

LINCOLN'S GHOSTS: THE POSTHUMOUS CAREER OF AN AMERICAN ICON

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ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY NOELLE KUTZ: Lincoln's Ghosts: The Posthumous Career of an
American Icon
(Under the direction of Professor John F. Kasson)

American cultural productions repeatedly have depicted Abraham Lincoln as “living on” as a spirit after his assassination in 1865. The unprecedented death toll of the Civil War coupled with the uncertain future of African American citizenship in the years after the war led Americans, both black and white, to imagine and reimagine how a living Lincoln would have responded to contemporary issues in the United States. As they grappled with Lincoln's legacy for American race relations, artists, writers, and other creators of American culture did not simply remember Lincoln but envisioned him as an ongoing spiritual presence in everyday life. Immediately after the Civil War, when the American Spiritualist movement encouraged the bereaved to believe that departed loved ones watched over and comforted the living, popular prints and spirit photography depicted Lincoln's ghost remaining to guide the American people. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, actors who played Lincoln on the American stage presented themselves as embodied forms of his spirit, in the process eschewing Lincoln's political achievement of Emancipation in favor of sentimental portrayals of his boyhood and family life. Fine artists and illustrators, such as Norman Rockwell and Palmer Hayden, turned to Lincoln's spirit as they attempted to use their work to promote African American equality. Walt Disney, creator of the Lincoln Audioanimatron theme park

attraction, used technological means to bring to life a robotic Lincoln that could never die. And ordinary Americans from all walks of life have been drawn to the places that Lincoln lived and the objects that he owned in the belief that they serve as a conduit to his spirit. These case studies demonstrate how memory functions not only as a set of ideas about the past but also as a living force in the present.

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Finally, Lincoln put it best when he said, “All that I am or all that I hope to be I owe to my angel mother.” I gratefully dedicate this work to my mother, Suzanne.

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Introduction: Ghost Stories

It was Winston Churchill's habit of an evening to take a long, hot bath, and a sojourn at the White House was no cause for exception. After a hard day's work hashing out details of the war with Roosevelt, a bath, a good cigar, and a fine brandy were just what the doctor ordered. He soaked, sipped, and puffed for a good long while. Finally, satisfied with the results of his ritual ablutions, he emerged, dripping, and headed into the Lincoln Bedroom, where his hosts had graciously seen fit to accommodate him. There, leaning against the mantel, was the unmistakable figure of Abraham Lincoln. Churchill stood stunned, cigar in one hand, half-empty glass in the other, naked as the day he was born. Thankfully, Churchill was rarely tongue-tied for long. "Good evening, Mr. President," he said. "It seems you have me at a disadvantage." Lincoln's ghost looked at him, smiled, and slowly faded away.¹

This, of course, is just a story. The tall tale of Churchill's encounter with the ghost of Lincoln has been making the rounds in books of White House folklore for decades, acquiring new details with every retelling. As ghost stories go, it's a pretty good one: it brings together two of the most famous—and quotable—figures in the history of the free world, and one of them isn't wearing any clothes. Below this surface

¹The tale of Churchill meeting Lincoln's ghost has been repeated and adapted in a number of books of ghost lore, and later, websites dedicated to ghost hunting. See Charles A. Stansfield, Jr., *Haunted Presidents: Ghosts in the Lives of the Chief Executives* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2010), 63; Garret Moffett, *Lincoln's Ghost: Legends and Lore* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009), 36; Patrick J. Kiger, "The Story of Lincoln's Ghost," in *Killing Lincoln*, National Geographic Channel Online, <channel.nationalgeographic.com>, last accessed 26 July 2013.

amusement, however, there lies a deeper significance to the story. Wouldn't it be nice to believe that in the midst of World War II, as Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met to coordinate the Allied assault against the Axis powers, the spirit of Abraham Lincoln was in the White House, guiding their endeavors?

There are dozens of similar stories about Lincoln's ghost haunting the executive mansion. One book of presidential ghost stories insists that "so many sightings of Lincoln's ghost have been reported that it is, without question, the most frequently seen apparition in White House history."² Maids, butlers, guests, and staffers have said that they've seen Lincoln's spirit doing everything from pacing back and forth along a hallway to pulling on his boots. Long before the alleged Churchill incident, First Lady Grace Coolidge claimed to have seen Lincoln standing in the Yellow Oval Room, staring out at the Potomac River.³ While on a state visit in 1942, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands swore that she opened her bedroom door and came face-to-face with Lincoln, which caused her to faint on the spot.⁴ As late as the 1980s, Maureen Reagan reported that she and her husband had seen Lincoln's ghost while staying in the Lincoln Bedroom. When she told her father about the apparition, he asked her to send Lincoln

²Joel Martin and William J. Birnes, *The Haunting of the Presidents: A Paranormal History of the U.S. Presidency* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 2003), 11.

³See Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 324; Dolores Riccio, *Haunted Houses U.S.A.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 184.

⁴See Moffett, *Lincoln's Ghost*, 36; Tom Ogden, *Haunted Highways: Spooky Stories, Strange Happenings and Supernatural Sightings* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2008), 115.

down the hall to his office the next time she saw him: “I’ve got a few questions to ask him,” he said.⁵

Whether or not ghosts exist, and whether Abraham Lincoln is one of them, remains a question better left to theologians. But it is undeniable that since his death in 1865, the notion that Lincoln’s ghost is still present in the United States has resurfaced again and again in American popular culture. Artists and cartoonists frequently have imagined what Lincoln would think about contemporary events using depictions of his ghost. In 1917, cartoonist Edwin Marcus dramatized Woodrow Wilson’s struggle with American neutrality in World War I with a drawing of the president encountering Lincoln’s ghost (fig. 0.1). After World War II, *Chicago Tribune* cartoonist Daniel E. Holland wondered whether the freedom characterized by the Emancipation Proclamation was “out of date” by showing the president’s shade holding the document in question while the oppressed of the world writhed in agony (fig. 0.2.) And after John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, *Chicago Sun-Times* cartoonist Bill Mauldin famously depicted the Lincoln Memorial statue resting its head in its hands, grieving for another fallen president (fig. 0.3).

These stories and editorial cartoons are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the posthumous career of Abraham Lincoln. American popular culture is full of walking, talking representations of Honest Abe. From used car salesmen shilling Presidents’ Day deals in cheap beards and top hats on TV to the stately countenance of Daniel Day-Lewis delivering an Oscar-worthy imitation of the sixteenth president, actors constantly bring a flesh-and-blood representation of Lincoln back to life. Alongside the Union and

⁵See Maureen Reagan, *First Father, First Daughter: A Memoir* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 324-325; Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 324.

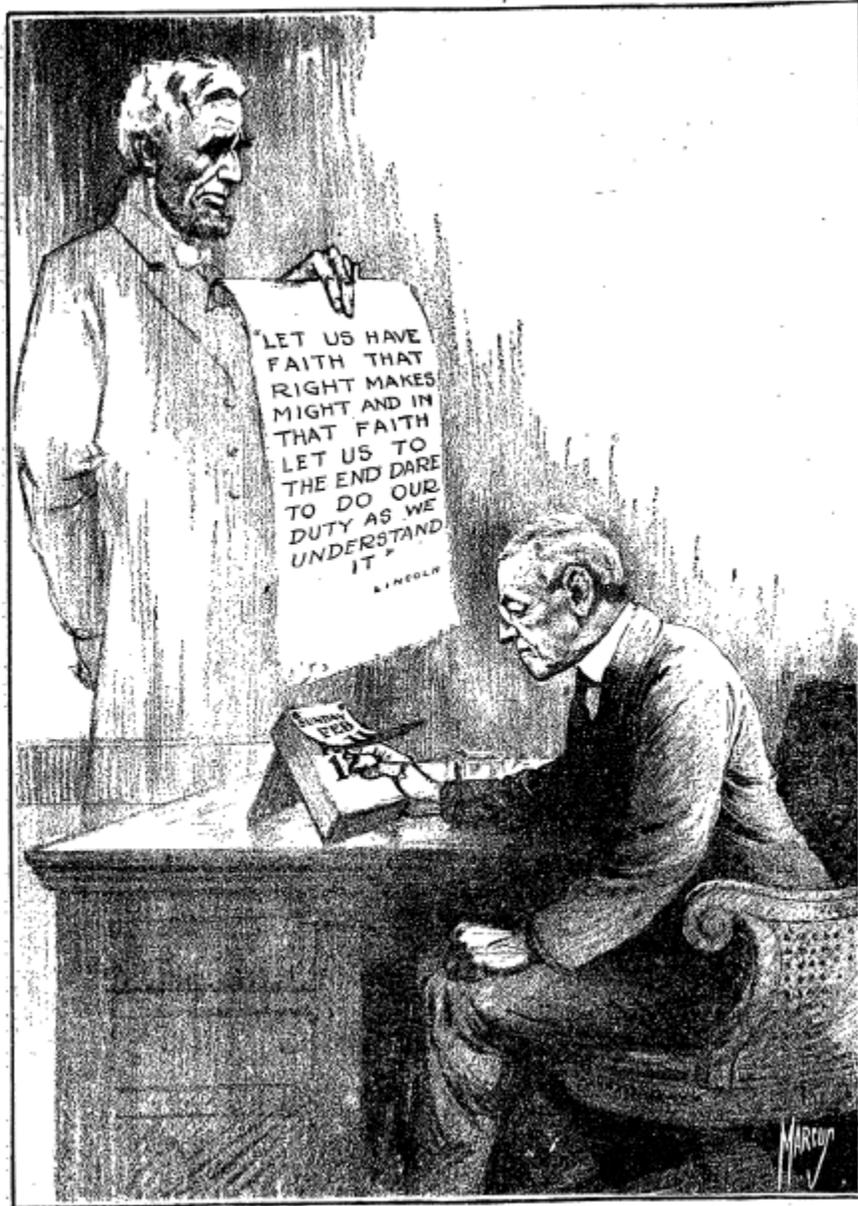


Figure 0.1. Edwin Marcus, "The Spirit of the Day." *The New York Times*, 11 February 1917, SM1.



