, residing in a mass grave outside the limits of the iron fence, can cross it without being affected. This division of space inverses the partition of privilege in the world of the living – and in the US when read allegorically – where Whiteness signifies freedom of movement and Blackness equals confinement. The Africanist image of the Black population as an enslaved and powerless presence is thus undermined by transcending the color line through the repartition of freedom and power between Black and White. Furthermore, the area bordering on the 'Black side' of the iron fence is described as "uninhabited wilderness" (Saunders 2017, 330), evoking the stereotypical connection between savagery and Blackness. However, since the wilderness "ended in the dreaded iron fence" (Saunders 2017, 330) and is thus still located on the 'White side', this connection is transferred from Blackness to Whiteness. Consequently, the characteristics of a savage and wild Africanist presence are subverted through the spatial setup of the Bardo.

The world of the living is described by the ghosts in the Bardo, as well as through inserted passages from both invented and real historical documents (Moseley 2019, 6-8). This mixture of fact and fiction heightens the heterogeneity of discourses in the novel, emphasizing the constructedness of historical accounts and, per Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, the novel's construction of itself as a historical novel. Through various contradictions and the multiplicity of different points of view, the novel outlines the scope of positions during the Civil War era, most prominently pro-slavery and abolitionist positions. The reliance on American Africanism in the world of the living is displayed not only in reports of the racist treatment of slaves but also in the discourses employed by the 'historical' quotes. The discourse of the Africanist presence, reflected in some of the quoted passages that show disap-

proval of Lincoln, is opposed by voices in favor of the President. The predominance of the latter in these 'documentary chapters' weakens the reliability of the quotes that employ the Africanist discourse. For instance, in the statement "you are nothing but a goddamn Black nigger" (Saunders 2017, 233), quoted from Holzer's *Dear Mr. Lincoln: Letters to the President* (1993, 341), the speaker intends to insult Lincoln by pejoratively equating him with the Africanist presence. Such overt employment of the discourse of American Africanism is challenged by the numerous characterizations of Lincoln as liberal minded and in search of justice (Saunders 2017, 283-285). Additionally, the quotations of the racist speaker lack punctuation marks, contain misspellings, and reproduce familiar speech containing vulgar insults, which reduces the speaker's credibility (Saunders 2017, 233, 235). In comparison to the standard register of the quotes in chapter LXX which do not engage in the Africanist discourse, the lines quoted from Holzer appear even more inappropriate. The novel arranges its selected 'historical' quotes as a strategic means of refuting the American Africanism employed in the world of the living.

The characters have departed the living realm by dying and remain in the Bardo because of their ignorance of this fact. The end of the ghosts' belief in their "self-deceptive version of reality" (Farsi 2020, 318) – the sickness in the case of the ghosts and the Africanist presence in the case of White people – leads to their release into the afterlife and another stage for American society that is different from the racialized present. As an undefined space that follows the Bardo, the afterlife allegorically refers to the space and time that the US could enter if its White citizens were to acknowledge the Africanist presence and their own Whiteness as imagined constructs that they rely on. As soon as they stop denying the obvious and accept that Whiteness and Blackness are cultural constructions, a possibility opens up for exiting the transitory space of the Bardo – as a signifier for the present – as well as for entering a future that, although uncertain, is different from the status quo. Just as the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" represents a sort of literal enlightenment of the ghosts that allows them to proceed to the next stage, the realization of Black and White as constructions is portrayed as unsettling America's White supremacist imagination. The

ghosts' progression through their 'enlightenment' represents the novel's call for a return to reason in order to counter ignorance. The semantic shift in the connotation of the Bardo and the afterlife from racial division and ignorance to progress shows the novel's critique of American Africanism and its demand for a similar shift outside of fiction. This demand is strengthened further through a Black character transcending the spatial limits as well as through the open ending, when Havens accompanies Lincoln on his way to the White House.

