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George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*: semiotic explorations of Abraham Lincoln in American cultural memory

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a semiotic analysis of Abraham Lincoln's role in American cultural memory by addressing the interaction in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) between Lincoln's two roles as a larger than life persona and a relatable 'common' man. By using the literary tropes of synecdoche and metonym, and Ernst Kantorowicz's notion of the King's two bodies ('body natural' and 'body politic'), this paper examines Lincoln's roles in the novel and argues that his portrayal as a synecdochic representation of the nation (his body natural) is crucial to the formation of his metonymic representation (his body politic). Discussing examples that range from the connection between the White House and the nation during the Civil War, to Lincoln's remarkable appearance and his role in the abolition of slavery, we reach the conclusion that Lincoln's popularity in American cultural memory is owing to the interweaving of these two semiotic relations.

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Introduction

In presidential historians' as well as popular rankings of 'best US Presidents ever' Abraham Lincoln has consistently ranked #1 over the last decades (C-SPAN). As an icon of the American past, both its fundamental frictions and its moments of glory and unity, Lincoln looms large in US history and American popular culture. This is a function primarily of his role as President in the Civil War, but also of his autofabrication as both a clear-sighted and honest leader, and as a projection screen for a host of ideas, needs, and cultural memories from across the political

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spectrum (Polak 2021, 26–31). After all, '[i]f Lincoln's historical role had been [. . .] less decisive, his place in American memory would not now be what it is' (Schwartz 2014, 6). The setting of the Civil War is pivotal as 'the war and Lincoln's response to it defined him as a President. [. . .] As the war grew and changed, so Lincoln grew and changed' (Oates 2011, 92).

Often remembered as the 'Great Emancipator' and the 'Savior of the Union', Lincoln was in charge of the nation during a time in which the United States were torn apart by civil war over slavery. Both the war and slavery were linked together and condemned by Lincoln by the time of his second inaugural address. He saw the war as 'divine punishment for the "great offense" of slavery' as though it was 'a terrible retribution God had visited on a guilty people, in North as well as South' (118). Before the Civil War, however, Lincoln could hardly be called a Great Emancipator. As a political candidate who had to oppose emancipation to safeguard his political career, Lincoln thought that the issue of slavery could only be solved in the distant future (118). He believed white Americans would not allow black people to 'live among them as equals' and therefore he insisted that, once slavery had vanished from America, 'the federal government should colonize all blacks in Africa' (63–64). Ultimately, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freed Lincoln from a balancing act focused on pleasing white Americans, while allowing him 'to act more consistently with his moral convictions' (118). Nevertheless, with the United States embroiled in civil war, Lincoln was leading a divided people. His inaugural address of 1861 'offered both a sword and an olive branch', by 'affirm[ing] the illegality of secession' and 'reiterat[ing] [. . .] Lincoln's pledge not "to interfere with slavery where it exists"' (McPherson 2000). Although the nation had teetered on the edge of civil war for decades by the time Lincoln became president, he remained committed to this balancing act, also after the start of the Civil War. While this was largely a rhetorical matter, Lincoln nevertheless remained somewhat popular on a personal level in the South, even during the War (McCrary 1978, 6).

Due to these efforts to appear favorable to all, a variety of interpretations of Lincoln's intentions and deeds exists. During his life, he already established his role as a vessel for a variety of memory communities, resulting in a range of remembrance practices, that continued to evolve in the years after his assassination in April 1865. Furthermore, 'through self-reliance and belief in the dignity of the common man', Lincoln embodied ideals that were at the base of 'America's self-conception', such as 'liberty,

equality, [and] individualism'. Therefore, 'Lincoln's life [. . .] has always lent itself to his country's political discourse' (Schwartz 2014, xi). This strong connection between Lincoln and the United States' mainstream values ensured that his memory remains pivotal even to this day, as his adaptability to the needs of different communities guarantees his enduring relevance. Now, as during his presidency, Lincoln presents an embodiment of one of the United States' most fundamental struggles and formative moments. In fact, 'many people think of Lincoln as did his contemporaries, for today's Lincoln, "our Lincoln", is largely constituted by the Lincoln of yesterday' (2008, 145).