Figure 0.2. Daniel E. Holland, "Out of Date?" *Chicago Tribune*, 1946, reprinted 12 February 1959, 17.



Figure 0.3. Bill Mauldin, "Lincoln Memorial Sobbing." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 November 1963.

Confederate reenactors, Civil War historic sites teem with Lincoln impersonators, who deliver the Gettysburg Address and answer questions about Lincoln's life in the first person.

Furthermore, as new technologies of representation have emerged in popular culture, they have been put to use creating ever-more-lifelike facsimiles of Lincoln. In addition to the films that animated Lincoln for audiences, entertainment pioneers have sought mechanical means of making Lincoln seem to live again. Walt Disney's team of engineers used the most advanced technology available to build his famous Abe Lincoln Audioanimatron, which is still a feature attraction at Disneyland today. Even more recently, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum has turned to holograms to make Lincoln's ghost seem to haunt its hallowed halls.

Ghost stories can be chilling, titillating, and even amusing, as the Churchill tale illustrates. But—like all the stories we tell ourselves—they also contain clues about the things we fear and the qualities we value. As “ghosts” live on in stories in folklore and popular culture, their very tendency to linger in society draws attention to the things we want to remember and the things we have tried, and failed, to forget.

In this dissertation, I explore how popular representations of Abraham Lincoln living on after his death act as a form of “cultural haunting,” a window into the unseen presences and unexpressed sentiments that give invisible texture and nuance to everyday life. Beyond the ordinary stuff of history—the speeches, the museum objects, the newspaper articles, and the demonstrations—our world is also filled with a whole range of uncanny experiences that we cannot easily express in words or actions. For example, the unshakable sense of a person's presence in her belongings after her death; the feeling

that an inanimate object like a doll has a spirit and a personality; the things that consciously go unsaid in a conversation; the brother who is conspicuously absent from the family portrait: all of these are invisible yet undeniable aspects of lived experience. The chapters that follow consider five different examples of this kind of haunting through the lens of Abraham Lincoln: the belief in ghostly presences as seen through spirit photographs and popular prints depicting his ghost visiting his grave, the desire to reincarnate Lincoln through actors and impersonators, the presence—and absence—of Lincoln in paintings where he has been omitted or painted over, the attempt to bring Lincoln back from the dead through building a life-sized robot, and the sense of Lincoln’s lingering presence in places he lived and the things he owned.

Why Lincoln? No other figure from American history has had such a lengthy resume of afterlife activities. Even the other assassinated presidents have been content to stay in their graves. But Lincoln’s role in the defining conflict of the United States and in ending slavery transformed him into a symbol of liberty and equality that could not be put to rest while the troubling question of black citizenship loomed over American society. The “unfinished business” of fulfilling the promise of racial equality has kept Lincoln’s ghost prowling through American culture since his death. Assassinated after the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery but before Reconstruction could settle the question of what race relations would look like after the war, no one could be sure how Lincoln’s postwar policy would have solved the seemingly insurmountable problem of sectional reconciliation and African American equality. As Americans confronted the issue of race after the Civil War, both those who were in favor of equality and those who opposed it called on the ghost of Lincoln to bolster their claims.

This study differs from many which have come before it in that it focuses more on the posthumous representations of Lincoln than on the man himself, which is fortunate because biographies of Lincoln and histories of the Civil War have so proliferated in the years since the conflict that it is hard to imagine that there is anything new to say on that front. Not long after Lincoln's death, those who knew him began publishing their impressions of his life. John Hay and John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's secretaries, and William Herndon, his law partner in Illinois, were among the first to share their stories of the martyr president.⁶ Since then, thousands of scholarly treatises on everything from Lincoln's political strategy to his sexuality have emerged, painting a diverse and often contradictory portrait of the man.⁷ Likewise, historians have raked over the Civil War in every possible direction, gauging its influence on everything from military strategy to the expansion of the federal government.⁸

Though bloody battles and ruthless politics will always have their place in histories of the Civil War, this study follows in the trail blazed by those historians who, starting in the 1970s, have delved into the cultural impact of the war. Influenced by the

⁶See John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, vol. 1-10. New York: The Century Co., 1890; William Herndon, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, vol. 1-3. Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1889.

⁷See, for example, James M. McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*, New York: Penguin Press, 2008; Paul D. Escott, "*What Shall We Do With The Negro?*": *Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009; Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2008; Jason Emerson, *Lincoln the Inventor*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009.

⁸See, among many others, David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War, 1848-1861*. New York: Harper, 1976; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Allen C. Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

work of symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, cultural historians have focused their attentions on the interplay between ideas, representations, and practices in American society. Drawing on cultural productions such as art, literature, theatre, and film, and social rituals such as parades, celebrations, and memorials, these histories of the Civil War have explored the influence of popular culture on public perceptions of the war and its aftermath. For example, in *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865*, Alice Fahs examined how heroic representations of black soldiers in popular magazines helped to convince Northerners to support emancipation.⁹ Similarly, Nina Silber, in *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*, showed how romantic narratives of love between Northern men and Southern women after the war aided in the process of sectional reconciliation—and therefore abetted the North’s subsequent abandonment of the cause of African American citizenship at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

In recent years, cultural historians also have begun to analyze Civil War memory, as expressed in memoirs, monuments, and memorial practices. Drawing on the collective memory theory of Pierre Nora, Maurice Halbwachs, and others, scholars such as Gaines Foster, William Blair, and Caroline Janney have examined the ways in which organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy altered the memory of the Civil War to promote the Lost Cause myth that

⁹Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

¹⁰Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

permeated the South long into the twentieth century.¹¹ On the opposite side of the conflict, David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* traces the struggle for currency between two different interpretations of the war in political rhetoric and memorial rituals: one that celebrated the end of slavery as the chief achievement of the Union's victory, and another—ultimately triumphant—which honored the soldiers of both sides for their valor without challenging the white supremacy that fueled the Confederate cause.¹²

Historians also have turned the interpretive lens of memory on Lincoln, exploring how his popularity has changed over time and how different eras celebrated different aspects of his personality. Merrill Peterson and Barry Schwartz have emerged as the foremost scholars of Lincoln memory in the recent era. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory*, first published in 1994, remains the standard text on the subject, detailing the formation of Lincoln "archetypes" in various eras of American memory. Peterson examined the "Lincoln image" through biographies, literature, and political speeches: for him, the Lincoln image was a mental or rhetorical phenomenon rather than a literal representation. In *Lincoln in American Memory*, Peterson identified five major themes in the vast outpouring of Lincoln material produced in the years since his death: Lincoln as

¹¹See Pierre Nora, trans. Marc Roudebush, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7-24; Maurice Halbwachs, , trans. Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; William Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

¹² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.

a national hero, the savior of the Union; Lincoln as Emancipator, the far-sighted humanitarian who freed the slaves; Lincoln as the ideal or representative American, a folk figure who explained our common origins; and Lincoln the “self-made man,” who pulled himself up from poverty and illiteracy to become president of the United States.¹³ Barry Schwartz, in *Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* and *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, also has devoted several volumes to the collective memory of Lincoln, assessing the changes in how Americans have perceived Lincoln’s life and legacy relative to their cultural needs and prerogatives, and ultimately finding that his influence and integrity have diminished markedly since the advent of Lincoln representations in “lowbrow media” such as television cartoons.¹⁴

In writing about the ghost of Lincoln as a form of cultural haunting, I want to enrich the concept of collective memory to describe more than just a set of ideas about the past as expressed in political rhetoric or memorial ceremonies. Rather, Lincoln’s ghost as it appears in popular culture sheds light on the depth and texture of memory as a spiritual, and at times even tangible, presence of the past.

