From Melville to Saunders: Using Liminality to Uncover US-American Racial Fantasies

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a comparative reading of Herman Melville's romance *Moby Dick* (1851) and George Saunders's fantastic ghost story *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), tracing the reverberations of Toni Morrison's 'American Africanism' as a specific kind of White supremacist discourse in both novels. After sketching nineteenth-century romance and recent fantasy literature as liminal genres fitting for a critical negotiation of the equally liminal Africanist presence, this paper shows how both novels employ liminality as a shared narrative strategy to transport their criticism on White supremacy and anti-Blackness.

KEYWORDS: American Africanism, White supremacy, nineteenth-century romance, twenty-first century fantasy, Whiteness, anti-Blackness, liminality

> The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self.
> (Morrison, "Unspeakable" 141)

Introduction

In the United States, White supremacists seem on the rise in the twenty-first century, especially after the election of Barack Obama as first Black president (Delgado and Stefancic 89). At the same time, some critics see in his presidency proof for a post-racial nation (Dawson and Lawrence 247). But even if racial tension is far from overcome in US-American culture, has the country come any closer to its democratic ideals in the past three decades? Does being US-American still mean being White and specifically not Black? Recent events point toward a heightened awareness of the necessity to deconstruct the popular division between a 'White center' and a 'non-White periphery' within the discursive arena of the public sphere, the "informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion" (Fraser 75). This awareness shows in the public approval of the Black Lives Matter Movement (Horowitz 2021),[1] in Biden's rhetoric compared to the Trump-era (Weinmann 48-51), and in Confederate statues being torn down (Hustvedt 44). Just as the Civil Rights Movement was followed by Nixon's War on Drugs or as Reconstruction was followed by Jim Crow, or as abolitionist efforts were

[1] While public approval of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States has declined since its peak (67 percent) after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, most adults in the United States (55 percent) still support the movement in September 2021 (Horowitz 2021).

met by the Black Codes, the current developments mark another step in this continuous back and forth between anti-supremacist resistance and White supremacist backlash.

Placed in socio-historical contexts that are more than 160 years apart, the two novels analyzed in this article, George Saunders's fantastic ghost story *Lincoln in the Bardo* and Herman Melville's romance *Moby Dick*, both emerged out of that climate of gains and backlashes in the struggle for racial justice and reflect the perseverance of their message: the articulation of transcultural visions to counter ideas of White supremacy and anti-Blackness, a dialectic ecapsulated by the American Africanist discourse (Morrison, *Playing* 6). Through a comparative reading the article outlines commonalities and differences in treatment of this encounter between the two texts to arrive at tentative conclusions for possible developments in the racial grammar of US-American public discourse. While both novels employ liminality as a central narrative strategy to oppose American Africansim, their endings transport different outlooks on the future of US-America's racial imagination. *Moby Dick* acknowledges the inability of nineteenth-century society to deconstruct established conceptions of Black and White, insisting on the necessity to keep challenging White supremacist and anti-Black ideas. In contrast, *Lincoln in the Bardo* presents a reconfiguration of racial categories as more probable, highlighting the possibility of progress in that matter.

The subchapter on literary American Africanism will introduce Toni Morrison's Africanist presence as a liminal concept summarizing the dialectic relation between White supremacist discourse and notions of anti-Blackness. Identifying liminality as a narrative strategy of the romance and the fantasy genre to disclose the Africanist presence as a racial fantasy and a social construction, the article proceeds with Morrison's reading of *Moby Dick*, which provides the analytical ground for my comparison with *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Literary American Africanism