Whereas Lincoln can easily be seen as an embodiment of the nation as a whole, both in its divided and in its reunited state, he was and remains relatable also on the individual level. These two roles – Lincoln as a larger-than-life persona at the head of the nation and Lincoln as a relatable 'common' man – can be related to what Ernst Kantorowicz has called the 'body politic' and the 'body natural'. The 'body politic' refers to 'a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government' and the 'body natural' is a 'Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident' (Kantorowicz 2016, 7). Kantorowicz observed this division between the body that belongs to the nation and the body that belongs to the self in a wide range of medieval expressions of the monarchy in law, literature, politics and theology. Kings, as they emerged into the early modern era, had 'Two Bodies' [which] 'form one unit indivisible, each being fully contained in the other' (9). This idea was based on the Christian notion of the double embodiment of God and man in Jesus Christ. Similarly, kings were understood as representatives of Christ on earth, which points to the body politic being 'more ample and large' than the body natural and containing 'truly mysterious forces which reduce, or even remove, the imperfections of the fragile human nature' (9). Although American presidents are 'only' the representatives of the people, a similar metaphor works well for Lincoln. As a Christ-figure, Lincoln's suffering was truly personal and embodied, while he also reigned over other people's life and death as a god. Arguably, there is a third aspect here, that George Saunders' Man Booker prize-winning experimental novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) emphasizes as well: that of Lincoln the father cradling in his arms his deceased child, making Willie the sacrificial lamb, who has actually entered the afterlife, unlike his father. As such, perhaps more than other presidents, Lincoln could easily reflect medieval monarchs' near-perfect overlap of body politic and body natural.

We shall argue here that the remembrance practices that continue to construct Lincoln as both a body politic that represents the nation as a whole and a body natural with its own peculiarities can productively be understood in semiotic terms. The tradition in historical and sociological studies of Lincoln memory is to organize various practices thematically, by, for instance, distinguishing Lincoln as 'Savior of the Union' and 'Great Emancipator' (for example, Peterson 1994; Schwartz 2008). While this is helpful in gaining an overview of the various thematic areas in which Lincoln continues to be remembered, it says little about the semiotic operation of Lincoln memory, and therefore little about why he remains such a versatile vessel in American popular culture (including such films as *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012)). We add to the thematic approach a semiotic analysis, showing that Lincoln functions both as a *synecdochic* representative of the United States during the Civil War – that is, as a single exemplary figure, an everyman, whose experience is like that of others – and a *metonym*. As a metonymic figure, Lincoln 'stands in' for the nation as a whole and thus solely represents all of the United States through his experience (comparable to Kantorowicz' notion of the 'body politic'). These semiotic terms are best observed as literary tropes in a literary novel, but can effectively be applied to a wide range of representations of Abraham Lincoln. As will become clear, one element of Lincoln's enduring versatility lies in the fact that he is often simultaneously represented as a synecdochic and as a metonymic figure.

To clarify these terms, Jonathan Culler's discussion of what he identifies as the fundamental structures of language – metaphor and metonymy – is important. Culler points out that 'metonymy links by means of contiguity. Metonymy moves from one thing to another that is contiguous with it, as when we say "the Crown" for "the Queen"' (Culler 1997, 71–72). The pivotal term here is 'contiguity', which etymologically is built up of the Latin prefix 'con-' and verb 'tangere' (past tense 'tetigi') meaning 'touched together'. When the Queen is metonymically substituted by 'the Crown' this is because Queen and Crown – in this case literally – touch each other. In the same vein, when Lincoln is treated as a metonym for the culturally dominant vision of the 'free' (that is, non-slaveholding) and unified United States, this is because the two entities are understood as very close to one another. Thus, our association between Lincoln as a metonym for the nation and as its body politic works together especially when that touching is abundant and multilayered. Culler adds: 'Other theorists add *synecdoche* and *irony* to complete a list of "four master tropes". Synecdoche is the substitution of part for whole: "ten hands" for

"ten workers". It infers qualities of the whole from those of a part and allows parts to represent wholes' (72).

We argue that Lincoln can also be viewed as a synecdoche of the nation at its most formative and taxing moment, by associating Lincoln's function as a single representative standing in for the whole with his physical embodiment of the presidency, its body natural. However, these roles, body natural and body politic, when united in one person, must also overlap considerably, especially to work well as a vessel of cultural memory and remembrance practices. Similarly, the tropes of metonymy and synecdoche are not as clearly disconnected as Culler presents them: arguably, synecdoche is a form of metonymy. After all, the hands are attached to the workers, though more bodily than the Crown is to the Queen. In Lincoln's case, his two roles are not perfectly distinct either, which is made evident in Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*. In this novel, the interaction between Lincoln as a relatable individual and as a unifying mythical being is a driving feature. On the one hand, Lincoln is a particular and peculiar individual, and a father grieving for his son. On the other hand, he serves as a symbol for the nation, embodying the grief and conflict of the land and its people. This embodiment is brought to readers' attention through the role ghosts play in the novel: numerous ghosts are stuck in a place between life and death, and therefore cannot leave their cemetery. They witness Lincoln's interactions with his son at the cemetery and discover through the deceased child their own ability to enter Lincoln's body and hear his thoughts.