Several scholars have advanced theories of what constitutes cultural haunting and how it can be analyzed to productive ends. Prominent among these scholars is Avery F. Gordon, whose 1997 book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* pioneered the idea of representing silences and omissions from texts and historical documents as “ghosts.” For Gordon, ghosts are *symptoms*: testaments to the fact that

¹³Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*.

¹⁴Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

something in culture is missing or unresolved. As she writes, “The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way.”¹⁵ In other words, ghosts point out the dark corners of society—and never more frantically than when there seem not to be any dark corners at all.

While Gordon’s analysis concentrates mainly on literary work, Judith Richardson takes a more historical approach to ghosts in *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley*. Richardson follows the trail of many ghosts in one of the nation’s most notoriously haunted regions, noting how their stories and forms change over time. She contends that ghosts “are produced by the cultural and social life of the communities in which they appear.”¹⁶ Drawing from Gordon’s suggestion that ghosts materialize the repressed or forgotten parts of society, Richardson demonstrates how local ghosts changed forms as the Dutch dispossessed Native Americans, the English dispossessed the Dutch, and so on. The instability of the region’s identity created an uncertainty about the past and its meanings that manifested in ghostlore, which, according to Richardson, “reflects disorientation, uncertainty, discontinuity, and unrootedness.”¹⁷

¹⁵Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

¹⁶Judith Richardson, *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 26.

In this dissertation, I argue that representations of Lincoln's ghost served as a focal point for an ongoing cultural clash over whether the Civil War's ultimate significance was in the emancipation of the slaves or in the restoration of the Union. Each of the chapters that follow examines a different "mode of haunting" in popular culture, demonstrating the broad range of ways that Americans perceived Lincoln's continuing presence in the United States. In chapter one, "The Ghost and Mrs. Lincoln: Images of Lincoln's Ghost in the Immediate Post Civil War Period," I examine spirit photographs and popular prints from the Reconstruction era that attempted to explain what happened to Lincoln after his death. I argue that these images, which depict Lincoln visiting his family, going to his grave site in his home state of Illinois, and ascending to heaven, gave rise to the practice of depicting Lincoln after his death under the unique circumstances of the war's end. As grisly battlefield deaths interrupted the traditional nineteenth century practices of dying and mourning, popular prints which imagined Lincoln's spirit completing his transition to heaven while still watching over his loved ones helped Americans to cope with the unprecedented carnage of the Civil War.

Chapter two, "Becoming Mr. Lincoln: Creating an Abraham Lincoln for the American Stage," focuses on theatrical performances about Lincoln and the men who brought him to life, from 1890 until the present. In this chapter, I argue that Lincoln actors have sought to portray themselves as Lincoln both on and off the stage, acting as a living embodiment of the sixteenth president for contemporary audiences. These "living Lincolns" haunted the American landscape by creating the illusion that the deceased president had come back to life in the present. But bringing Lincoln back to life also allowed for the possibility of changing his story. These reincarnated Lincolns, however,

reinterpreted the narrative of his life during the era of Reconciliation in order to all but eliminate the story of his role in ending slavery in favor of heartwarming tales about his boyhood and family.

In chapter three, “Not Pictured: Haunted Paintings and Lincoln’s Ghost,” I look closely at two paintings that *do not* depict Abraham Lincoln: Norman Rockwell’s *Murder in Mississippi* and Palmer Hayden’s *The Janitor Who Paints*. As both Rockwell and Hayden tried to use their art to promote African American equality, they turned to Lincoln’s spirit for guidance. Although Lincoln does not appear in the final version of either of these paintings, I argue that Lincoln’s ghost—and his complex relationship with race in American—haunts each of them in different ways. Like the brother missing from the family portrait, I demonstrate that images also can be haunted by what they do not show.

Chapter four, “The Ghost in the Machine: Walt Disney’s Abraham Lincoln Robot at the New York World’s Fair,” follows the creation of Disney’s first Audioanimatronic, a life-sized talking robot in the form of Abraham Lincoln. Like the actors who portrayed Lincoln, the Lincoln Audioanimatronic produces the eerie sensation that the president has come back to life, but in this case, through mechanical means. During the turbulent years of the Civil Rights movement, Disney used his genius for three-dimensional storytelling to build a version of Lincoln that purported to be an exact replica of the deceased president. In fact, his robot was modified to resemble the ideal Lincoln of Disney’s imagination, which catered to a conservative vision of race relations in the United States.

In chapter five, “The Saint of Springfield, Illinois: Relics, Pilgrimage, and Lincoln Memory,” I travel to Lincoln’s final resting place to explore the ways in which

objects and places can be haunted by their perceived connection with a spirit. This chapter explores how devotees of Lincoln have approached the sites where he lived and the things he left behind in a very similar fashion to how medieval pilgrims approached the relics and shrines of saints, because they—like pilgrims—imagine that the spirit of Lincoln is present in these material goods and spaces.

Finally, the epilogue brief considers how Lincoln's ghost haunts the United States today—and how he will remain as long as inequality persists in American society.

Chapter 1

The Ghost and Mrs. Lincoln: Images of Lincoln's Spirit in the Immediate Post Civil War Period

William Mumler hardly blinked when a mysterious woman in black entered his photography studio in Boston. The year was 1870, and by then he was no stranger to bizarre goings-on, let alone the eccentricities of his well-to-do clientele. “Mrs. Lindall,” as she introduced herself, swept to the portrait chair with all of the authority of a queen, hiding her features behind a crepe veil while Mumler readied his famous photographic process. His plates in place, his lighting perfect, Mumler finally inquired whether Madam would remove her shawl so that he might capture her face. With a storied flourish, Mrs. Lindall shed her disguise to reveal Mary Todd Lincoln, widow of the deceased president—and ardent believer in Spiritualism.¹

Mumler and Mrs. Lincoln made for a strange pair. One a hapless mystic turned charlatan, the other a bereaved widow turned eccentric, neither had survived the turbulent years after the Civil War with reputation intact. Mumler credited himself as the inventor of spirit photography, a self-professed innocent who had stumbled across the first visual evidence of the Great Beyond one day when he discovered the translucent image of a young girl in an 1861 self-portrait. When a prominent Spiritualist circulated the

¹Mumler's account of his sitting with Mary Todd Lincoln does not give a precise date, though the photograph has been dated from between 1870 to 1875. See William Mumler, *The Personal Experiences of William H. Mumler* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1875), 92-93, in Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

photograph in newspapers claiming it as the first photographic image of a spirit, Mumler achieved instant celebrity and moved to New York to set up shop on Broadway.

Charging ten dollars apiece for spirit photographs (with no guarantee that the spirits would choose to show themselves on film), Mumler made a good living until he found himself on trial for fraud in 1869. The City of New York's deployment of an all-star prosecution featuring Elbridge T. Gerry as attorney and P.T. Barnum as a witness evokes the currency of the debate over the existence of spirits during this time period in America as well as Mumler's central role in it.² The court dismissed his charges when the prosecution could not expose his process as counterfeit, but even though Mumler walked away without a blemish on his record, the stain on his character proved permanent. He was on a downward slide toward obscurity and eventual poverty when Mrs. Lincoln darkened his doorstep.³ The former first lady was not faring much better herself. Unpopular while her husband lived, after his death Mary Todd became something of a national embarrassment as she demanded outrageous sums from the government for her personal pension, exposed herself to ridicule for attempting to auction off her secondhand clothing, and frequented disreputable spirit mediums from Chicago to New York.⁴

²Andrew Devine, *Argument of Mr. Elbridge T. Gerry, of Counsel for the People, Before Justice Dowling, on the Preliminary Examination of Wm. H. Mumler, Charged with Obtaining Money by Pretended "Spirit Photographs."* May 3rd 1869. New York: Baker, Voorhis, & Co., 1869; "Spiritual Photographs." *New York Times*; May 4, 1869; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1.

³See Crista Cloutier, "Mumler's Ghosts," in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 20-22; "Spiritual Photography," *Harper's Weekly* 8 May 1868; Devine, *Argument of Mr. Elbridge T. Gerry*.

⁴See Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 206; Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50-52.