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison detects a discursive practice within canonical nineteenth- and twentieth-century US-American texts which she calls "American Africanism." She explains that Africanism consists of various reductive and degrading ways that Blackness is portrayed as a 'negative counter-image' to an allegedly superior Whiteness, including strategies like the fetishization of Blackness, or dehistoricizing allegory. Employing this Africanist discourse in literature is to inscribe an "Africanist presence" into the text, a presence of explicit or implicit anti-Blackness used to support White supremacy (*Playing* 6-7, 67-69). Morrison thus uses the Africanist presence as a collective term to grasp the dialectical relationship between often latent anti-Black and White supremacist ideas in US-American literature. According to her, the Africanist presence reflects how the United States formed a national identity in relation to Whiteness, which gains and maintains its meaning as superior through the constructed opposition of an inferior objectified Blackness, an "Africanist other" (*Playing* 47). Her argument involves what today might be understood as an Afropessimist claim, i.e. that being human specifically means being 'not Black' (Wilderson

15), adding that humanity, at least in the Western sphere, entails the exclusive condition of being White. National literatures that transport the Africanist presence unreflectedly thereby participate in White supremacy as they are part of a "cultural system in which […] conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted" (Ansley 592). Morrison sees an analytical potential in the dependency of "ideas of white superiority" from "non-white subordination" to shift the focus from those subjected to White supremacist ideas to those who imagine them in order to reach the psychological root of "daily reenacted" (Ansley 592) injustice.

In her lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison offers Melville's *Moby Dick* as an exceptional example for a nineteenth-century novel critically reflecting on the Africanist presence instead of maintaining it (140-45). In contrast, *Playing in the Dark* shows how authors like Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allen Poe uncritically inscribe this presence into their texts and therefore make it "possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature – even the cause – of literary 'whiteness'" (Morrison, *Playing* 9). Indeed, her results show a correlation between images of whiteness/light and blackness/darkness, between the representation of White and Black characters, and their hierarchical relation to one another that is predominantly to Whiteness's advantage (Morrison, *Playing* 33). Morrison draws the conclusion that many canonical literary texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries participated in US society's persistent reproduction of White supremacist and anti-Black ideas embedded within the American Africanist discourse (*Playing* 14-16).

In his 1958 article "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison already articulated a similar thought by describing African American literary representation as a reduction to a "negative sign" (48) alongside "the white American's Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness" (47). He argues that White Americans need to hide behind a mask of blackface in order to establish a national identity, ignorant of the "true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" (55). Surprisingly close to Morrison's formulations in *Playing in the Dark*, Ellison posits that "it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, national identity, historic change, social justice […] without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness" (48).[2] Ellison claims that stereotypical representations of African Americans in canonical American fiction reveal the social and the psychological condition of (White) US America in its respective time (27-29). The African American was "recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human 'natural' resource who was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization" (Ellison 29). White

[2] My argument does not restrict itself to texts written by White male authors, as all US Americans are influenced by their socio-historical environment and the racial politics governing it. Ellison's and Morrison's primary, but not exclusive, focus on male authors and images of masculinity is due to the fact that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views" (Morrison, *Playing* 5).

Americans' humanity thus depends on Black Americans' degradation. For Ellison, the "veil of anti-Negro myths, symbols, stereotypes and taboos" can be noticed in US-American literature "even when the Negro seems most patently the little man who isn't there" (29). Morrison's work on the Africanist presence does thus not emerge within a critical vacuum but joins earlier African American criticism to show literature's complicity in establishing and sustaining White supremacy as the systemic core of racial inequality in the United States.

While Ellison did not yet develop a systematic approach to detect the connection between White supremacy and anti-Blackness in literature, Morrison offers readers of *Playing in the Dark* the Africanist presence as a theoretical concept that epitomizes the role African Americans play in the US-American imagination. It is particularly useful for literary and cultural studies because of its systematic focus on the interconnection between Whiteness and anti-Blackness and its realization in literary patterns that introduce a more or less absent presence to texts. Morrison's Africanist presence differs from Ellison's critique because of its figurative quality which manages to unite the contradictions inherent in racial categorization. Rather than using 'Blackness' to sum up the socially constructed image projected onto African Americans, the word 'presence' in a metaphysical sense already implies the concept's central duality, its position between "chaos and civilization, desire and fear" (*Playing* 7), between being and non-being, as a "visible and invisible mediating force" between White and Black (*Playing* 47). The Africanist presence is therefore a liminal concept that acknowledges the interdependencies and ambiguities of the racial categories it unites. As we will see in what follows, *Moby Dick* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* both use liminality as a narrative strategy to expose the ambiguities of the Africanist presence.