The novel illuminates the nation's grief during the Civil War through a focus on Lincoln's personal grief. In this process, Lincoln serves as a synecdoche and a metonym. Through these literary devices, this paper identifies two Lincolns. Lincoln as a synecdoche is tied to the 'body natural'. Lincoln as a metonym finds its roots in the 'body politic'. These two roles are closely intertwined, as Saunders' novel emphasizes. Arguably, *Lincoln in the Bardo*'s interweaving of the two roles is the key to the novel's success and worth special attention. Therefore, although extensive research has been conducted on Lincoln's life, both personal and political, this paper aims to bring a semiotic perspective to the cultural memory of Lincoln.

Lincoln in the Bardo

Saunders' novel recounts one evening in February 1862 on which Lincoln visits Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. Here, his son

Willie is laid to rest after succumbing to typhoid fever a day earlier. Although the novel treats Lincoln's grief as uniquely devastating, it also presents him as one among the many thousands that lost sons during the Civil War. Surrounding Abraham and Willie Lincoln, however, is a chorus of varying voices, both historical and fictitious. As a result, the novel reads as an 'oral history, a collage built from a series of testimonies' (Whitehead 2017). Although the shifts in Lincoln's political views are not emphasized, the time, 1862, less than a year away from issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, is poignant.

Given the novel's alternation between a reliance on oral dialogue and a listing of historical excerpts, *Lincoln in the Bardo* has rightfully been labelled a 'surreal, experimental [. . .] novel' (Alter 2017). At first glance, the novel seems to be structured 'like a play' (2017). While not claiming any kind of historical accuracy, *Lincoln in the Bardo* does play abundantly with reader expectations, particularly through the juxtaposition of the supernatural and the employment of historical and fictional quotations from seemingly traditional historical sources, sometimes difficult to distinguish, interspersed with oral quotations and clearly fabricated source material. The inclusion of externally referenced material lends authority to the text as a whole, and as the novel is a patchwork of duly attributed, though often clearly invented quotations, it self-consciously plays with the claim of historicity. As Kalle Pihlainen has argued, this process itself reminds the reader of the problematics of historicity (Pihlainen 2019, 628), and thus of the extent to which interpretation is a function of needs and interests in the present rather than the past.

The speakers are all ghosts lingering at the cemetery, three of which are placed in the foreground by serving as 'tour guides' (Whitehead 2017): Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III, and Reverend Everly Thomas. These ghosts talk in turns without further descriptions supporting their dialogue. The historical excerpts, some real, some fabricated, then serve to provide a glimpse into the novel's background of the Civil War and Lincoln's presidency. Through the two narrative modes' interlacement, the ghosts' dialogues do not simply appear to be a dramatic re-enactment of one evening at the cemetery. Instead, the novel becomes a re-enactment on a much larger scale of the nation's trauma during the Civil War, as the ghosts' traumas are grounded in a backdrop of real and imaginative US history.

The novel's unusual approach to storytelling demands active interpretive work from the reader. The story makes little sense unless the reader imaginatively fills in the gaps, and makes conjectures about what the

ghost characters do not tell, how they relate to each other, and what the ontology of their world is. Readers are thus invited to project something of themselves into the story to fill in the blanks caused by the lack of descriptive hints surrounding the dialogue. As a politician, Lincoln, during his lifetime, also rhetorically invited people to project their own needs and desires onto him in order to make sense of their position in the US, for instance through his use of 'we' and 'our fathers' in the Gettysburg address (Lincoln 2015, 328–29). In the novel, Lincoln extends this invitation toward the deceased in a more literal sense, and even unwittingly offers them his body to inhabit: the ghosts can pass through the living and influence their thoughts and actions by doing so (Bale and Bondevik 2019, 73). They are also able to formulate their forgotten memories and wishes by entering Lincoln's body as a group, upon which all 'instantaneously [recollect]' occasions from their lifetimes because of 'this serendipitous mass co-habitation' (Saunders 2017a, 254–56). The novel's structure reflects this process of making room for and evoking separate individual interpretations by having so many unknowns for readers to interpret for themselves.