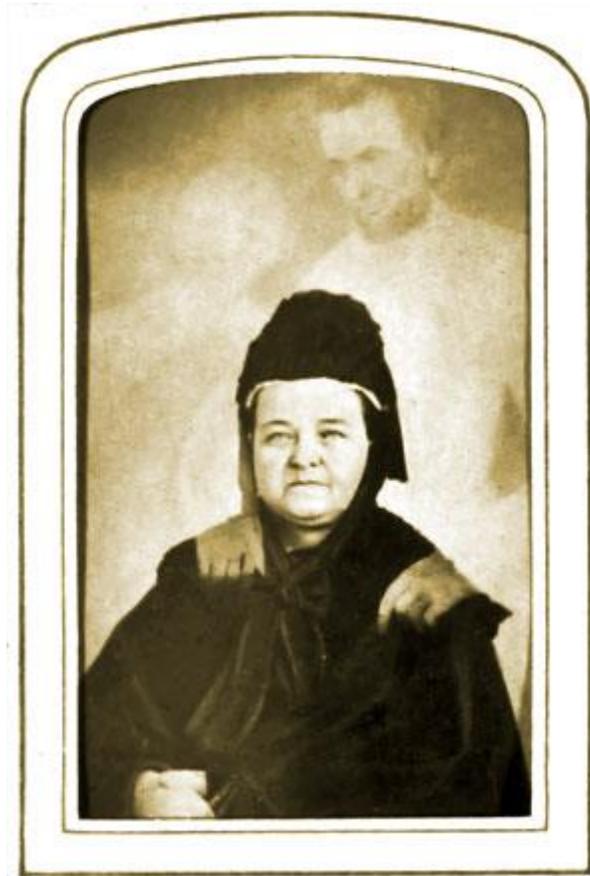


Figure 1.1. William Mumler, *Mary Todd Lincoln with the spirit of Abraham Lincoln*.
c.1870-1875. Image courtesy the College of Psychic Studies,
<<http://www.collegeofpsychicstudies.co.uk>>.

Both Mumler and Mrs. Lincoln must have felt relieved when the spirit of Abraham Lincoln “appeared” with his hands upon her shoulders on the developed photographic plate, along with a ghostly image of her recently deceased son Thomas “Tad” Lincoln (fig. 1.1). Mumler promptly printed the image on a carte-de-visite and circulated it throughout the country. Despite Mumler’s run-in with the law, the American public still had an immense appetite for such a sentimental image of their beloved president.

In fact, Mumler’s was far from the only ghostly image of Lincoln produced in the aftermath of the Civil War. Prints, photographs and literary representations of Lincoln as a spirit abounded in the months and years after his assassination, chronicling his passage into the afterlife from the moment the Angel of Death appeared above his bed. Lincoln’s ghost remained present on the American scene through the images and invocations of artists and writers for years after the Civil War.

As the first president to be captured in broadly disseminated prints, and as the first politician to recognize the power of the photographic image, Lincoln has acquired a small body of literature devoted to his iconography.⁵ In *The Lincoln Image*, Hal Holzer, Gabor S. Borritt and Mark E. Neely, Jr., have catalogued the myriad Lincoln visual archetypes, from the trend to depict Lincoln’s western boyhood as a “railsplitter” to his eventual apotheosis after his assassination.⁶ In *Lincoln in American Memory*, Merrill Peterson has

⁵See Alan Trachtenberg, *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 74.

⁶Harold Holzer, G. S. Borritt, and Mark E. Neely, *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (Fort Wayne: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1984); Holzer, et. al., *Changing the Lincoln Image* (Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1985); Gabor Borritt, ed., *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an*

chronicled the stages of Lincoln representation in public memory down to the present through his many roles as Savior of the Union, Great Emancipator, Man of the People, the First American, and the Self-made Man.⁷ But analyzing Lincoln's status as a myth and his elevation to martyred sainthood does not quite encapsulate the significance of Lincoln's spirit in the United States in the years after the Civil War.

Biographies and biopics, memorials and movies, artists and admirers have elevated Lincoln's words, actions, and craggy visage to a reflection of the supreme character and moral compass of America. A political address, be it a garden-variety stump speech or a presidential inaugural, hardly merits the name without a quotation from Lincoln. The "spirit of Lincoln" has become, in essence, the spirit of America, the ultimate referent for the national conscience. Curiously, nothing would have seemed more unlikely during Lincoln's hard-fought road to the White House or his rocky presidency, when the needle of his public opinion meter twitched dismally between "bungler" and "scoundrel." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., recalled a debate with his friends in the trenches during the Civil War over whether the War had produced a great man; when someone suggested Lincoln, derisive laughter ensued.⁸ Willard Saulsbury, the Democratic senator from Delaware, felt Lincoln merited artwork of a very different sort than the glowing portraits his death soon would engender. "If I wanted to paint a

American Icon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Holzer, *Lincoln Seen and Heard* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

⁷Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 27.

⁸See Lewis Einstein, Introduction to *The Holmes-Einstein Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Lewis Einstein, 1903-1935*, ed. James Bishop Peabody (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), xvii, quoted in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), 39.

despot, a man perfectly regardless of every constitutional right of the people,” he fumed, “I would paint the hideous form of Abraham Lincoln.”⁹

Needless to say, Lincoln’s assassination forever changed his perception in the American mind, but it need not have catapulted him into immortality or sainthood. Immediately after Lincoln’s death, Americans engaged in a nearly frantic refashioning of his image, transforming him from a mere politician into a patron saint. The trauma caused by Lincoln’s death produced scores of eulogies, lithographs, songs, poems, and newspaper tributes, which sought to solve happily the mystery of what happened to Lincoln’s soul once it departed from his gawky body. Why were Americans so concerned about the fate of Lincoln’s ghost?

Perhaps it was because his was the chief ghost in a nation of ghosts. 620,000 people died in the Civil War, an unprecedented loss of life that upended the traditional nineteenth-century process of mourning: separating families, displacing corpses, and shattering religious ideals of death and dying.¹⁰ Lincoln’s sudden and devastating death seemed the average soldier’s death writ large, and Americans projected their desires for the souls of their sons, husbands, and fathers into the national process of mourning Lincoln. At war’s end, bereaved families longed for the return of their loved ones to home, sought comfort in a sentimentalized view of death that erased pain, and hoped that national reconciliation would continue despite Lincoln’s assassination, ensuring that such

⁹David Donald, “Getting Right With Lincoln,” in *Lincoln Reconsidered, Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 4.

¹⁰See Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), xi-xii.

tremendous loss of life had not been in vain. Images of Lincoln's spirit emerged as a ghostly reflection of these needs.

Of course, not all Americans wished for the continuation of Lincoln's administration, ghostly or otherwise. White Southerners in particular felt more relief than despair at the assassination of their most dogged adversary; a Northern paper reported (perhaps with some exaggeration) that in Texas rejoicing Confederates built a mock grave for Lincoln in the street, on its headstone "pasted the picture of a large negro head, cut from an Ethiopian show-bill, the board being marked, 'To the memory of the d—d Ape Lincoln.'"¹¹ But more often than not, the outpouring of grief occasioned by his death subsumed all dissent on the matter, silencing former Confederates and Northern Democrats alike. When Henrietta Price, of Essex County, New Jersey, remarked to her soldier brother Elias that citizens who had criticized Lincoln now festooned their homes with black mourning crepe as ardently as their neighbors, he scathingly replied that they hardly dared do otherwise.¹²

Still, though Lincoln did not survive to accomplish the mission he laid out in his Second Inaugural Address, "to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations," as artists and writers imagined him in numerous posthumous incarnations in print culture, he went on

¹¹"Rejoicing over the Assassination." N.D. Elias Winans Price Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, Southern Historical Collection.

¹²Henrietta Price, letter to E.W. Price, April 19, 1865. Elias Winans Price Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, Southern Historical Collection.

to do exactly that.¹³ Rendered as a father figure in a bereaved national family, his spirit did not abandon but abided with the American people, consoling them with his continued presence in the tumultuous years after the Civil War.

The Ghosts of Politicians Past

Ghosts were a hot topic in mid-nineteenth century America. Though it seems difficult to believe that Americans would have so readily endorsed as genuine the image of Lincoln's spirit in Mary Todd's portrait, the phenomenon of spirit photography was but the latest facet of a craze for communication with the dead that had been going on for over twenty years by the time Mumler arrived on the scene. The new religious movement known as Spiritualism, combined with novels and tracts examining the individual experience of life after death, ushered in a new way of thinking about the role of the dead in everyday life that revolutionized the American notion of heaven and deeply influenced postwar depictions of Lincoln's ghost.

The Spiritualist movement was first widely recognized in 1848, after sisters Kate and Maggie Fox (then just nine and twelve years old) claimed that the spirit of a murdered peddler had been communicating with them through "rappings" in their Hydesville, New York home.¹⁴ News of the extraordinary powers of these young "spirit mediums" spread quickly, and so did interest in the extraordinary powers and voices of

¹³"The Inaugural Address." *New York Times*, March 6, 1865. ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1.