4 The African American Influence on US American History and Future

With the main plot including Willie's stay in the Bardo and Lincoln's nightly visits to the graveyard, the novel seems to focus on the fate of a White American family and to marginalize African Americans to the same extent as the novels that Morrison analyzes in *Playing in the Dark*. The instance in the novel when the Black ghosts cross the iron fence, however, represents a turning point concerning the novel's apparent engagement in White supremacist discursive practices. The White characters' overt reproduction of the Africanist discourse while bragging narcissistically about their success in life seems to trigger the first appearance of Black characters in the novel. Tension is intensified by the White characters introducing the arrival of the "darkies," "Black beasts," and "Damnable savages" (Saunders 2017, 213) as an ominous event, employing the othering discourse of American Africanism. This tension is resolved abruptly and is even ridiculed through the sharp contrast between the hostile announcement of the Black characters as monsters by the White ghosts and their subsequent depiction as emotional individuals. The confrontation of the two images, namely that of the Africanist presence and that of the African American presence, which emerges when the White characters excessively employ the Africanist discourse, conveys a necessity to resist White supremacist discourse and to short-circuit its dependence on a distorted portrayal of African Americans. Therefore, the appearance of Black characters in the novel adds a socio-political dimension to the indi-

vidual story of a grieving father. In chapter LXX, shortly after the introduction of the Black characters, the tension between Black and White people during the Civil War is for the first time discussed explicitly in the 'historical' sources. The inclusion of Black characters is thus crucial for the understanding of the novel and its historical context just as African Americans are for an understanding of American history and culture.

The importance of Black characters for the dynamics of the plot becomes further apparent in chapter LXXVII when Black and White characters enter Lincoln to convince him to return to Willie's grave. The united force that results from the union of the Black and White ghosts compels them to remember happiness in life and even erases the White characters' alien physical features. Lizzie also regains her speech and Mrs. Hodge her hands and feet. This fantastic moment of transcultural fusion, where the line between Blackness and Whiteness is dissolved, improves the situation for all characters involved in both a physical and mental sense. The momentary absence of the racial divide so firmly entrenched in American culture is thus portrayed as beneficial for everyone. In this scene, a utopian microcosm is created where being united regardless of socially ascribed differences is presented as a dramatic change and an improvement of every citizen's well-being: "We found ourselves (like flowers from which placed rocks had just been removed) being restored somewhat to our natural fullness" (Saunders 2017, 256). The collapse of the racial dichotomy in this reunion impels the partaking characters to unfold their personalities in "natural fullness," freed from the "removed" burden of the Africanist presence. The metaphor of the 'blossoming flower' announces the impending arrival of a 'fresh spring' after a 'cold winter' of ignorance. As soon as White and Black Americans are no longer viewed as opposites but achieve a "spirit of intersubjectivity" (López 2005, 6), both groups may complete and enrich one another. However, the characters' astonishment about their "miraculous transformations" (Saunders 2017, 259) within Lincoln underlines the utopian character of this idealist scenario and reminds the reader that this exciting transcultural fusion is a fantasy. As the characters withdraw from the fantastical realm of Lincoln's body, they characterize this moment of unity and self-

fillment as "a flim-flam," a "chimera," and "[m]ere wishful thinking" (Saunders 2017, 263). Even though the transcultural society reveals itself to be idealist, and even though the union does not achieve its goal of stopping Lincoln on his way, the moment of unity still proves decisive for the plot. The characters' changed views regarding their identities, as neither White nor Black, which was initiated by the utopian vision, finally brings them all closer to being released from the transitional state. Therefore, the novel suggests that a conception of American identity that does not rely on the construct of a Black-White dichotomy would prove decisive in the course of the nation's development. While the transcultural union is not presented as a final solution to America's systemic racism, as it does not immediately result in the ghosts' release from the Bardo, it nevertheless disrupts the "parasitical" (Wilderson 2020, 16) relation between Whiteness and anti-Blackness for a moment, putting the two constructs' artificiality on display.