The Potential of Liminality for Disclosing the Africanist Presence in Romance and Fantastic Literature

The anthropologist Victor Turner defines liminality as the transitional phase an individual crosses between two states during a transformational ritual ("Liminal" 57). In liminal spaces hierarchical or binary systems are thus temporarily reversed or dissolved and a transgressional state in between well established norms and structures is found that will lead to some indefinite new order ("Liminal" 59-60).[3] The postmodern understanding of the concept liberates it from this focus on temporal continuity and widens liminality's scope from a temporary phase with a final outcome to "an endless, oscillating movement" (Klapcsik 13), always in between. It is with such a postmodern conception of liminality that the Africanist

[3] Liminality differs from Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity in that for the latter, no final result of transformation will be achieved: "One can connect Bhabha's hybridity with Turner's liminality in the sense that in both theories the hierarchical oppositions are turned upside down[…]. Yet Bhabha's theory differs from Turner's, because it is not based on a rite of passage from one state to another. The colonizer does not fully turn into the colonized, nor the other way around" (Klapcsik 13). Liminality is used here because it captures the literary and societal transformations with regard to the dynamics of racial identities.

presence can be grasped. It is always in between reality and fantasy, because it springs from the imagination but is projected onto real-life people, suffering real-life consequences. It is always in between hypervisibility and invisibility, as it is constructed, both, to point out the Black body and to make White bodies invisible—or the other way round. It is situated between Blackness and Whiteness, with its alledgedly unilateral connection to the former in order to conceal its essential connection to the latter. It occupies this threshold between contradictory poles where it continuously and chaotically oscillates.

Therefore, it is within equally liminal spaces that such racial liminality can be represented and challenged in literature, within fitting genres that can encompass spaces, times, characters, and symbols 'in between.' According to Manuel Aguirre, the limen "[l]ying outside structure and hierarchy, […] flaunts categories and appears dangerous or terrifying; but precisely *qua* unstructured, it may also be seen as a source of liberation or transcendence" ("Liminality" 553). *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Moby Dick* both deploy liminality to challenge the Black-White binary structuring the United States in their respective times. Their liminal spaces, characters, and symbolism allow for a re-assessment of racialized world conceptions from a critical distance

> without the constraints of wider societal conventions. What emerges from the liminal space is not necessarily a definitive answer, but rather an alternative way of understanding social realities where artistic, political, cultural, and social ideas and concepts are in constant flux and contestation. (Andrews et al. 2019)

The "ontological ambiguity" created by the liminal elements (Aguirre, "Liminality" 553) allows the narratives to capture and transcend the contradictions and dynamics of reality. The Africanist presence is a concept encompassing precisely such contradictions. Therefore, to understand the logics of the US-American racial imagination, one needs to acknowledge the Africanist presence's liminality. As *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Moby Dick* show, the dynamic threshold existence of nineteenth-century romance and current fantasy makes those genres fitting to the articulation or, precisely, the critique of an Africanist presence.

With its "sublime incredibility" (Morrison, *Playing* 37), the romance is at once connected and disconnected from historical reality. It "spans mimetic and non-mimetic, actuality and fantasy, history and legend, past and present, and is striking in its open-endedness, if frustrating in its capacity to defy classification or resolution" (C. Saunders 2). The distance from reality is a key aspect of fiction in general, however romance exploits this distance more than other genres, because it puts the attempt to articulate the imaginary as part of reality at its center (Fluck 423-24). As Winfried Fluck notes in reference to Richard Chase, "it is the 'romance-novel' in its characteristic reliance on unrealistic representational modes […] and its direct, forceful expression of imaginary desire which captures the conflicts—and thus the 'realities'—of American society much more accurately than the smoothly controlled surface of the novel of manners and its realistic mode of representation" (416). Romance uses this 'unrealistic representational mode' to deal with "unknown territories or 'other,' imagined worlds, including the unknown territory of the self and the uncanny world of dreams" (422). The