¹⁴One of the sisters would ask a question aloud, followed by reciting the alphabet, and the "spirit" would respond by making a rapping sound after the correct letter in order to spell out a message. See Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism, A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: University Books, 1970), 30-36.

the spirits themselves. Their parents sent the Fox sisters to live in Rochester with Amy and Isaac Post, a family deeply committed to social reform whose paths crossed with the likes of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison in the 1850s. Soon, along with their older sister Leah, they made their debut in front of a packed house at Corinthian Hall with a demonstration of their unique rapping conversations with spirits, under whose direction they shocked antebellum audiences by answering difficult questions and discoursing far beyond the power of children on topics chosen by the audience. With the attention of such notable figures in an era of broad social reform, it was hardly a coincidence that spirit-rappings and séances spread across the country. Nor was it any surprise that when the spirits, great and ordinary alike, spoke from the séance rooms of reformers, they spoke of reform.¹⁵

From its humble beginnings in Hydesville, Spiritualism acquired a mass following in the 1850s, attracting at least two million devotees in the northeast alone.¹⁶ By the 1860s Spiritualism had a place at even the highest table in the country. Abraham Lincoln, though he did not share in his wife's enthusiasm for spirit mediums, attended at least one of the séances she held in the White House in hopes of contacting their son Willie, who died in 1862 at the age of twelve, probably of typhoid fever.¹⁷

Hopes for reunion with family members in the afterlife frequently brought the bereaved into Spiritualism's fold. Many scholars have attributed the movement's

¹⁵Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

¹⁶R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 14.

¹⁷Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 206.

extraordinary appeal among nineteenth-century Americans to a kind of retaliation against hellfire Calvinist doctrine that consigned the souls of their loved ones, especially innocent children, to eternal damnation.¹⁸ In this era, many American Christians increasingly began to reject the central role of the wrathful Old Testament God in favor of the more forgiving tones of Jesus and the New Testament, and Spiritualism seemed to offer concrete proof of a peaceful afterlife for all believers.¹⁹ Moreover, the very practice of spirit communication through séances reassured adherents that deceased family members remained emotionally invested in them after their deaths, giving advice and offering comfort by way of spirit mediums to grieving families. After a lapse in public interest during the sectional crisis of the 1850s, Spiritualism's mass appeal resurged in the late 1860s once the Civil War's horrific death toll ensured that virtually everyone had someone to contact on the Other Side.

Often, Americans who frequented spirit mediums went to hear that their dearly departed had achieved happiness in death. During séances, parents received messages from the spirits of children, who assured them of their heavenly bliss and continued development in the next world, where they often learned to read and write (thus explaining infants' ability to communicate articulately). The bereaved individuals who sought to contact ghosts in the séance room desired reassurance that their deceased loved

¹⁸See Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 2-6; Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 3-5.

¹⁹For the new emphasis on the gentleness and humanity of Jesus in the mid-nineteenth century, see Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary S. Harman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 137-157.

ones had transcended earthly ills and were neither suffering in hell nor even temporarily lost to living family members.²⁰

The cultural historian Ann Douglas has described Spiritualism as “a manifestation of a complex retransfer of force from the living to the dead,” one symptom of an overall “domestication of death” taking place in the mid-nineteenth century, in which depictions of heaven began to resemble middle-class parlors and cemeteries began to resemble scenic gardens.²¹ Mourning literature—obituary poems, memoirs, and books about heaven—inflated the importance of the dead and sentimentalized the afterlife as a sphere of emotional and aesthetic gratification.²² These writings, particularly those which described heaven at length, also helped to change the way that Americans conceptualized the afterlife, giving it a new emotional, rather than moral, force.

For example, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s bestselling 1869 novel *The Gates Ajar* featured as its heroine a young Massachusetts woman named Mary Cabot, who lost her beloved brother Roy in the Civil War. Tormented by the notion that his unexpected death on the battlefield might have prevented him from entering heaven, no less than by the realization that even if he had been saved he would, according to Scripture, lose all “special selfish affections” and cease to love her as a sister, Mary withdraws from life.²³

²⁰See Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 1-2, 32-41.

²¹Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 207.

²²*Ibid.*, 201.

²³Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869), 71. Early American Fiction Full-Text Database, University of Virginia, 2004 <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/eaf/>> University of North Carolina Libraries.

Though chided by the local minister for failing to accept the will of God, Mary cannot leave her house, much less attend church, until her widowed aunt Winifred arrives.

Winifred confides her knowledge of a very different sort of heaven to Mary, a heaven where the affections of the home and family continue to reign. She comforts Mary that: “Roy loved you. Our Father, for some tender, hidden reason, took him out of your sight for a while. Though changed much, he can have forgotten nothing. Being only out of sight, you remember, not lost, nor asleep, nor annihilated, he goes on loving. To love must mean to think of, to care for, to hope for, to pray for, not less out of a body than in it.”²⁴ Mary quickly grasps the implications of Winifred’s assertion: that in spirit form, Roy remains near to her—as her brother, interested in Mary’s everyday life and personal development, and as her guardian angel, assisting in her salvation. Winifred adds, “I cannot doubt that our absent dead are very present with us. . . . What more natural than that we shall spend our best energies [in heaven] as we spent them here, --- in comforting, teaching, helping, saving people whose very souls we love better than our own?”²⁵

When Mary wonders if Roy has met President Lincoln in heaven, Winifred replies that she does not doubt it—in fact, she believes that all of the soldiers (though presumably only those who fought for the Union) must be crowding up to meet him: “What a sight to see!”²⁶

Novels like *The Gates Ajar* helped to bring the family-interest formula of spirit communication into the process of mourning over the Civil War. No longer lost souls in

²⁴Ibid., 87.

²⁵Ibid., 88.

²⁶Ibid., 83.

the unimaginable wasteland of a distant battlefield, the imagined spirits of brothers, husbands, and fathers traveled home after their deaths, even if their bodies did not. As Drew Gilpin Faust has written in her recent treatment of death and the Civil War, soldiers as well as their families worried deeply about the spiritual consequences of the bodily remains left on battlefields. Escalating casualty rates as the war progressed necessitated the abandonment of orderly burial practices in favor of hasty interment, so that increasing numbers of soldiers went nameless and neglected to the grave. “The death of relatives far away from families and kin,” Faust writes, “was particularly disruptive to fundamental nineteenth-century understandings of the Good Death, assumptions closely tied to the Victorian emphasis on the importance of home and domesticity.”²⁷ Imagining the spirits of soldiers who died far from home returning to perform the emotional work of consoling, protecting and guiding their loved ones in the wake of the war’s destruction eased the anxiety of families who were unable to locate their dead. Spirit communication aided in closing the gaping hole left by family members who were not only deceased but absent, whose abrupt off-stage demise deprived their relations of the material reality of death as well as the mourning process, which traditionally took place in the home. If relatives far from the battlefield could not hold or bury their soldiers, at least they still could communicate with them.

Although most ordinary mediums and adherents of Spiritualism spoke to deceased relatives when conducting séances, over the course of the 1850s there were a few notable cases when figures of national or international importance emerged from beyond the veil in order to rebuke or to impart wisdom to willing listeners. Famous spirits from Francis

²⁷Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 85.

Bacon to John Quincy Adams stepped far afield from the common “family interest” formula of spirit interaction, setting a distinctive precedent for encounters with the famous dead.²⁸ Their role was not to comfort listeners but to instruct them; they returned not as creatures of emotion but as vehicles for political ideology—sometimes the same ideology they espoused in their lifetimes, sometimes quite blatantly the ideology of the spirit medium through which they conveyed their messages. Personally unknown but nationally notable figures called up by Spiritualists were not contacted on behalf of their families but on behalf of the nation, and accordingly they commented upon and advised in matters of the country’s material and moral progress.

Famous ghosts often began by entreating listeners to marvel at the opportunity afforded to them by Spiritualism to accelerate the progress of humanity through communion with the spirit world. Spiritualists drawn from the highest ranks of society provided an added incentive for Americans to join the movement, not to mention credibility for messages purporting to issue from the famous dead. New York judge John Worth Edmonds teamed up with Nathaniel Pitcher Tallmadge, former U.S. senator and governor of Wisconsin, to produce one of the first monographs devoted to Spiritualism, in which they conducted an ongoing conversation (consisting mainly of lengthy missives explaining the scientific and philosophical reasoning that made spirit communication possible) with Francis Bacon and eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg.²⁹

²⁸See Joseph Stiles, *Twelve Messages from the spirit of John Quincy Adams* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1859), John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism*, vol. 1 (New York, Partridge and Brittan, 1853).

