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Josey Gardner  
*Brigham Young University*, [jgardner48@gmail.com](mailto:jgardner48@gmail.com)

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# The Only Way Out is Through

Community, Death, and the Desacralization of Trauma in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*

Josey Gardner

George Saunders' novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* deals with memory and trauma among the living and the dead. It takes place in a graveyard on the night immediately following 11-year-old Willie Lincoln's funeral. President Abraham Lincoln sits next to his son's coffin and aimlessly wanders the graveyard, attempting to cope with the grief and trauma of his son's death. Unbeknownst to President Lincoln, a slew of ghosts witness his grief and trauma in this graveyard. One of these ghosts is his own son, Willie. These ghosts choose to remain in the Bardo—Saunders' creation of a mixture between the Catholic idea of purgatory and the Tibetan Buddhist idea of the Bardo—under the false hope they can return to their "previous state" of life and reclaim the things they have lost. Through the ghosts' experience in the Bardo, the novel tackles methods of how to deal with trauma and grief. Among those methods is a process called desacralization: removing trauma from a place of all-encompassing power. Another method the novel uses is a focus on community and an acceptance of a new self and life.

*Lincoln in the Bardo's* appearance as yet another trauma narrative is not surprising. As Professor Schwartz of Emerson College wrote, "We speak of trauma incessantly these days" (Schwartz). What began as a desire for representation of trauma in media and literature has morphed into an obsession. Trauma has a chokehold on narratives within entertainment media with true crime TV shows like, *Black Mirror*, *The Last Duel*, and so many more (Pandell). It is seen in literature through novels such as *Black Sun*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and others. It is hard to deny Parul Sehgal's analysis, "Dress this story up or down: on the page and on the screen, one plot—the trauma plot—has arrived to rule them all." We watch trauma, we speak of trauma, we read of trauma, we write of trauma.

However, *Lincoln in the Bardo* fills a unique niche in the current portrayals of trauma found in popular media by seeking to minimize the importance of trauma. This comes in direct contrast to the way trauma overwhelms and consumes current media trends. As trauma narratives become the most noteworthy and valuable of stories, trauma itself is inevitably placed upon a pedestal—the shining object that all other decisions are measured against and based upon. The placing of trauma on a pedestal marks what historian Dominick LaCapra refers to as the "sacralization" of trauma. This sacralization occurs when a traumatic event is converted "into a founding or sublime event—a traumatic sublime or transfigured moment . . . that helps to create a compelling, even disabling sense of betrayal if one departs from a 'fidelity' to it" (123). As the trauma narrative becomes prioritized above all others and trauma itself, it is used as a foundational event from which all decisions, outlooks, and entire identities are based. Our culture's treatment of these narratives seems to echo the language of the Catholic Nicene Creed: instead of God, the *trauma* is "the First and the Last, the beginning and the end of everything," a dogma that demands loyalty (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*). It is no wonder then that the word "sacred" is used to describe the modern relationship to trauma.

The depiction of the sacralization of trauma within *Lincoln in the Bardo* is precisely what makes it unique among the sea of trauma novels in which it floats. Rather than lending itself to further prioritization, the novel charts a path for removing trauma from the pedestal it is often placed on—in other words, a path for desacralization. This desacralization is a key part of LaCapra's specific method of dealing with trauma that he labels "working through" (121). *Lincoln in the Bardo* renders a method for desacralizing

trauma through the steps the ghosts themselves use: the use of community, empathic unsettlement, and an acceptance of death twice over: first, accepting the death of the self before the trauma, and second, accepting the death of the self created by the sacralization of that trauma. As the ghosts actively seek to desacralize their own trauma, *Lincoln in the Bardo* demonstrates a critique on the sacralization of the trauma narrative that pervades current media trends.

The sacralization of trauma begins with the inability to accurately describe traumatic events. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an “incomprehensible event that defies all representation” (Leys 269). What makes an event traumatic is that it fundamentally exists outside of the realm of imagination and understanding, and cannot be placed into such a framework. By the very nature of what trauma is, any and all words and symbols fail to communicate precisely how the event felt (Adami 27). However, LaCapra theorizes that when this definition of trauma as an all-encompassing, indescribable force is left unchallenged, it inevitably results in the hallowing of trauma, developing a God-like power and mystery (121).