One of these unknowns is 'the bardo' mentioned in the title, but nowhere in the novel itself. The bardo, one surmises, is the place from which the ghosts perceive Lincoln at the cemetery. Somewhere between life and death, it is a transitory place where those who cannot move on to the afterlife dwell. Saunders, himself a Buddhist, describes the bardo as a realm that is derived from 'the Tibetan notion of a sort of transitional purgatory between rebirths' (Saunders 2017b). However, more than just transitional, the bardo is a liminal space of possibilities: a place that exists in the mind, allowing events and experiences to be reframed. This reframing occurs explicitly in Lincoln and the ghosts: the President's interaction with the ghosts reframes the way in which Lincoln and the Civil War are remembered, and the ghosts are able to reframe the grief and trauma from their lifetimes into something more positive after inhabiting Lincoln's body, enabling them to move on to the afterlife.

The tension between Lincoln's two roles

The novel's main stage is the bardo, but it begins with a description of a reception the Lincolns host at the White House. Here, the tension between Lincoln's body natural and body politic is evident. A historical excerpt reveals abolitionist Ben Wade's reaction to this gathering: '"Are the President and Mrs. Lincoln aware that there is a civil war? If they are

not, Mr. and Mrs. Wade are, and for that reason decline to participate in feasting and dancing"' (Saunders 2017a, 8). Wade's words frame Lincoln as a selfish individual, focused only on his own amusement. Partying, however, which Lincoln must engage in, in his commitment to the presidency and the war, is the last thing he, as an individual, wants to do at that time.

The Wades are scandalized that Lincoln would, as occupant of the body politic, choose to host a party at a time of war; this makes him an inadequate metonym in their eyes, given the sad state of the nation, and even, as they suggest by refusing to celebrate themselves, a poor synecdoche, a misguided single representation. Ironically, however, the Civil War, costing thousands of American sons' lives is re-enacted in the White House: 'Willie burning with fever on the night of the fifth, as his mother dressed for the party. He drew every breath with difficulty. She could see that his lungs were congested and she was frightened' (9). Willie is dying upstairs while the country's leaders are busy feasting and talking. The situation in the White House effectively is a photo negative of the situation in the battlefield: while the soldiers die in the field, and their superiors (including, according to the Wades, President and Mrs. Lincoln) feast in higher and safer spaces, the party at the White House is downstairs, and the Lincolns in fact only want to attend Willie's battle for life upstairs. To the attendants, it is obvious that 'there was no joy in the evening for the mechanically smiling hostess and her husband. They kept climbing the stairs to see how Willie was, and he was not doing well at all' (15). As such, the President in fact acts as metonym downstairs, continuing to hold his post in the body politic, while simultaneously, as a synecdochic father trying desperately to attend his natural son's deathbed.

This parallel between the White House and the Civil War as depicted in the Lincolns' party reflects the tension between Lincoln's body natural and body politic. On the one hand, Lincoln is made relatable as a father who is losing his son, but on the other hand, this same situation allows for him and the White House to be seen as a representation of the entire nation and its conflict. The way in which this enables Lincoln to serve as a metonym is found in other parts of the novel as well. For instance, the ghosts describe their lingering at the cemetery as an offense to God, which is remarkably similar to how the Confederacy's endeavors to secede were seen as an offense to Lincoln and his Union. The Reverend remarks that '*We are in rebellion against the will of our Lord*' (194) due to the ghosts' refusal to

move on to the afterlife. As a result, angels appear in the bardo from time to time. These 'mercilessly assault the spirits with the intention of making them leave the bardo' (Bale and Bondevik 2019, 74), which should not surprise the reader since Bevins has previously described the bardo as a place '*where the natural law, harsh and arbitrary, brooks no rebellion, and must be scrupulously obeyed*' (Saunders 2017a, 166). The natural law in the bardo does not tolerate rebellion. Just as the angels attempt to persuade the ghosts to leave their current state and move 'to the other side of the iron fence that demarcates the borders of the bardo' (Bale and Bondevik 2019, 74), the Union ultimately gave the Confederacy the same choice. If the realm of the bardo is governed by God and the US by Lincoln, the similarities in these rebellions between the two settings suggest a connection between Lincoln and God.