²⁹Edmonds and Dexter, *Spiritualism*, vol. 1; Benjamin Franklin was also a favorite spiritual personality contacted by mediums, owing to his discovery of electricity, the scientific principle upon which spirit communication purported to function. See Werner

The appendix featured communications from the trinity of great nineteenth-century American orators, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun, received through automatic writing by members of Edmonds' and Tallmadge's Spiritualist circle. Tellingly, dead American statesmen used their first opportunity to speak from beyond the grave to lend their support to the Spiritualist movement. "Already in my short journey," confided Clay, "I can perceive how great the happiness and welfare of the nation is to be promoted by a knowledge of the truth, when they shall reap the benefit of the communion of spirits from the highest to the lowest in the land."³⁰

More significantly, these illustrious dead called for positive social action, however vague. John C. Calhoun announced the spirits' intentions in returning to the earthly plane as not only a demonstration of the immortality of humankind but also as a plea for universal cooperation among nations and peoples—a bit rich coming from him.³¹ Daniel Webster, for his part, unveiled a prophecy that attempted to allay fears in the tumultuous political environment of the 1850s that the passing away of great figures had left the country without a captain:

You speak of your statemen's having left you, of your having none to fill their places. Do not think so. Greater than they will fill their places. Mightier than they shall speak to the nation, in language bringing flowers of truth for man to live by and to die by. To die; the word will be banished from earth. It is but an exchange, a putting off the worn-out frame, and entering the new and beautiful spirit-covering which is prepared for us as we emerge into the world—not of shadows, but of bright realities.³²

Sollors, "Dr. Benjamin Franklin's Celestial Telegraph, or Indian Blessings to Gas-Lit American Drawing Rooms," *American Quarterly* 35, 4 (Winter, 1983), 459-480.

³⁰Edmonds and Dexter, *Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 400.

³¹*Ibid.*, 424-431.

³²*Ibid.*, 414.

Using florid oratorical language to espouse elevated if somewhat murky ideals, Spiritualists primarily sought to employ deceased political figures to further the appeal of the movement itself.

But the shades of Clay, Webster, and Calhoun paled in the national pantheon beside another spirit Edmonds contacted in his career as a Spiritualist, one who was considerably more specific about his political goals for returning to purvey ghostly counsel. In 1851, Judge Edmonds wrote that a robed, gray-haired spirit had appeared to him “like living flame” within the mist of a vision.³³ He recognized at once the spirit of George Washington, who soon made it clear that he had returned with the express purpose of delivering a jeremiad to his wayward nation on behalf of the abolitionist movement.

Apparently having renounced his living stance on slavery, Washington’s ghost confessed that

Bound up as my heart even yet is in the continuance of its freedom; looking on its institutions as the great fountain of freedom that was yet to flow over the whole earth, I ask myself, ‘Where now is the spirit that made us free?’ and from dark and dismal depths alone a voice answers, ‘Here, buried beneath the load of oppression and selfishness which has grown up and overwhelmed us.’³⁴

Abolitionists, whose numbers to a large extent overlapped with those of the Spiritualists, mobilized Washington’s voice, imbued with the authority of the Father of the Nation, in

³³John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism*, vol. 2 (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1853), 261-263. Robert S. Cox has discussed George Washington’s posthumous activism on behalf of abolitionists in *Vox Populi: Spiritualism and George Washington’s Postmortem Career*, *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 230-272.

³⁴Edmonds and Dexter, *Spiritualism*, vol. 2, 261-263.

the fight against slavery.³⁵ Not only were the spirits of ordinary individuals who had achieved further enlightenment in heaven speaking out against the evils of contemporary America, so too were the ghosts of Founding Fathers past.

Still, Washington's ghost remained above such political squabbles. P.T. Barnum, in his ongoing project to debunk the fraudulent activity of Spiritualists, wrote about peace advocate William Cornell "Colorado" Jewett's meeting with Mumler in his 1866 book of exposés, *The Humbugs of the World*. Jewett, Barnum reported, went to Mumler in 1864 in hopes of consulting with "the spirits of distinguished statesmen," whose counsel he believed might help to end the Civil War.³⁶ From John Adams to Napoleon, Jewett allegedly invoked the greatest departed political and military minds from the United States and abroad, and Mumler accordingly produced their shades on film. Jewett was so pleased with the images of Adams, Webster, Jackson, and Clay he received that he implored Mumler to produce a spirit photograph of the most sacred American spirit.

Barnum wrote that

The whole affair was so entirely satisfactory to Jewett, that after paying fifty dollars for what he had witnessed, he, the next day, implored the presence of George Washington, offering fifty dollars more for a 'spiritual' sight of the 'Father of our country.' This request smote upon the ear of the photographer like an invitation to commit sacrilege. His reverence for the memory of Washington was not to be disturbed by the tempting offer of so many greenbacks. He could not allow the features of that great man to be used in connexion with an imposture perpetrated upon so deluded a fanatic as Colorado Jewett. In short, the 'conditions' were unfavourable for the apparition of 'General Washington;' and his visitor must remain satisfied with the council of great men that had been called

³⁵For the Spiritualist connection with the abolition movement, see Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 11.

³⁶P.T. Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1866), 80.

from the spirit world to instill wisdom into the noddle of a foolish man on this terrestrial planet.³⁷

The Ghost of Lincoln

Unlike his storied predecessor Washington, the earthly incarnation of Lincoln's spirit proved available to the public. After Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, his ghost manifested itself within the familial rather than political paradigm of spirit interaction, effectively casting him in the role of a beloved family member lost. In appearing in Mumler's photograph to comfort Mary Todd, his spiritual return conveyed tender reconciliation, evidently designed to assure his wife that he looked after her still. Furthermore, Mumler's Lincoln is *happy*: his craggy features retain their enigmatic solemnity, but the hint of a smile curves his lips. His hands rest on her shoulders in a gesture of personal guardianship. Lincoln, like the preponderance of American spirits that communicated with their loved ones from beyond the grave, primarily concerned himself with reassuring his family. By proxy, he reassured the nation.

The tender, gentle portrayal of Lincoln after his death sharply contradicted much of his wartime iconography. Lincoln the horse-trading senator from Illinois and Lincoln the prevaricating president were far more common representations in the popular press during his lifetime. Certainly, Currier & Ives's lithographed cartoon posters of Lincoln were more critical than celebratory, the most famous of which being their 1860 lithograph "*The Nigger*" in the *Woodpile* (fig. 1.2).³⁸ In it, a young, beardless Lincoln perches atop a pile of split rails, in which a grinning slave hides in plain sight. In

³⁷Ibid., 82.

³⁸See Holzer et. al., *The Lincoln Image*, 37.

mockery of his campaign image as a simple “rail splitter” from Illinois, the cartoon Lincoln quips, “Little did I think when I split these rails, that they would be the means of elevating me to my present position.” In front of him, Horace Greeley, gripping his newspaper the *New York Tribune*, assures a voter representing “Young America” that the Republican Party is in no way affiliated with Abolition. “It’s no use old fellow!” the young voter replies, “You can’t pull that wool over my eyes, for I can see ‘the Nigger’ peeping through the rails.”³⁹ This image of a bantering Lincoln, propped up by a thinly-veiled platform of abolition, propagated the idea that Lincoln’s down-home demeanor and folksy speech patterns concealed a crooked politician, while simultaneously playing upon the racial fears of white laborers in North and West.

By 1864, the growing casualty rate led to recriminations that Lincoln was mismanaging the war and callously sacrificing the sons of the North, culminating in the New York City Draft Riots. *Columbia Demands Her Children!*, a political cartoon from 1864, drew upon the righteous indignation of thousands of families who had lost soldiers in the war, made manifest in Columbia, the symbolic embodiment of America (fig. 1.3). Wearing a skirt made of the American flag and carrying a sword and shield, Columbia advances on Lincoln pointing an accusatory finger. “Mr. Lincoln,” she demands, “give me back my 500,000 sons!!!” Disheveled and disconcerted, with one leg draped over the back of his chair, Lincoln at his desk resembles nothing so much as a melancholy jester. Amid crumpled papers, including a request for more troops, Lincoln stammers, “Well the fact is—by the way that reminds me of a STORY!!!” As the war progressed, the image of Lincoln as a folksy banterer had a new, dire resonance: it echoed Nero fiddling while

³⁹Currier & Ives, “*The Nigger*” in *the Woodpile*, New York, 1860. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>