The ineffability of trauma is seen at the start of *Lincoln in the Bardo* when it comes time for the ghosts in the graveyard to explain their situation to the newly arrived ghost of Willie Lincoln. None will admit they are dead, and none can tell Willie exactly what his next steps should be. They are not able to even say the word “coffin,” instead calling their coffins “sick boxes” (Saunders). As they lay in their “sick boxes,” they anxiously await the day when they will return to the life they left behind. Their existence in the Bardo originates not only from their inability to describe their deaths, but to even admit their reality.

Although trauma is initially felt as something beyond words and understanding, this perception of trauma must eventually change in order for it to be worked through. Many trauma victims, including the ghosts in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, resist this change, as if putting their trauma into words diminishes the horrible aspects of it. Feelings of fidelity towards trauma are telltale signs it has been sacralized. In order to experience any semblance of peace after a traumatic event, the desanctification of the event must occur. Working through trauma must not be seen “as total transcendence of trauma” or as “a betrayal of it” (LaCapra 122). The goal of working through trauma is not to be “cured” of it or to return to a version of self that existed before the trauma as if it never happened. Rather, the process of working through

trauma involves creating a narrative that gives trauma less power so that the victim's future is not dictated solely by the memory of their trauma (122).

Because the ghosts' experience of trauma as a fundamentally indescribable event remains unchallenged, it becomes a kind of unknowable force that drives their behavior—they believe they must stay in the Bardo in order to return to the lives they left behind. The ghosts never admit what or where they are. They cling to their last memories of life to grasp any hope to return to what they've left behind. Because their last memories are of their deaths, this trauma is what they cling to. This creates the fidelity to trauma that always accompanies its sacralization (LaCapra 123).

According to trauma theory, trauma is often experienced "in a highly fragmented way, as a collection of sensations and images" (Stroinska et al. 249). True to that theory, the ghosts manifest in the Bardo as haphazard and uncontrollable collections of the thoughts, feelings, and circumstances that surrounded their deaths. The ghost of Roger Bevins III, who committed suicide and realized too late that he still felt a longing and a zest for life, manifests to Willie Lincoln as having "several sets of eyes All darting to and fro Several noses All sniffing His hands (he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hand were so quick they seemed to be many) struck this way and that" (Saunders 27). The physical sensation and stimulus Bevins so craved in his last moments haunt his spirit in the Bardo. Likewise, the ghost Hans Vollman's manifestations are centered around his last memories of being on his way to consummate his marriage with his wife—just before a wooden beam fell from the ceiling onto his head, killing him. Consequently, Willie Lincoln describes Hans Vollman as "Quite naked Member swollen to the size of Could not take my eyes off . . . Awful dent in the head" (28). The ghost of Reverend Everly Thomas, who is haunted by the fear he experienced in his last moments, arrives with "eyebrows arched high, looking behind himself anxiously, hair sticking straight up, mouth in a perfect O of terror" (28). These manifestations are always present and never under the conscious control of the ghosts.

It is not just the types of manifestations that are uncontrollable, it is also their intensity. The manifestations are in a state of flux, ranging from mild to all encompassing. Given the fragmentary nature of trauma, the sacralization of it often leads to an inability to control how trauma manifests itself. This is known as "acting out"—when the experience of past trauma, its effects, and associated behaviors are repeated in the present. "Traumatized people tend

to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts, and thus to repeat the trauma in the present as if they were still in the past" (Adami 24). This acting out is seen in the ghosts' manifestations. Bevins' manifestations flare and recede depending on how intently he talks about missing life and having a body. As he lives with his trauma in the Bardo, it is those feelings of longing that often overwhelm him. While he speaks to Willie Lincoln, Bevins grows "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 / Slashes on every one of the wrists" (Saunders 27). His desires to experience all the material and physical sensation the world had to offer are continually thrust upon him in the Bardo. Organs and limbs devoted to physical sensation such as eyes, nose, and hands, swell and multiply. Amid his denial to accept he is dead, all his wrists are slashed to declare the consequences of his suicide.