This connection relates to Lincoln's role as the nation's savior. According to historian David Donald, one of the two traditions of Lincoln mythology that arose after the Civil War frames him 'as an American Christ who died to expiate the sins of his guilty land' (Oates 2011, 4). Saunders' cemetery echoes this tradition, as Lincoln similarly functions as a Jesus-like figure to whom the ghosts flock as he is a potential alleviator of their suffering. He leads the ghosts as though in a procession, described as 'a general movement' from which none '[wish] to be excluded' (Saunders 2017a, 251). At the same time, being at the head of the nation during the Civil War, Lincoln functions as the one person deciding who goes to the battlefield. In both cases, Lincoln's role as a metonym is emphasized: he is made into a God-like figure who is out of mortal man's reach to such an extent that he becomes a symbol rather than an individual. It seems that this is then no longer the Lincoln who hosts parties at the White House. However, Lincoln's role as synecdoche is necessary to enable this image of Lincoln as God of the battlefield. After all, it is Lincoln's remarkable individuality that made him so memorable and which therefore also promotes the connection between his body natural and body politic.

It is, of course, also ironic that Lincoln as a case study must always be framed in the context of civil war; while it had been practiced in the United States for eighty years that the continuity of leadership was not based in blood, but in democratic constitutional procedure, this was at, and past, the breaking point during his presidency. This literal political separation of two bodies makes the case study of Lincoln as having two overlapping and entwined bodies and semiotic functions especially important. Moreover, Lincoln's continuing reign as an American icon

is at odds with his bodily inability to survive the Civil War, or to transition power in a traditional manner. Still, in the long run, Lincoln remains a symbol of both unity and post-slavery redemption.

Lincoln as a grieving individual and a monumental site

This interaction between Lincoln's role as synecdoche and as metonym can be observed in the novel's portrayal of the President's grief. Although Willie did not die in combat, Lincoln does provide a model to the many fathers in the US that were mourning their sons lost to war. As a result, Lincoln's grief no longer belongs to his individual person, but is stretched out to encompass the nation's collective grief, reinforcing his exemplary and elevated role. For instance, as attested by the ghosts at the cemetery, it is not often that a mourning father visits to hold his deceased son's body – something that fathers of battlefield victims may have wished, but were unable to do. Lincoln's visit is exceptional, and marks his individuality as well as his vulnerability: although a private moment, all the details of Lincoln's visit to his son are revealed by the ghosts. Hans Vollman calls the visit '[a]n extraordinary occurrence' and the Reverend notes it is '[u]nprecedented, really' (Saunders 2017a, 41). The situation becomes even more unique when Lincoln holds his son's body: 'We heard an intake of breath from the Reverend, who, appearance notwithstanding, is not easily shocked', Roger Bevins observes. Hans Vollman adds: 'He is going to pick that child up, the Reverend said' (57). The ghosts' reaction to Lincoln's actions suggests that Lincoln's act is transgressive, and beyond the pale of what other grieving parents would do, although it lives out a wish that no doubt other parents would have shared. And, what is perhaps as important: Willie is desperate for his father to find him. He believes his parents will come to collect him and insists 'I am to wait' (30). Once Lincoln enters the cemetery, Willie's face lights up with joy. He watches him, 'uttering many urgent entreaties for his father to look *his* way, fuss over and pat *him*' (57). The other ghosts urge Willie to move on to the afterlife, as 'young ones are not meant to tarry' (31), but Willie hangs on to his place in the bardo as if for dear life. His tenacity is rewarded in a literalized performance of the symbolic yearning to be seen and recognized by Abraham Lincoln, both his actual father, and a father figure to all American dead (not just, as the novel shows, war dead).

As in a re-enactment of a father figure inhabiting the expectations of many, the ghosts enter Lincoln's body in a literal sense, revealing his inner life as well as his vulnerability explicitly: once they are inside

Lincoln's body, they receive 'glimpses of one another's minds, and glimpses, also, of Mr. Lincoln's mind' (253). The barriers set up by each ghost's individuality disappear, leading to unification. The ghosts are able to hear Lincoln's thoughts directly and can even influence him to some extent. It is through this mechanism that Lincoln is enabled to move on: he is made to see that his own sorrow is 'part of a greater community of loss' (Clark 2017), which ultimately allows him to focus on the war again.