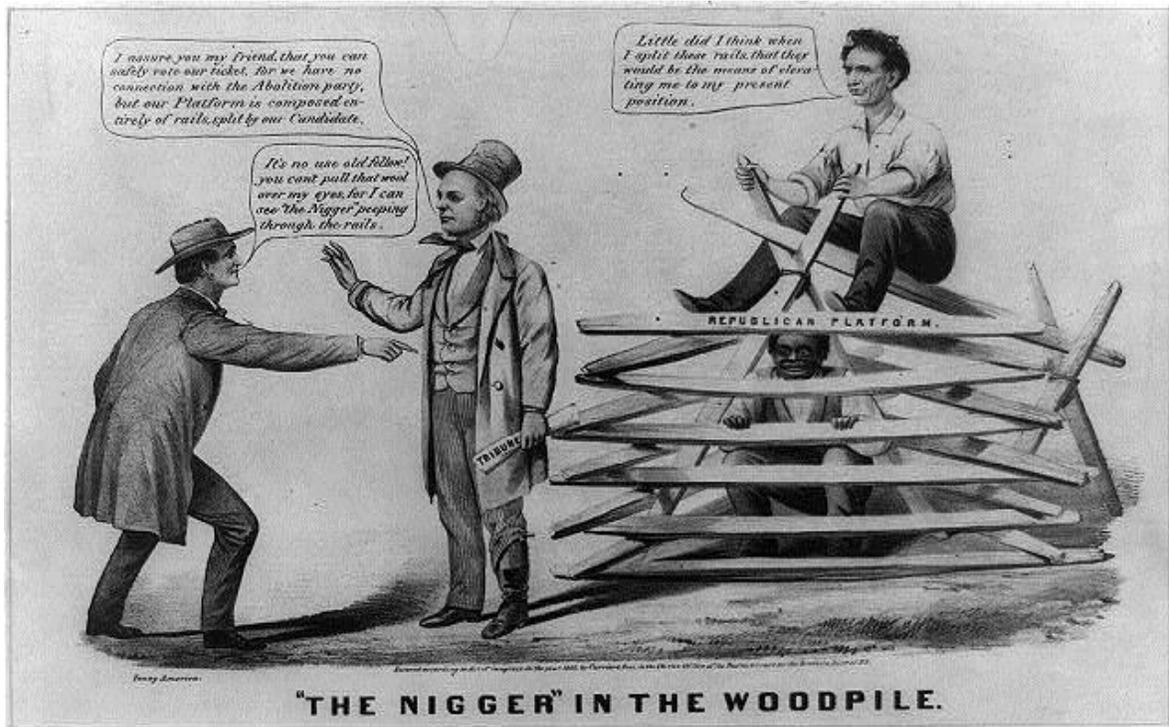


Figure 1.2. Currier & Ives, "The Nigger" in the Woodpile, New York, 1860. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>



Figure 1.3. Joseph E. Baker, *Columbia Demands Her Children!* Boston, 1864. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>

Rome burned.

Lincoln's assassination at the very moment of his victory, however, rendered an instant and immutable change in his public perception, and consequently in his iconography. Killed in retaliation for his unswerving devotion to a righteous cause, Lincoln instantly assumed the status of a martyr, and citizens ascribed to him characteristics typical of those most well-known martyrs, the Christian saints. The extremity of this shift is understandable in that the very nature of the Civil War's battle over slavery tended to inflate the perception of the conflict into a battle between good and evil. After all, abolitionist sentiment had been born among the religious leaders of the North. They saw slavery as a national sin that separated families and damned slaveowners into becoming evil tyrants: in their eyes, the mission of the war had always been to do the work of God.⁴⁰ Furthermore, religion's currency in everyday American life had not yet waned; if anything, the sense of religious crisis intensified during the Civil War as ordinary citizens attempted to make sense of death on an incomprehensible scale. "*Saint*," notes Ann Douglas, "was a term that had not lost its vitality in Victorian religious thought."⁴¹ Across the North, ministers preached memorial sermons casting Lincoln's assassination as a trial by fire that, like the jeremiads of old, should rededicate Americans to the cause of truth, justice, and piety.⁴² On April 23, 1865, Edward Payson Powell preached to his congregation in Plymouth, Michigan, that Lincoln

⁴⁰See Ann Douglas, "Introduction," in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 22.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴²See Sacvan Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*.

had a right to reap the fruit of his labors. But he cannot! Dead! Dead! Would to God I had died for thee! Oh Lincoln! My Father! My Father! Assassinated! Oh how an American hates that cowardly word. Henceforth he will hate it with a double detestation. But alas we needed the blow. We needed it to waken us to the horrid nature of treason. We were so tired of war that we were willing to buy peace at a sacrifice of justice and safety. We needed it to unite the people, and under a common loss, to bind us for a common effort.⁴³

Phineas D. Gurley, a Presbyterian minister from New York who preached over Lincoln's body in the East Room of the White House, had a similarly devotional message when he reminded the attendees that, though Lincoln had died, "he, being dead, yet speaketh" through his faith and believers' faith in him.⁴⁴ Through his "steady enduring confidence in God, and in the complete ultimate success of the cause of God, which is the cause of humanity, more than by any other way, does he now speak to us and to the nation he loved and served so well."⁴⁵ Ministers exhorted their listeners to believe that Lincoln's spirit had been raised up by God to guide the nation, and that it was their duty to unite with one another in order to complete Lincoln's difficult task of stamping out the slave power while still retaining the South.

Magazines such as *Harper's* reproduced the notion that Lincoln's death was of deep religious import. In June 1865, *Harper's* printed a six-panel memorial spread for Lincoln by Thomas Nast entitled *Victory and Death* (fig. 1.4). In the largest panel, titled "Our Martyred President," a knight symbolizing Victory kneels tearfully before the throne of the ghostly skeletal figure of Death. Below him, a placard reads "Victory and

⁴³E.P. Powell, *Sermons on recent national victories, and the national sorrow.: Preached, April 23d, 1865, in the Plymouth church.* (Adrian, Michigan: Smith & Foster, 1865). University of Michigan Library, Making of America Books, available at <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACK9066.0001.001>>

⁴⁴Phineas Gurley, *White House Funeral Sermon For President Lincoln*, April 19th, 1865.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

Death. Death levels all things in his march, nought can resist his mighty strength/The palace proud, -Triumphal Arch, shall mete their shadows length.” Five smaller vignettes ring the central scene: at the top left, a white family cries piteously into handkerchiefs with the legend “Thy will be done,” while at the top right, a black family kneels in prayer with the caption “Our Saviour.” At the bottom, three panels shaped as a triptych depicts the symbolic figures of Europe and America weeping by Lincoln’s casket flanked by citizens celebrating the Union victory in the streets at left and Lincoln’s funeral procession at right. The depictions of Lincoln’s casket (black, with silver stars) as well as his catafalque in the parade are rendered in the form of reportage, which readers would have recognized from the broad coverage of Lincoln’s funeral rites.⁴⁶ The powerful image of Death reigning over Victory resembles a *memento mori*, mirroring the emotional turmoil that characterized the month of April, 1865, when devastation came so swiftly upon the heels of elation. Significantly, Death is the largest figure in this representation of the Civil War’s finale. But it is interesting to note that the two family vignettes interpret the conflict in strictly Biblical terms: the white family mourns Lincoln, attempting to accept the will of God, while the black family prays for their fallen savior.

Juxtaposing families mourning with the scenes of the funeral procession was particularly appropriate because so many families did turn out to view Lincoln’s funeral train. On that final journey, Lincoln’s corpse made its trek from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois through nearly every major city in the Northeast. The train featured a

⁴⁶“President Lincoln’s Funeral Procession in Washington City.” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 6, 1865, 217.



Figure 1.4. Thomas Nast, *Victory and Death*. *Harper's*, June 10, 1865, 360-361. HarpWeek, Duke University Libraries.

specially-built Pullman car with glass sides so that Lincoln's casket could be viewed by the gathered mourners as it stopped for memorial ceremonies in Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Chicago, not to mention the smaller towns where it paused for shorter viewings. Hundreds of thousands of mourners filed past Lincoln's body at ceremonies in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago alone.⁴⁷

In this way, the citizens of the Northeast and West personally engaged in Lincoln's funeral procession. They gathered to participate in the ritual of sending Lincoln's body home, which mirrored the railway journeys of thousands of soldiers' bodies lucky enough to be shipped home during the war.⁴⁸ But not all bodies made it home; many were interred in mass graves, and some were never even found. In turning out to witness Lincoln's passage to Springfield, citizens displayed both their respect for the man himself and their approval of his journey home. The *New York Herald* reported that as the funeral train passed through Bridgeport, Illinois, the torches of the onlookers illuminated a banner emblazoned with the motto "Come Home."⁴⁹ In returning for burial to the state to which he had bid fond farewell at the beginning of the war, Lincoln was doing what many could not.

⁴⁷See Thomas J. Craughwell, *Stealing Lincoln's Body* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 16-18.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁴⁹"The Funeral Train. The Reception of the Remains at Mr. Lincoln's Home." *The New York Herald*, 4 May 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

R.E. Harris, a Union soldier whose regiment led the funeral procession for Lincoln in Washington, D.C., described the experience in a letter to his mother. “The Presidents Body was placed under the dome of the Capitol and the day following the funeral he lay in State for the purpose of permitting all the American people who desired to see him to do so,” he wrote. Noting that hundreds of thousands attended the viewing, Harris added “I never wept so much over the death of any person as his.” He also commented upon the process of Lincoln’s sudden transformation from charlatan to saint, remarking that “I have had men say to me since who had before denounced him as a corrupt man that they felt so miserable since his assassination that they could neither sleep nor eat and were satsafied [sic] that he was a pure honest and good man.”⁵⁰ Marching in Lincoln’s funeral procession helped to relieve these naysayers’ feelings of guilt for having despised a man now widely admired for his devotion and suffering.