In addition to the ghosts' manifestations of themselves, Saunders' adaptation of the Bardo displays the uncontrollable acting out that continues when trauma is allowed to be placed on the pedestal of total authority, mystery, and devotion. The Tibetan word "bardo" literally translates to "intermediate state," but is often interchangeably translated with words such as gap, interval, transitional process, liminal state, or in between (Kilts). In traditional Tibetan Buddhist thought, the Bardo describes a liminal space that many Buddhists believe exists between death and rebirth. Those who inhabit this space are engaged by hallucinations and visions that represent different aspects of themselves and the lives they led. Upon encountering these hallucinations, a person can choose one of three actions: first, they can accept the hallucinations as part of the life they lived and forego any attachment to them and reach enlightenment; second, they can attach themselves to the hallucinations and refuse to let go until they are forced back into the reincarnation cycle; or third, they can run from the hallucinations and deny that they are a representation of themselves, which also forces them back into the reincarnation cycle (Holecek).

Being bombarded by uncontrollable hallucinations is an aspect of Tibetan theology that Saunders utilizes in his own imaginings of the graveyard Bardo. It is not made clear if the specters that appear to the ghosts in the graveyard are hallucinations or some form of spirit from the next stage urging those in the Bardo to move on, but they arrive against the will and wishes of the ghosts in the graveyard to convince them they are truly dead by showing them things they no longer have. When these hallucinations

arrive, each ghost sees something different. They are not just representations of life, but representations of the very traumas that landed them in the Bardo to begin with. Hans Vollman sees a “swarm of beautiful young brides,” meant to remind him of the wife he was never able to love entirely (Saunders 92). The Reverend sees “angels, attentive to strangely corporeal wings,” as the horror of his divine judgment is brought back to life (92). Roger Bevins sees “hundreds of exact copies of Gilbert,” the man who broke his heart and prompted his suicide (92). Just as the hallucinations in the traditional Tibetan Bardo determine if a person will move on or remain stuck in a cycle, each ghosts’ refusal to acknowledge or heed these hallucinations creates the limbo those who refuse to accept trauma find themselves in.

Rather than moving to the place where they belong, the ghosts who continue to deny the hallucinations are left in a liminal space where purpose and meaning are unclear. It is the ghosts’ sacralization of and fidelity to their trauma that keeps them trapped in the Bardo, unable to progress. These hallucinations can serve as theology as well as to emphasize the acting out that follows the sacralization of trauma. Just as a trauma victim unexpectedly re-experiences the traumatic events of the past as if it were the present when their trauma has not been properly worked through, each ghost experiences the trauma of their death in the now, against their will, as memories they associate with their trauma take form and walk among them. Because the hallucinations in Saunders’ Bardo are centered around the trauma of each ghost, they represent the “overwhelming experience of . . . often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). The ghosts are assaulted by hallucinations reminiscent of their trauma, forcing them to relive aspects of the trauma that even the manifestations cannot imitate.

“Storytelling about life events seems to be a universal human activity,” and so even amid the ghosts’ rejection of their trauma and current state, they form a narrative around their traumas (Stroinska 263). However, they are not honest narratives. They are grounded in the indescribability and mystery of the trauma itself, as well as denial of death and where they are. Early in the novel, these narratives are not used to work through trauma, they are used to deflect the effects of trauma. As such, the narratives only reinforce the sacred status of their trauma. This results in an obsession with the trauma narrative each ghost has produced.

The ghosts are so fixated on their last memories that they have the stories of their deaths memorized word for word. They repeat the same script over and over to anyone who will listen. Upon the arrival of young Willie Lincoln, the other ghosts do not extend any “hellos” or “how do you dos”. Instead they immediately launch into retelling their own deaths. As soon as Willie arrives, Vollman promptly begins, “on our wedding day I was forty-six, she was eighteen,” and proceeds to tell Willie about how he was about to consummate his marriage when he was struck on the head by a wooden beam (Saunders 3). Vollman finishes his story before he even notices Willie’s age, exclaiming, “Goodness, are you a child? He is, isn’t he?” (5) The power Vollman’s trauma has over him is so strong that it is not until he is completely finished recounting his own story that he sees Willie for what he is—a child. Vollman does not notice or care that his lack of sexual fulfillment and subsequent death is not a subject to be discussed with an 11-year-old, nor does Vollman think to provide comfort or an explanation to a boy who has just died and does not know where he is or who is around him; Vollman can think of nothing else until his trauma narrative is told. Every standard of what is appropriate, right, or logical pales in comparison to this need to relay his trauma.