romance can discuss the racial dreams underlying US-American identity, the Africanist presence's liminal state between hypervisible and invisible, between Whiteness and Blackness, existent only in the imagination but real in its consequences. Its "interweaving of fantasy and reality" resists generic categorization (C. Saunders 2) and bears the potential to subvert not only hierarchies but, as some critics argue in the specific US-American context, also "an official ideology of American innocence" (Fluck 417).[4] As this innocence is historically coupled with Whiteness (Griffin 4), it is not surprising that romance's color symbolism plays specifically with notions of darkness as its evil counterpart (Morrison, *Playing* 37).

Morrison argues that darkness is a central gothic element to the romance genre used in meditations on Blackness for White "ego-reenforcing" (*Playing* 36-37, 45). Aguirre argues that the gothic is in itself liminal, a threshold genre between the medieval romance and the modern novel, reconciling fantasy and psychology, the ordinary and the extraordinary ("Narrative" 233). Eric Sundquist bridges the connection between the gothic, color symbolism, and racial fantasies, when he claims that "the identification of the gothic with darkness has fixed the image of the black deep in his [the writer's] subconscious mind […]. The whole history of cultural and political images of 'blackness' has conspired to ensure the repetition of the gothic pattern" (19). The gothic can then be understood as a sub-genre that helped to consolidate the ambiguous connection between darkness and evil, and the 'uncanny' quality of invisibility, as "for Gothic fear is not so much what is seen but what is sensed beyond sight" (Keech 132). The combination of romance's liminality between real and unreal, as well as its symbolism paired with gothic elements, like darkness and an invisible threat, establishes a fertile ground for inscriptions and critiques of American Africanism. Fluck concludes his discussion of romance's definitions with

> the actual political challenge posed by the romance: the crucial role of the imaginary in social arrangements and social visions. Although a seemingly aristocratic genre, the romance has, in and through its changing uses of the imaginary, become an important genre of democratization, because as 'pure fiction' it is ideally suited to articulate an imaginary dimension that is the nourishing ground for ever new claims of the individual. In this, the romance and its changing functions are not only part of a history of cultural dehierarchization. They are, in fact, one of its driving forces. (447)

Accordingly, romance carries the potential to destabilize the racial hierarchy implied in American Africanism by disclosing the racial categories of White and Black as imaginary, as a 'real-life' fantasy.

Having emerged out of romance (Jackson 4), fantasy literature not only shares its resistance to a concrete definition with romance, but also its "irreality" (Fluck 422). Romance's subversion of hierarchies and its highlighting of reality's fantasies are also the main functions of the fantastic as "literature of subversion" (Jackson 1981). The quality of fantasy novels also

[4] While it may be contested to claim romance as "the representative American genre," it undoubtedly can be claimed "an important part of the American literary tradition" (Fluck 419).

stems from their distance to reality and their simultaneous reliance on the real, opening up imaginative possibilities within liminal elements such as threshold spaces and characters similar to those used in romance (19-20). The liminality of fantasy between possible and impossible, between reality and imagination, also works as a space for negotiations of well established categories and structures (15). Fantasy can capture what lies outside those categories by creating worlds and characters that transcend classification schemes: "Cultural, ethnic, or gender hybridity is frequently symbolized by monsters and cyborgs, ontological heterogeneity is manifested by extraterrestrial and alternate worlds, weakened historicity by alternate histories" (Klapcsik 4). The Africanist presence entails an ontological ambiguity that can also be represented through fantastic means. Turner observes that a liminal condition may turn its subjects into "monstruous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes" ("Liminal" 42). Fantasy therefore offers a space that, by its liminality, can equally accommodate the contradictions inherent in the Africanist presence, its hypervisibility and invisibility, its reality and irreality, its Blackness and its Whiteness.