Lincoln's sorrow as part of a community of loss hints at the function of his body politic. In representing the grief of the nation, Lincoln is removed from his body natural. Hans Vollman explicitly addresses this removal: 'As we approached, he lifted head from hands and heaved a great sigh. He might have been, in that moment, a sculpture on the theme of Loss' (Saunders 2017a, 145). The capitalization of 'Loss' implies that Lincoln embodies a much larger scale of loss. Saunders presents him as a sculpture, bringing to mind both pietà sculptures generally and the Lincoln Memorial. This memorial references Lincoln's two roles: while its 19-feet-tall statue of the President makes Lincoln seem larger than life, the inscription above the statue points to the entanglement of Lincoln's body natural and body politic despite the initial emphasis on the latter: 'In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever' (Savage 2008, 220). This message implies that Lincoln must live on, both in the temple and in the hearts of the people. For it is in Lincoln that 'the people of the United States could finally see themselves, each for himself and all together' (qtd. in Oates 2011, 9–10).

Although the inscription hints at Lincoln's body natural, as does the iconic representation of his body, the statue's size foregrounds his body politic. Moreover, the Lincoln Memorial makes subjective engagement with Lincoln possible (Savage 2008, 225) and aims to make him relatable through the sculptor's inclusion of cues for viewers to identify with Lincoln's human struggle (224). In a similar manner, the 'sculpture on the theme of Loss' line in *Lincoln in the Bardo* alerts readers to the importance of the theme of loss and invites them to identify with Lincoln's loss. Readers can link their sorrows to Lincoln's, so that Lincoln's grief becomes 'a bridge between particular and collective sorrow' (Bale and Bondevik 2019, 77).

This emphasis on Lincoln as a monumental figure that is capable of reflecting and perhaps even taking over people's sorrows relates to Hans Vollman's recollection of how Lincoln was described to him and Roger Bevins: '*Husband, Father, Shipwright*' (Saunders 2017a, 145). While

'husband' and 'father' point to Lincoln's body natural, 'shipwright' is an important aspect of his body politic. Throughout the Civil War, Lincoln was tasked with steering the ship that is the nation toward a better future, representing all aspects of that nation, including its loss. By inhabiting Lincoln's body, the ghosts repeat this process in the novel. As Lincoln steers the nation, the ghosts try to do the same with him: they inhabit his body and ultimately manage to direct him toward refocusing on the war. Their influence on his body natural has consequences for the body politic, revealing the close connection between the two.

However, the denizens of the bardo are not able to influence Lincoln if they 'enter' him individually. Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, and the Reverend (despite religious objections) experiment regarding this: 'What Mr. Vollman had been unable to accomplish alone—' Roger Bevins conjectures, 'Perhaps all of us, working as one, might', the Reverend, suggestively called Everly Thomas, adds. Vollman, in a performance of the proposed unity, continues: 'As one. Simultaneously' (252–53). This does work, as they discover: they must act collectively to exert tangible influence on the President's thoughts and movements. Commensurate with the idea of a body politic in a democratic setting, they must achieve collective action, communicated in unison, in order to be effective in the body politic. The process is reciprocal: the ghosts are able to move Lincoln if they act together, and, therefore Lincoln's body leads to and enables unity to flower in the bardo. 'We found ourselves (like flowers from which placed rocks had just been removed) being restored somewhat to our natural fullness' (256). The ghosts in the bardo suffer excruciating, disfiguring loneliness. Through their unity in Lincoln (literally), they are able to reconcile, and enable Lincoln to move on and focus on ending the war.

Lincoln's remarkable looks and deeds

Lincoln in the Bardo, as noted, does not treat the end of the Civil War, nor Lincoln's own death in April 1865 (when presumably, he would himself enter the bardo and the afterlife). Instead, it stops at his foray into this zone in 1862, a journey which is both a classical underworld descent, paralleling the United States' descent into civil war, and arguably a journey into a land where he has no right to be. Yet it is through that, and through his connection with the bardo's inhabitants, both as Willie's father in blood (synecdoche) and as metonymic father of the nation, that the novel gives the people in a bardo a voice. The bardo's inhabitants are, to borrow and extend Gayatri Spivak's term, a kind of material, interred, Subaltern (and they often refer to their

being forgotten or continuing to be misunderstood and misremembered in the world 'above'). The event of Willie's death, and his father's resultant foray into the bardo, gives these historically undocumented and undocumentable people a voice. The paradox of postcolonialism is apparent here: if Lincoln, the embodiment of power, had not traveled into the bardo, its inhabitants would not have had a voice at all, and yet, his doing so is also a transgression that leads to the bardo's unraveling.

It is relevant here to note Barry Schwartz's metaphor about Lincoln as a carrier of American memory:

> Lincoln has always been a *lamp* illuminating the ideals of the American people as well as a *mirror* reflecting their interests. [. . .] Lincoln's troubles reappear in present predicaments; Lincoln's facing his troubles shows us how to work through our own. Abraham Lincoln in American memory is more than a political asset; he is a moral symbol inspiring and guiding American life.
>
> (Schwartz 2008, xi)

This metaphor illuminates both Lincoln's synecdochic work in making visible the forgotten dead, and his metonymic flexibility in reflecting the American people's ideal, if shifting, self-image.