The ghosts have been telling and listening to one another’s tales of woe for so long that they have each other’s stories memorized. The ghost of Mrs. Abigail Blass waits in line to speak to Willie Lincoln, anxiously awaiting her turn, and upon reaching him is seized “with a sudden case of stage-fright” and is rendered speechless (Saunders 81). Even still, it does not matter because Reverend Thomas knows exactly how her narrative begins. He prompts her, “You have one thousand three hundred dollars in the First Bank, I believe?” She responds, “Yes. Thank you Reverend. I have one thousand three hundred dollars in the First Bank...” (81). This devotion to trauma leads to a preference of acting out over working through as represented by the ghosts’ preference for uncontrollable manifestations and hallucinations over moving on to the next place (Adami 25).

The process of desacralization of trauma for the ghosts in the Bardo begins with community. Initially, it seems the creation of a community is the only step towards desacralization they have achieved, and it is not very effective—many of the ghosts have been around each other for decades, and yet still prioritize their own trauma. The community at the start of the book is established on the sacralization of individual traumas. In an interview,



author George Saunders described the community in the Bardo by saying, “So who do we have in these bardo beings? We have a bunch of neurotic beings who are self-obsessed, completely convinced they’re correct, prefer their version to everyone else’s, and believe they’re at the center of the universe” (McLeod). The ghosts form less a community and more a group of individuals simply existing next to each other. This is a community of competition, not harmony. Each ghost competes for their trauma narrative to be the one that is prioritized and listened to.

This competition of trauma is the direct result of the sacred pedestal each ghost has created for their trauma. This competition is clearly observed when each ghost clambers for a chance to recite their trauma to Willie Lincoln. As each ghost yells their story at Willie, pandemonium ensues and Hans Vollman makes the observation, “What did we want? We wanted the lad to *see* us I think. We wanted his blessing. We wanted to know what this apparently charmed being thought of our particular reasons for remaining” (Saunders 73). Each ghost’s priority is being seen by others without any regard for seeing anyone in return. Each ghost uses their own trauma narrative to justify their actions. Saunders explained that the ghosts are “constantly reinforcing who they are and why they’re justified in staying” (McLeod). At the beginning of the novel, this is the function of the community they have built. Because they have all sacralized their trauma, the community serves to provide justification for that choice.

Even so, the importance of community in working through trauma is well documented. Psychologists, sociologists, and trauma theorists agree that “facing the trauma with empathic others, and being ‘held’ by the presence of those who offer recognition and encouragement appears to mitigate some of the damaging effects of trauma” (Stroinska 267). So how does the graveyard community become a help rather than a hindrance to the desacralization of trauma?

The community is able to transform itself from a party of the helpless into an encouraging environment for desacralization through the use of empathic unsettlement. Empathic unsettlement is defined by LaCapra as a “virtual not vicarious experience—that is to say, an experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of—or speaking for—the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering” (135). Often, empathy for trauma victims finds itself wandering into the dangerous territory of “I know *exactly*

how you feel," even though they could never *exactly* know. Sometimes a well-wisher seeks to take on the trauma of the victim to lighten the load, consequently experiencing compassion fatigue or even secondary trauma themselves. This type of empathy is mistakenly grounded in identification and cannot produce the type of community *and* support that a trauma victim needs. However, empathic unsettlement is an empathy constructed not by personally identifying with the victim, but by "respect[ing] the otherness of the other" (135). It is an empathy that requires both community *and* a firm level of individual differentiation. Someone practicing empathic unsettlement understands the traumatic event only as far as the victim has explained it, while knowing no one but the victim understands how it felt to live it. Empathic unsettlement distinguishes between the listener and the victim while concurrently placing value in the victim's story.

The graveyard community becomes invaluable to working through trauma with the introduction of empathic unsettlement. It debuts when Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins enter President Lincoln's body together in an effort to possess him and force him to walk back to Willie Lincoln's coffin. When they are joined together, it is as if they inhabit one another completely—mind and body. They know what the other thinks and feels, understand precisely what it is like to exist as each other. When they are first joined, Bevins and Vollman fall into the trap of an empathy rife with personal identification. Vollman describes Bevins's suicide using first person pronouns, as if it is Vollman's own experience: "In my thrashing panic I have upended a chair. The blood, channeled within the floorboard interstices, pools against the margins of the next-room rug. I may yet be revived" (Saunders 172). Likewise, Bevins experiences Vollman's trauma as his own, becoming a surrogate for Vollman's desire for his wife: "As soon as tomorrow, if I can only recover, I will have her. I will sell the shop. We will travel. In many new cities, I will see her in dresses of many colors. Which will drop to many floors" (172). However, this inability to differentiate between the self and the trauma of another is not sustainable. Both Bevins and Vollman are experiencing personal identification with the other's trauma story rather than the respectful differentiation that is found in empathic unsettlement.