Liminality in Melville's *Moby Dick*

Based on the observation that "[i]n 1850 at the height of slavery and burgeoning abolitionism, American writers chose romance," Morrison asks "Where [...] in these romances is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled?" ("Unspeakable" 137). In the Melvillian romance *Moby Dick,* the shadow, or more precisely its liminality, is used to disrupt White supremacist structures. Readings of *Moby Dick* have increasingly emphasized Melville's anti-supremacist program. Like many other scholars, Sterling Brown and Carolyn Karcher diagnose a strong focus on human commonalities instead of racial differences in Melville's work (Brown 11-13, Karcher xii), transported through liminal spaces, characters, and color symbolism. The reader accompanies the narrator Ishmael on his first whale-hunting trip on the Pequod. Its captain, Ahab, is determined to find and kill the white whale to which he lost one of his legs. The voyage of the Pequod eventually ends in the death of the whole multicultural crew except of the narrator Ishmael. According to Michael Kouroubetes, *Moby Dick*'s general classification as a romance is challenged by its inclusion of various text types (63). Its questioning of established categories thus is performed on multiple levels, starting with its generic composition. Its liminal form comprising narrative, essayistic, poetic, and dramatic elements defies classification by transgressing textual borders (63).

Melville's romance as inherently liminal literary form (Loerke 2013) then works with the ship at sea as an equally liminal space. As many scholars have remarked, the isolated setting of the sea allows for an abstraction of the plot as a search for American identity and the culture's struggle with its racial fantasies (Kouroubetes 60). The ship functions as a metaphor for the United States on their way to a national identity, a way that is accompanied by a dangerous White threat under the surface. An encounter with this Whiteness leads, in the case of Ahab, to madness and eventually death, as in Melville's days governed by African American

enslavement and White imperialism a more explicit questioning or defeating of Whiteness would have deprived the United States of its foundation (Morrison, "Unspeakable" 141-42). Considering Ahab as representative for this society, Morrison makes the racial interpretation of the story concrete:

> But if the whale is more than blind, indifferent Nature unsubduable by masculine aggression, if it is as much its adjective as it is its noun, we can consider the possibility that Melville's 'truth' was his recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became ideology. And if the white whale is the ideology of race, what Ahab has lost to it is personal dismemberment and family and society and his own place as a human in the world. The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self. ("Unspeakable" 141)

Ahab's madness then stems not from his struggle to dominate nature, but from facing the Whiteness that dominates American society: "it is white racial ideology that is savage and if, indeed, a white, nineteenth-century, American male took on, not abolition, not the amelioration of racist institutions or their laws, but the very concept of whiteness as an inhuman idea, he would be very alone, very desperate, and very doomed" (141-42). The direct confrontation with Whiteness "as the most threatening manifestation of the imaginary" (Fluck 429) therefore leads to Ahab's, the individual's, downfall. The plot shows how disturbing it was for a White person in the nineteenth century to enter this liminal state, where Whiteness no longer serves as a point of reference structuring reality. It forces the White self to realize that the Whiteness it created as the core of its identity, paradoxically threatens White identity to fall apart.

The white whale is haunting Ahab and the Pequod, just as Whiteness is haunting the United States (Morrison, "Unspeakable 141). The projection of an evil, dark threat usually connected to the Africanist presence is transferred to this White presence, however without demonizing Whiteness entirely. As Morrison clarifies, the language of Melville's chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" "ranged between benevolent, beautiful images of whiteness and whiteness as sinister and shocking" ("Unspeakable" 143). With its ambiguous color symbolism,[5] *Moby Dick* moves in between the established opposites of light and dark, good and evil to destabilize the US-American Black-White dichotomy. According to Viola Sachs, Melville uses this dichotomy as a basic axis along which he structures his work and "destroys the fundamental racist theory based on the superiority symbolized in the white skin" (73) through his deployment of liminal color symbolism. By dissolving the simplistic Black-inferior versus White-superior divide (53-56, 64-73), *Moby Dick* discloses the Africanist presence as an ambiguous construct. Melville's romance creates a liminal state where the poles mingled within the Africanist presence are presented in an unstructurable disarray, constantly

[5] For a detailed analysis of the black-white color symbolism in *Moby Dick*, see Harry Levin's *The Power of Blackness* (1958).

oscillating back and forth, showing an ontological chaos that cannot be easily divided in two opposites.