Eventually, the connection between Lincoln and the ghosts is beneficial to both parties. They are clearly dependent on each other, and due to the subsequent knowledge the ghosts gain about Lincoln's person, the novel's use of them to describe him makes sense. In fact, the novel's portrayal of Lincoln relies completely on the ghosts' interpretation of him and the historical excerpts that describe him. Early on, Hans Vollman notes that '[a]n exceedingly tall and unkempt fellow was making his way toward us through the darkness' (Saunders 2017a, 43), zooming in on Lincoln's individual appearance. Although the ghosts and the excerpts do not idolize Lincoln's appearance as much as Walt Whitman did by insisting 'that only the combined genius of Plutarch, Aeschylus, and Michelangelo [. . .] could have captured Lincoln's likeness' (Oates 2011, 8), their interpretations of Lincoln's looks say a lot about how his appearance played a large role in people's assessment of him.

The novel particularly emphasizes the effect of Lincoln's individual appearance on those around him. Upon seeing Lincoln's face clearly for the first time, the Reverend notes, 'And what a face it was' (Saunders 2017a, 195). The historical accounts say more about how Lincoln's outward appearance was regarded by his contemporaries. These accounts vary somewhat. Isaac Arnold describes Lincoln's eyes as 'dark grey, clear, very expressive', while Robert Wilson notes Lincoln's eyes 'were a bluish-brown' (197). Noteworthy

is that while these accounts frame Lincoln as an individual person with his own characteristics, the varying accounts ultimately make a vessel applicable to many people's needs and interpretations out of Lincoln: it seems even his eye-color is a matter of personal preference. Most striking, however, is the sharp contrast between the assessments of his overall appearance. As there are those who call Lincoln 'the ugliest man I had ever seen' and those who call him 'the homeliest man I had ever seen' (199), Walt Whitman's words are echoed in that he described Lincoln's face as 'so awful ugly it becomes beautiful' (qtd. in Oates 2011, 8). Apparently, Lincoln is capable of embodying two characteristics that are meant to be opposites. The novel's assessment of Lincoln's appearance in connection to Whitman's judgment therefore reveals another bridge between Lincoln's body natural and his body politic: his individual person lends itself to many different interpretations, all of which are in this instance tied to something as simple as his appearance.

These many different interpretations of Lincoln's appearance confirm his status as a vessel. As in an echo of this example, there is an equal, perhaps even greater number of interpretations about the similarly remarkable, yet multi-interpretable part Lincoln played in the abolition of slavery. Oates writes that Lincoln detested slavery and saw it as 'a blight on the American experiment in popular government, the one institution that robbed the Republic of the hope it should hold out to oppressed people everywhere' (Oates 2011, 61). Yet he 'did not envision black people as permanent participants in the great American experiment' before the Civil War and at that time, he was of the opinion that if black people could not be free in the US, they should be free in another place (63). The novel treats Lincoln's views of slavery in line with his opinions expressed during the Civil War: an institution that had no place in a nation where freedom was of the utmost importance.

The novel addresses Lincoln's role as Great Emancipator in the final scene, when the ghost of the formerly enslaved Thomas Havens enters Lincoln's body when the President finally leaves the cemetery. As Havens notes: 'we rode forward into the night, past the sleeping houses of *our countrymen*' (Saunders 2017a, 343, emphasis added). There is no distinction between the President's relation to the nation's citizens and a formerly enslaved person's relation to them, meaning that the same position is occupied by a white president and an enslaved black person. Lincoln's body natural is used as a vehicle for this equality, and through his body politic Lincoln carries out the same kind of equality by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation.