Personal identification is an easier path to follow in the sacralization of trauma, shown by Bevins and Vollman when they fall into attempting to take the other's trauma as their own almost immediately without any effort. However, it has the opposite effect of empathic unsettlement. Personal

identification does not create community; it still focuses on the self and how the self can find a mirror to gaze into, that mirror being within another person. However, as soon as Bevins and Vollman separate, their personal identification fades and their understanding of each other forms into a much more sustainable empathic unsettlement.

They no longer refer to each other as “I” but as “him,” and their interactions are now based on understanding each other’s experiences as different than their own. Because this difference is grounded in honesty and respect for the other, their original goal of being seen is surpassed and they can move on to truly seeing others. Hans Vollman exclaims, “I would never fail to fully see him again: dear Mr. Bevins!” (Saunders 173). For the first time, concern with something other than themselves and their personal trauma narrative is experienced, something that the sacralization of trauma expressly prevents. Thus, their concern for one another marks the beginning of the desacralization process.

The healing effects of empathic unsettlement are increased as the community grows—the more ghosts that participate in empathic unsettlement, the greater its effects become. When several ghosts inhabit President Lincoln together in an attempt to once again possess him and force him to walk back to Willie’s coffin, all of them experience the stages of empathic unsettlement that Vollman and Bevins did. Vollman describes them all as being “expanded” (Saunders 253). The focus on their own traumas is significantly decreased, and they are able to remember things they had forgotten. Through their work on empathic unsettlement as a large community, “all selfish concerns (of staying, preserving one’s strength) [are] momentarily set aside” (254). They begin to remember the times they had experienced meaningful community before they died, which highlighted the loneliness of the graveyard. The Reverend wonders, “How had we forgotten? All these happy occasions?” (255). The answer that Bevins gives: “To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one’s primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else” (255). In this moment, the community becomes collectively aware of how much power they have given their trauma by sacralizing it, and how much they have lost by doing so.

Vollman realizes that to stay in the Bardo “one must be constantly looking for opportunities to tell one’s story” (Saunders 255). Bevins remarks, “But this had cost us, we now saw. We had forgotten so much, all else we had been and known” (255). With empathic unsettlement, their eyes are

opened to more than just their individual trauma—they saw the trauma of others. They understood the memories that existed before trauma and the possibilities that could have existed without it.

This working through and desacralization of trauma results in a significant decrease in the ghost's acting out. After the mass communal empathic unsettlement event, the ghosts' outlandish and uncontrollable manifestations slowly disappear. Vollman appears "*clad*, his member shrunk down to normal size" (Saunders 256). Bevins is "no longer a difficult-to-look-at clustering of eyes, noses, hands, et al.—but a handsome young man, of eager and pleasing countenance: two eyes, one nose, two hands, ruddy cheeks, a beautiful head of black hair" (256-57). When community is centered on listening to and seeing others rather than selfishly being seen and justified in one's own actions, its healing effects are initiated. This process of desacralization does not stop with a decentering of self and a decrease in acting out; it goes on to challenge the ghosts' long held and long rehearsed personal and sacralized trauma narratives. The connection and respect spurred by empathic unsettlement creates an honest account of their ghostly neighbors' traumatic experiences—an honesty much deeper than anything allowed by each ghost's sacralized narrative of himself/herself. Even while they cannot face their own trauma, the empathic unsettlement leads to other ghosts who can very clearly see what the other hides from. While an individual ghost does not have the strength to face his own trauma, his neighbor sees it for what it is and holds up the mirror for him.