Melville uses the liminal position of romance between reality and 'irreality,' nurished by the appropriated gothic elements of the invisible threat, haunting, and the contrast between darkness and light, to subvert American Africanism and expose its imaginary character. His romance discloses the paradox that the White supremacist ideology is part of American reality without being real—it exists only in the racial imagination of the United States, however real in its violent consequences. Just as the Pequod never arrives in its harbor, the subversion of White supremacy and anti-Blackness remains in the open space of the sea. As failed as the voyage and thus also the project to challenge White-supremacist ideas outside the secluded realm of the Pequod seem, those ideas are carried on through the narrator. Ishmael is the only one not succumbing to the White whale, enabling him to deliver the story to posterity in retrospect. This ending suggests 1) an acceptance that White supremacy cannot be conquered easily through a single instance of narrative subversion, and 2) a conviction that the anti-White-supremacist ideas developed throughout the story need to be futher cultivated.

Liminality in *Lincoln in the Bardo*

Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* shows how contemporary fantasy, just like romance literature of the nineteenth century, can disclose American Africanism as a result of White America's imagination, of its fear to lose its power and its identity, by exploiting its 'irreal' space in connection with gothic elements. To adapt Morrison's statement about *Moby Dick*: In 2017, in the context of widely perceived Black Lives Matter activism and Trump rethorics, Saunders chose a fantastic ghost story to rework the times of the Civil War, one of the most important historical moments for US-American racial politics. The genre-related continuity between Melville's romance and Saunders's fantasy also parallels a continuity in the treatment of the topics of White supremacy and anti-Blackness. While they both deploy liminality as a narrative strategy for their criticism of American Africanism, Saunders's novel differs from *Moby Dick* in its open ending, leaving a promising, rather than a failed, outlook on possible progress in the Unites States' racial imagination.[6]

Lincoln in the Bardo tells a story about the night after the death of Abraham Lincoln's son Willie Lincoln in 1862. The reader accompanies Willie's ghost on his journey in the Bardo, a space the ghosts enter after death, believing to be sick and not dead. Eventually, the realization of their deaths makes them move on to an undefined afterlife. The Bardo is situated as a parallel sphere in the graveyard in Washington D.C., from which the ghosts can

[6] In the following, I draw on my close reading of Saunders's novel and its critique of American Africanism as discussed in my article "Anti-Supremacist Speculations in *Lincoln in the Bardo*" (2022) to point out liminality as a central literary strategy transporting that critique, both in Melville's *Moby Dick* and in *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

observe how Willie's father spends the whole night mourning over his son. The ghost-protagonists, Roger Bevins III, the Reverend Everly Thomas, and Hans Vollman, are so moved by Lincoln's grief that they set out on a mission to bring Willie back to his father. Finally, when Willie learns about his death and informs the other ghosts that they are not sick, they 'evaporate' through the so called "matterlightblooming phenomenon" (G. Saunders 296) into the afterlife. The ghost of Thomas Havens, a former Black slave, takes another path however: He fuses with Lincoln's body and returns with him to the White House. The novel's framing of a ghost story in the historical setting during the Civil War makes it a fusion of historical novel and fantasy, its experimental form a mixture of dramatic dialogue and narrative fiction, with dispersed quotes from non-fictional texts (Moseley 2019). Just like Melville's *Moby Dick*, it is characterized by a generic liminality and therefore, through its composition, sets out to question established categories as fundamental as history or knowledge.