Whether an actual realization of the "chimera" will take place is left unanswered by the novel. Elson's and Lieutenant Stone's fight is said to seem to go "on into eternity" (Saunders 2017, 321), suggesting that the racial divide of Black and White will never be dissolved (Farsi 2020, 319). However, this Afropessimist outlook is countered by the open ending. The effect of the union between Black and White characters on Lincoln encourages Havens to stay inside the President in order to influence not only the end of the novel but also the 'plot' of history. The mass inhabitation of Lincoln by Black and White ghosts influences his conception of the self and the other (Thompson 2019, 303), therefore giving the President the predisposition that leads to his main achievement: the abolition of slavery.⁵ Havens's metaphorical description of Lincoln as an "opening book" (Saunders 2017, 312) with "no aversion" to him (Saunders 2017, 311) aptly demonstrates the President's development by the end of the novel. Initially a White man driven by the dominant dis-

⁵ According to Morse (2018, 30), the Civil War's ending in the abolition of slavery is foreshadowed in the novel itself through the Black ghosts moving beyond the iron fence, thus resisting their deprivation of freedom and anticipating a "fundamental and unimaginable alternation of reality" (Saunders 2017, 321).

courses of the time and, hence, "closed" toward the African American population, he progresses further to become a man opening his mind to a world-view beyond White supremacist thinking. This process is accelerated through the union of the "black and white [ghosts], who had so recently mass-inhabited him" (Saunders 2017, 312), which questions the existence of an Africanist presence. The emphasis on the importance of the Black and White characters' unification indicates that the novel assumes the disruption of American Africanism to be central to social progress.

Havens not only transcends his previously internalized Africanist thinking, but also transcends the space of the dead by returning to the living world through Lincoln (Saunders 2017, 343). This event is the novel's assurance that the Civil War and slavery will end. With its open ending, the novel calls for a change of racial hierarchies. Without forecasting some 'post-racial' future, the fusion of two characters, one marked by Blackness and the other by Whiteness, highlights the two concepts' continuing interdependence and directs attention toward the necessity to reassess simplistic racial categories. Had Havens not accompanied Lincoln to the White House and instead been driven back to his grave or the afterlife, as are the other inhabitants of the Bardo, the novel would have ended as it started: with the separation of and hierarchy between Black and White. However, the novel's ending instead places an empowered and liberal-minded African American persona in control, enabling him to 'come back to life' and influence the thoughts of the President of the nation, thus deciding the course of history. Such an ending clearly emphasizes the central role of African Americans in American society. In so doing, the novel favors the development of American society, both in fiction and reality, toward unsettling the US' White supremacist belief system, which can only be constructed through an imagined Africanist presence. Lincoln's mind is no longer metaphorically occupied by an Africanist presence, but by an African American presence. Through its plot the novel thus portrays the development of American history from slavery to segregation to the prospect of a disruption of the racial dichotomy, while also highlighting African Americans' centrality to the development of American society. Beginning in medias res with White characters' perspectives

marginalizing Black characters as Africanist presences, its ending remains open with an African American persona actively influencing the mind of one of the most powerful White men in history.

5 Conclusion

Although *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes some time to develop the African American presence as a counter-image to the Africanist presence during the course of the narrative, the second half of the novel effectively articulates a strong anti-supremacist program. Initially, the novel consciously subscribes to the American Africanist discourse, only to disrupt that discourse's continuity and expose it as an artificial construct later on. Through the embodiment of the African American presence in concrete characters who are portrayed as powerful and free individuals, the White characters' image of Black people as alien others is undermined. The novel's critique of the degradation of African Americans by a White hegemony is further expressed through the empowerment of the African American presence and the defamiliarization of White supremacist thought. Moreover, the importance of African American characters to the plot turns the novel into a counter-narrative to the marginalization and absence of African Americans within dominant historical accounts. As a historiographic metafiction in form of historical fantasy, *Lincoln in the Bardo* not only calls these historical accounts into question, but also relates their discriminatory practices concerning African Americans to the 21st century, as part of "the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007, 6). The novel's division of the narrated spaces redraws the imaginative color line between Black and White in order to then dissolve the line and the binary oppositions through the transgressions of these spaces, disclosing their artificiality. While the possibility of an 'eternal fight' between Black and White in an Afropessimist sense is acknowledged, the novel's open ending and fantastical fusions of characters eventually demand a disruption of the pessimist paradigm without proposing this disruption as the final solution to the US' systemic racial division. Unlike, for instance, Faulkner's texts' ambiguity concerning American Africanism, the contemporary novel clearly renegotiates the White supremacist "grand narrative" (Lyotard 1984, xxiii) about a stereotyp-

ical Africanist presence through its depiction of an empowered African American presence and its urgent call for White America to see its self-deceptive belief in White supremacy for what it is.

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