When Vollman tries to deny the truth of his own death after the empathic unsettlement he experienced with Bevins and the other ghosts, Bevins says to him, "Friend... Enough. Let us speak honestly. I am remembering many things. And I suspect that you are too" (Saunders 327). Bevins then describes an incident many years in the past: Vollman's wife came to visit his grave, and she explained that she had remarried and would be buried with her new husband. She called Vollman "a true friend" and wished him peace wherever he was (327). In an effort to remain in the Bardo with hopes of returning to his wife, Vollman had banished this event from his awareness. But Bevins, because of the connection empathic unsettlement created, is able to give Vollman the honesty he cannot give himself. The empathic unsettlement and radical honesty they give to each other leads to the next step each needs in order to truly desacralize and work through their trauma—an acceptance of death.

This acceptance of death is two-fold: first, accepting the death of the person that existed before the trauma and second, accepting the death of the person created during its sacralization. The acceptance of the first death (the death of the individual that existed before the trauma) is examined in various trauma studies regarding which aspects of personal narratives are most helpful for trauma victims. These studies show that healthy trauma narratives must be “conceptualized as having a before and after organization... The old life was destroyed and a new one was being built” (Stroinska 267). Accepting the destruction of the previous self and previous life is key to working through trauma as it creates “a coherent life narrative that introduces order into a chaotic experience” and helps reduce the amount and intensity of acting out (267).

When Bevins forces Vollman to honestly acknowledge his past and the memory of his wife visiting his grave, Vollman responds to Bevins by saying, “You... You cut your wrists and bled to death on your kitchen floor” (Saunders 328). In the face of his friend’s honesty, Bevins no longer has the strength to deny it—he replies, “Yes... Yes I did. Many years ago, [Vollman] said. So many years ago, I said” (328). A combination of community and empathic unsettlement finally leads both Vollman and Bevins to accept that they are in fact dead and can never return to who they once were. Their old life is gone—neither their past self nor their past life can ever be recovered. The sacralization of their trauma is nearly completely destroyed as all the goals that sacralization created—the desire to be seen rather than to see, to be important and unique, and to return to their previous state—crumble entirely. Their trauma is no longer fragmentary as they deny less and less of it, and take more of it off the pedestal and place it into an honest and knowable narrative. As the ghosts accept that their past selves are dead, it allows them to put words to the experience they never dared describe, and the previously sacralized trauma of their deaths holds less power over them and their behavior.

When a person manages to accept the death of the old self but then creates a new self with their trauma at the focal point of their identity, it marks an incomplete desacralization. As such, some ghosts complete the steps of desacralization only partially in the Bardo. Reverend Everly Thomas is one such ghost. In fact, it is largely the Reverend who convinces the other ghosts to place their trauma on a pedestal, something to constantly and vigorously refer to, because he does not want anyone to move on to the next

place. He wants the other ghosts to stay in the Bardo with him. He creates this community and even completes the first step of acceptance. He states, “I know very well what I am. Am not ‘sick,’ not ‘lying on a kitchen floor,’ not ‘being healed via sick-box,’ not ‘waiting to be revived.’ No... I knew very well what I was. I was dead” (Saunders 187). He accepts the death of the person that existed before the trauma and knows he has been irreparably changed. However, his community lacks empathic unsettlement, and consequently his trauma narrative is centered around dishonesty and selfishness, of wanting to be seen rather than see, gravitating him to the center of the universe. He has sacralized his trauma, made it his basis for all decisions concerning the creation of his new self.

What is the trauma that Reverend Thomas centers so poignantly? When he died, he experienced the judgment of his life and soul. That judgment did not work in his favor. When his thoughts, desires, and deeds were measured by angels on the steps leading to heaven or hell, one side of the scale was found wanting. Afraid of eternal damnation, the Reverend “turned and ran” (Saunders 193). He returned to the Bardo for he could not understand why he was damned, could not make heads or tails of it. The mystery was unchangeable, indescribable, and all-powerful. From thenceforth, every action he made was done with that fate, this singular traumatic experience, in mind. He exclaims, “For any of us *here*, it is too late for any alteration of course. All is done” (193). He becomes loyal to that belief and loyal to its place as the most important thing in the Bardo-life he now lives. The sacralization of his trauma is secure.

The Reverend does not experience the healing effects of desacralization until he participates in empathic unsettlement with the other ghosts in their attempt to possess President Lincoln. As a result, his manifestations and acting out fade away—he no longer looks perpetually terrified, and finally possesses a normal expression (Saunders 257). Following empathic unsettlement and the previous acceptance of his death, he now begins to deprioritize and thus desacralize his own trauma. However, he is never able to complete the last step: the acceptance of the death of who this sacralization created. Thus, his transition to the next state is less than pleasurable.