While the story mainly focuses on the ghosts' attempt to lead Willie to his father, both Willie and Abraham Lincoln are portrayed in liminal states and spaces (Éigeartaigh 2019)—like Ahab and his crew on their search for identity on the Pequod. As Aoileann Éigeartaigh points out, Willie Lincoln is caught in the interstitial space of the Bardo, Abraham Lincoln in the graveyard between giving in to grief and moving on to lead the Civil War. The ambiguous reference in the title to '*Lincoln' in the Bardo* can therefore refer to both characters, as Willie is literally located in the transitional space of the Bardo in the novel's ghost story and his father can be metaphorically located in a transitional phase between his role as president and his role as father (Éigeartaigh 2019). By isolating himself from his presidential duties in the graveyard, appearing primarily in his position as a father, he is temporarily distanced from his historical context, like Willie in the Bardo. Those liminal settings, I argue, liberate the message of the story from its temporal specificity, making it, like the voyage on the Pequod, an allegory for the United States' quest for identity in the past and present. Just as *Moby Dick* acts out its criticism within the "imagined world" of the Pequod directed toward "unknown territories" (Fluck 422), *Lincoln in the Bardo* dives into the Bardo at the graveyard as an 'other' world after death, where norms of reality are suspended and therefore questioned from critical distance (Éigeartaigh 2019). Allegorically speaking, the novel suggests that the United States needs to enter such a liminal state as well, to question their social hierarchies and categories in order to move on to another stage, their own unknown afterlife.

Through its dissolution of the Africanist hierarchy in the Bardo by alienating Whiteness, the novel suggests that this metaphorical afterlife of the United States has to transcend American Africanist practices. As is the case for Melville's white whale, the Africanist othering of Blackness is projected on Saunders's White characters by caricaturing them through physical deformation, for example, having multiple eyes (Seuberth 2022). Instead of othering the Black ghosts by projecting an Africanist fantasy on them, the White ghosts are the ones who are fantastically deformed. Moreover, the power hierarchy between White and Black ghosts in the Bardo is a reversal of the White surpemacist one in the living world (Seuberth 2022). The supremacist correlation of Whiteness with superiority and freedom, and consequently of

Blackness with enslavement, is inverted. In their ability to pass over the "dreaded iron fence" (G. Saunders 36), positioned as a sort of 'color line' between White and Black territory, the Black ghosts enjoy more freedom than their White counterparts, who experience nausea when approaching the fence:

> Hence a standoff resulted: Lieutenant Stone and patrol, from nausea, could not advance close enough to drive the black contingent over the fence, and those individuals, having reached the limit of their willingness to submit to such depredations, continued to hold their position on this side. (G. Saunders 223)

The Reverend Everly Thomas's metaphorical description of the scene as a "standoff" suggests a division into two equally powerful camps: the White Lieutenant with his patrol versus the "black contingent." While he does not portray the Black ghosts as non-humans, but as individuals with agency, he fails to acknowledge their actual superiority to the White ghosts in terms of their freedom of movement in this situation. In his reference to the Black characters as "those individuals," who usually do not belong to "this side," i.e. the 'White side,' the reverend reveals his perception of Black people as others, differing from White people. The White characters' (sub-)conscious representation of the Black population as a powerless Africanist presence is undermined through the repartition of freedom and power between Black and White and the semantic connotations of narrated space. The Africanist dichotomy of White freedom versus enslaved Blackness is thus reversed, highlighting the arbitrariness of the Africanist hierarchy. The refusal of the novel to subscribe to the Africanist White-self versus Black-other paradigm and its usage of the liminal space for visualizing such an alternate order transports its critique on the American Africanist discourse.