As the quotation above stands as the novel's final sentence, it can also be interpreted as a promise for the future. By ending with the sentiment that there is no difference between a president and an enslaved person, Lincoln's

legacy as the Great Emancipator is heavily emphasized. The remarkability of Lincoln's body natural, which is extremely open to different interpretations, allows for equally remarkable actions from Lincoln's body politic. Havens' feelings of kinship with Lincoln, which are also revealed through the words 'our countrymen', are enabled by Lincoln's vessel-like quality, allowing for the transition of Lincoln's body natural to his body politic which symbolizes the hope for unity between black and white people.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to add a semiotic perspective to the cultural memory of Abraham Lincoln by looking at the way in which Lincoln's roles as body natural, or synecdoche, and body politic, or metonym, interact throughout *Lincoln in the Bardo*. As discussed, the novel depicts the tension between Lincoln as synecdoche and as metonym early on. The connection between the party at the White House and the Civil War illuminates this tension. As a body natural, Lincoln is a father who has to cope with his son dying, while as body politic, he has to cope with the nation's dead as well. Moreover, he is forced to act as a metonym in the White House during the party, holding his post in the body politic. Another location that is connected to the Civil War is the cemetery. The Reverend's use of the word 'rebellion' to indicate the attempts of the inhabitants of the bardo to 'secede' from God's plan provides a connection between Lincoln and God, emphasizing Lincoln's role as the nation's savior.

It is then shown that Lincoln's grief functions both on an individual and on a symbolic level in the novel. Lincoln holding his dead son's body is exceptional, but no different than what any other father would wish to do. The ghosts witness this action, revealing Lincoln's vulnerability and inner life. As a result, his sorrow links to a greater community of loss, which marks the transition toward Lincoln's body politic and frames Lincoln as a monument-like figure. Since the ghosts are able to influence Lincoln by inhabiting his body natural, the close connection between this body natural and his body politic is once again revealed.

Lastly, the novel addresses Lincoln's remarkable appearance and actions; his individual appearance lends itself to many different interpretations, resulting in an emphasis on Lincoln's function as a vessel applicable to different people's expectations. His appearance results in a bridge between his body natural and his body politic. Equally remarkable and open to interpretation is Lincoln's part in the abolition of slavery. The figure of Thomas Havens is used in the novel to highlight Lincoln's role as the Great

Emancipator. The equality between Lincoln and Havens is shown through Havens' inhabiting of Lincoln's body natural, which results in Lincoln's body politic ultimately issuing the Emancipation Proclamation as a step toward political equality.

In all these instances, it is clear that Lincoln's role as the synecdochic representation of the nation, his body natural, is crucial to the formation of his metonymic representation, his body politic. Due to the fact that his body natural often serves as a stepping stone toward his political function as a metonymic representation of the US, the two bodies are strongly intertwined. Lincoln is only able to inhabit his body politic by relying on his body natural. This interlacement, then, accounts for Lincoln's continuing popularity in cultural memory: he is applicable to the many needs and expectations of various memory communities in the US, but also remains a striking individual with his own looks and feelings. As a result, Lincoln came to represent the US' values on a large, nation-wide scale while also representing who individual Americans aspire to be in their day-to-day lives.

That Lincoln remains a popular vessel for cultural memory to this day is perhaps most apparent in the fact that recent US presidents at opposite ends of the political spectrum have rhetorically embraced him, and positioned themselves as following in his footsteps. This is most clearly visible in Barack Obama's case, who consistently, both during his 2008 campaign and throughout his presidency associated himself with Lincoln. Obama did not usually connect himself to Lincoln on a personal level, but rather, presented himself as an outcome of the long historical arch toward racial emancipation and national unity that Lincoln began. As such, Obama employed a longstanding image of Lincoln in mainstream American cultural memory. Moreover, in his own autofabrication as president, he employed the same combination of bodily, synecdochic representation of the nation on the one hand, and political and metonymic representation on the other hand, that we have been able to identify in *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a key ingredient to the successful production of Lincoln as an icon in American memory.

In Obama's case the synecdochic self-representation revolved around personal life stories as represented in his memoirs *Dreams from My Father* (1997) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2007), in which Obama comes across as simultaneously relatable and also uniquely gifted. Both his references to his parents and his frequent anecdotes in the memoirs and speeches about his wife Michelle and two daughters have a similar function of showing how Obama's experience is common to all Americans and therefore he can be trusted with their concerns. As a metonym for the nation his family is also a crucial symbol – particularly

its incorporation of people from a range of cultural and social backgrounds, and its straddling of the racial divide, as well as his conciliatory, consensus-driven rhetorical style. Obama knows he is a symbol – as was Lincoln – both for the nation's dream of unity, on the level of metonymy and for the nation's sense of individualist self-made American character.

Few US presidents to this day can avoid reference or comparison to Abraham Lincoln. This point is not in itself new, but we have tried to show through our analysis of *Lincoln in the Bardo* that Lincoln's continuing magic, in the experimental lab space of literary narrative as well as in current-day politics, rests on the entanglement of his roles as synecdoche and metonym for the nation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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