The Reverend can serve as a case study for the harmful effects that an incomplete healing process can have. Foreshadowing the consequences of our own culture’s sacralization of trauma, *Lincoln in the Bardo* shows that when one creates a community for the purpose of justifying the sacralization

of one's own trauma, that community is deeply hurt. Several ghosts stay in the graveyard only because of the Reverend's urging—several ghosts are haunted by hallucinations and manifestations of their own trauma longer than was needed, several ghosts are taught how to sacralize their own trauma by his example when they might not have otherwise. Being a trauma victim does not exclude one from being a perpetrator of it.

Even when the Reverend is finally able to move on and leave the Bardo, it is not under the peaceful circumstances that other ghosts experience. Demons rise up from the ground to trap him forever and his fear overcomes him. He leaves the Bardo just as afraid as when he entered it. The expression of fear that the process of empathic unsettlement banished had returned. He did not complete the last step of desacralization before passing on, and consequently took the fear he created with him to that next place (Saunders 275).

This leads the narrative to the second acceptance of death and the final step *Lincoln in the Bardo* provides for desacralizing trauma: an acceptance of the death of the person that the sacralization of trauma created. The ghost of Reverend Everly Thomas is never able to cast off this person—he enters the Bardo with fear, embodies it as his entire reason for existence, and exits the Bardo still attached to that fear. The ghost of Lizzie Wright, however, is able to accept this second death.

Lizzie Wright is a slave girl who has been unable to speak for the majority of the novel. The trauma she experienced in life was so great that she is simply unable to speak at all in the Bardo. Her trauma in both imagination and reality is so overwhelming that she cannot use words in any way. When Willie Lincoln announces to all the ghosts that they are dead, Lizzie accepts this. When her friend, Mrs. Francis Hodge, asks if she would like to stay or go, Lizzie speaks her first words in the Bardo: "I'll do what you do Mrs. Hodge, Lizzie said. You always been like a mother to me" (Saunders 314). Lizzie is not only able to accept the death of who she once was, she also casts off the muted version of herself that the prioritization of her trauma in the Bardo created. Thus, she is able to embrace the new community and embrace her death, and together Lizzie Wright and Mrs. Francis Hodge peacefully pass on to that next place (314).

Bevins and Vollman also experience a more conscious and grounded transition due to their ability to accept the deaths of the people their sacralization of traumas made them out to be. They are not afraid. Rather, they end the journey the way they started it. "Shall we? Mr. Bevins said. Shall

we go together?" (Saunders 328). Hans Vollman replies, "Yes, all right . . . Let us go. Together" (329). So together they leave behind their manifestations and hallucinations, leave behind their sacralization of trauma, and move on to that next place.

Working through trauma is not a linear process; it often takes a great deal of time. Some ghosts were in the graveyard-Bardo for decades before moving on. As the ghosts grappled with desacralization, they were able to move from a liminal existence, one that remained in the gaps of life rife with the uncontrollable repetition of past trauma and pain, and onto the next stage of existence—whatever that may be. Often, life after trauma is unimaginable, and a person can never truly know it until their arrival to that place. All we know for certain is that remaining in limbo—in a Bardo created by the sacralization of our trauma—only leads to living nightmares. We must push through the liminal spaces and the ghostly versions of ourselves that trauma creates.

In his poem "A Servant to Servants," Robert Frost puts it this way:

He says the best way out is always through.  
And I agree to that, or in so far  
As that I can see no way out but through—  
Leastways for me. (Frost)

The sacralization of trauma will not lessen its effects or make it easier to deal with. A culture that obsesses over trauma narratives and holds them on a sacred pedestal cannot produce healing. Once trauma has been experienced, there is no getting around it, there is no going back—there is only working through. The only way out is through—through the acting out, through the liminal spaces and Bardos, through the desacralization and chaos that accompanies it, all accomplished with the help of an honest community, empathic unsettlement, and an resolute acceptance of the deaths of potentially many versions of ourselves. George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* offers a breath of fresh air through its portrayal of working through trauma via desacralization—a concept and method that media and literary trends would be wise to emulate.



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