However, Whiteness is not simply estranged into an alien and powerless other. Like *Moby Dick*, *Lincoln in the Bardo* also defies simplistic color symbolism that idealizes or demonizes White or Black. It appropriates the dark, gothic graveyard setting and disrupts it with comedy (Seuberth 2022). Isabelle Perkins, a woman who lives next to the graveyard and often observes it by night from her window, describes the scenery in a letter to her brother by deploring how the statue "Morty [...] is not the man he once was" because the storm cut off his arm "sword & all" (G. Saunders 183). She imagines the thoughts of Lincoln's horse, a "calm & exhausted fellow, nodding as if to say: Well, though I find myself at the yard of the Dead in the dark of night, I am Horse, & must obey" (183). The whole setting of a graveyard by night thus is not presented as horrifying but as lively and entertaining, with personified horses and statues with nicknames. The Bardo and the graveyard therefore are not only liminal spaces because of their threshold position between life and afterlife, but also in terms of their non-participation in the Africanist division between demonized Blackness and glorified Whiteness. They install a middle ground in between those two poles to show that the American Africanist division is no natural given but one of many possibilities of how to conceptualize reality.

The ghosts enter this liminal space, this middle ground between Blackness and Whiteness, like Ahab on his voyage, however, the ghosts' fate propels a more optimistic outlook than his. While Melville's (anti-)hero becomes an isolated madman because he enters a space outside

the Africanist hierarchy, the ghosts entering the Bardo will eventually be released into the afterlife. The ghosts' collective liberation from the Bardo after Willie announces their death suggests the possibility for America to establish a joint instead of a fragmented community. One key difference between both novels therefore lies in their endings. *Moby Dick* depicts how questioning Whiteness would lead to destruction and death in the nineteenth century. However, the necessity of challenging White supremacy remains crucial, or so *Moby Dick* seems to suggest. According *to Lincoln in the Bardo*, in the twenty-first century, questioning Whiteness would lead to advancement. Although no concrete picture is drawn of how this new order, this afterlife, would look like, the open ending proposes a persistent questioning of the status quo until a different future is reached. When Thomas Havens enters Lincoln's body he "felt a kinship" and detects a development in Lincoln's racial imagination, having partially eroded his former "aversion" to Black people (G. Saunders 311-12). Their fusion of a dead and a living presence, of a White and a Black man, extends the limen of the Bardo and the graveyard into the historical reality of Abraham Lincoln and offers a promising outlook on the United States' racial imaginations. A new liminal presence is created that rides through the United States, a presence that does not embody American Africanism but defies it. Saunders's novel thus suggests that continuously challenging racial separatism is a necessary part of possible transformation.

Through its liminality between historical and fantastical, between death and life, between Whiteness and Blackness, the ghost story subverts Africanist categories showing that their presence in imagination does not correlate with their presence in reality. Through fantasy, the Africanist presence is disclosed as a ghost haunting the US-American imagination, as "the ghost [that] drives the machine" (Morrison, "Unspeakable" 145).

Conclusion

Saunders's ghost story provides a suitable context to face "the colonial ghosts" (López 4) of Whiteness and anti-Blackness today. Accordingly, the novel aligns itself with the literary work of Melville in its critical reflection on and exposure of White supremacist and anti-Black discourse. Both novels employ liminality as narrative strategy to transport their criticism of the Black-White dichotomy propelled by American Africanism. They use liminal genres and settings to lay out a space in which the Africanist divide does not apply, illustrating that the opposition of Blackness and Whiteness is a social construct based on a racial fantasy. Comparing Melville's and Saunders's novels as criticism of American Africanism shows a repeated attempt to defamiliarize the racial separatist paradigm in order to rebuild a new order beyond White supremacy and anti-Blackness in the United States. This project is portrayed as doomed to fail in *Moby Dick*, as everyone except the narrator dies on their way to that 'unknown territory.' Ishmael's survival and telling of the story, however, demand to pass on the novel's anti-separatist message to future generations. *Lincoln in the Bardo* does not arrive at the end of the journey either, but its open ending still keeps the possibility for

transformation alive. Whether this difference between *Moby Dick* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* reflects a change in the racial mindset of the United States from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century cannot be deduced from two analyses alone. However, the continuity of liminality as a narrative strategy to approach the subjects of White supremacy and anti-Blackness, as a flight into dissolving old orders instead of creating new ones, reveals a persistent struggle to envision a post-White-supremacist future.

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