As the funeral train carried Lincoln’s body to its final resting place in Springfield, it was left up to artists to ensure his spirit made it there as well. Two Chicago lithographers, J. Gemmel and Gustav Fuchs, printed similar images of Lincoln’s spirit arriving at his tomb in 1867. Both are quiet, peaceful scenes, depicting the immediately-recognizable shape of Lincoln’s burial monument framed by woods. Gemmel’s *The Tomb and Shade of Lincoln* (fig. 1.5) features a transparent figure of Lincoln’s ghost, beardless as in his youth, wearing a waistcoat and staring into the distance at his own grave. With his hands in his pockets and one knee bent as if about to take a step forward, the shade of Lincoln looks as if it has been walking awhile in thought and has reached the last league before returning home. Fuchs’ version, *The Spirit of Our Martyr Visiting His*

⁵⁰R.E. Harris, letter to mother, April 23, 1865. Nathaniel Harris Harrison papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, Southern Historical Collection.

Tomb (fig. 1.6), takes the metaphor one step further, erasing even the slightest trace of Lincoln's features and instead representing him as a silhouette formed by two willow trees intertwined, standing just outside his tomb. Here, Lincoln's spirit has not only gone home, it has assimilated into the very landscape of the country. Thus, images and rituals of bearing Lincoln's body and spirit home fulfilled Americans' desire to complete the traditional, familial process of mourning interrupted by the Civil War.

In fact, after his death, Lincoln began to be characterized as family member, particularly as a father figure in the national family. Despite an apparent lack of interest in appearing as one during his lifetime, Lincoln developed a reputation in prints and photographs as a family man after the Civil War. Lincoln never sat for a photograph with his wife, and not until 1864 did he allow any occasion for a photographer to take his portrait in a domestic milieu. That picture, Mathew Brady's 1864 photograph of a bespectacled Lincoln reading with his son Tad, only became famous when *Harper's Weekly* published it after Lincoln's death in 1865.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it enjoyed repeated interpretations throughout the balance of the century, along with a host of lithographs and paintings depicting Lincoln in family scenes, many of which expanded the portrait of Lincoln with Tad to include a whole family tableau.⁵² Artists frequently chose to project the Lincolns back in time to 1861, presumably so that they could capture the family in a

⁵¹Holzer et. al, *The Lincoln Image*, 174-175.

⁵²For examples, see Haskel & Allen, *The Lincoln Family*, (Boston: Haskel & Allen, c. 1865), Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *The Lincoln Family*, (New York: J.C. Buttre, 1867), D. Wiest, *Lincoln and His Family* (Philadelphia: William Smith, 1865).



Figure 1.5. J. Gemmel, *The Tomb and Shade of Lincoln*. Chicago, 1867. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Archive, Washington, D.C.



Figure 1.6. Gustav Fuchs, *The Spirit of Our Martyr Visiting His Tomb*. Chicago: Joseph Kuhn, 1867. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Archive, Washington, D.C.

state of greater happiness, before the outbreak of war and before Willie's death.⁵³

Even visual representations of Lincoln on his deathbed continued the theme of family unity. In the weeks and months after Lincoln's death, artists produced scenes of his assassination and deathbed with astonishing rapidity, playing fast and loose with the details of the tragedy in their hurry to sell prints of various kinds to a public hungry for visual representations of a story they consumed voraciously as it emerged in special bulletins. Currier & Ives' lithograph entitled *Death of President Lincoln at Washington, D.C., April 15th 1865, the nation's martyr* depicted Mary Todd Lincoln, as well as Tad, sobbing with a troop of statesmen over her husband's prone form.⁵⁴ A lithograph of the "Death Bed of Lincoln" showed Mary Todd on her knees beside the bed, crying into the coverlet as Lincoln died, while more than a dozen members of his Cabinet posed awkwardly around the bed.⁵⁵ In actuality, the tiny room in which Lincoln drew his last breath held no more than a handful of people at a time, and Mary Todd had been removed from the vigil shortly after arriving due to the volume and intensity of her grief. She was not present when her husband died.⁵⁶

⁵³Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *The Lincoln Family in 1861* (1865). In Holzer et. al., *The Lincoln Image*, 176.

⁵⁴Currier & Ives, *Death of President Lincoln at Washington, D.C., April 15th 1865, the nation's martyr*, 1865. Emmet Collection of Manuscripts Etc. Relating to American History, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs Print Collection, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, New York Public Library Digital Gallery <<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm>>.

⁵⁵Brett & Co., *Death Bed of Lincoln*. N.D. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>.

⁵⁶The *New York Herald* reported that "Mrs. Lincoln took her last leave of him about twenty minutes before he expired, and was sitting in the adjoining room when it was announced to her that he was dead.": "Our Loss. The Great National Calamity. Death of

With many of the Lincoln family and deathbed scenes, printers often paid homage to preexisting images of American statesmen, most notably those depicting George Washington, in order to equate Lincoln with past heroes.⁵⁷ Engravings of the Washington family similar to the ones produced portraying the Lincolns had a brief popularity in the 1790s, and lithographers in the 1840s and 1850s depicted Washington's peaceful deathbed in a manner similar to that employed by those who later would render images of Lincoln.⁵⁸

Yet Lincoln's posthumous iconography differed from Washington's in important ways. Washington had no children, which did not lend him well to domestic scenes. Because he was a military man, contemporary notions of Washington's personality and style of leadership lent a solitary, formal aspect to his representation. "Washington was characterized by an almost unapproachable loftiness of bearing," remarked *The Christian Advocate and Journal* in a comparison of the two presidents in Lincoln's obituary, adding that his martial deportment "gave to him the aspect of a Roman rather than of an

the President. Details of the Calamity. The Herald Despatches." *The New York Herald*, 16 April 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives
<<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

⁵⁷In addition, artists frequently substituted Lincoln's face for that of John C. Calhoun when updating earlier lithographs. For example, see Henry S. Sadd, *Union* (New York: William Pate, 1852), depicting the Compromise of 1850 with Calhoun at center, and *Union* (New York, c. 1861), a reprint in which Lincoln has been depicted in Calhoun's stead. In Holzer, et. al, *The Lincoln Image*, 68-69.

⁵⁸For an example of paintings of the Washington family similar to those produced about the Lincolns, see Edward Savage and David Edwin, *The Washington Family./ George Washington his Lady, and her two Grandchildren by the name of Custis* (Philadelphia and London, c. 1798) National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. For examples of Washington's deathbed see Regnier, *Life of George Washington/ The Christian*. (Paris: Lemercier, 1854), N. Currier, *Death of Washington, Dec. 14th A.D. 1799* (New York: 1846). Library of Congress. In Holzer, *Washington and Lincoln Portrayed*, 52-54.

American.”⁵⁹ Paintings like Rembrandt Peale’s 1824 portrait of Washington depicted him in uniform, eyes focused in the distance, his expression of noble dignity appropriate to his military station and rank as an American hero.⁶⁰ Washington stood alone, as in Jean Nicolas Laugier’s 1839 print, in which the General surveys the battlefield from an elevated vantage point while an awed soldier leads his charger to him.⁶¹ Images of Washington rarely strayed far from the Classical poses suitable to the found and father of the nation, while images of Lincoln depicted him as the nation’s approachable, native son, born of the American soil.

Nevertheless, the American populace linked the spirits of Washington and Lincoln in the national consciousness, and imagining their reunion in heaven had deep emotional resonance for a country eager to see its benighted former president rewarded for his sacrifice. “If Lincoln possessed not his forerunner’s unmatched and almost superhuman grandeur, he was more gentle and sweet,” pronounced Reverend C. A. Bartol in a sermon reproduced in *The Monthly Religious Magazine* in July, 1865, “He was not Washington’s fac-simile, but counterpart. Heaven be blest for them both!”⁶²

Lincoln’s assassination on Good Friday and unintentional martyrdom for his nation quickly led to his spirit’s assumption of a status akin to that of Jesus Christ, and the parallel prompted writers and artists immediately to cast Washington and Lincoln in

⁵⁹“Death of President Lincoln.” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 20, 1865, 124.

⁶⁰Rembrandt Peale, *George Washington*, c. 1824. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. In Holzer, *Washington and Lincoln Portrayed*, 37.

⁶¹Jean Nicolas Laugier, *Washington* (New York: James Herring, 1839). The Old Print Gallery, Washington, D.C. In Holzer, *Washington and Lincoln Portrayed*, 43.

⁶²C.A. Bartol, “The Significance of Abraham Lincoln as Man and President.” *The Monthly Religious Magazine*, July 1865, vol. 34, no. 1, APS Online, 31.

the Biblical roles of creator and redeemer of the nation, respectively. In 1865, Currier & Ives produced a lithograph of Washington shaking Lincoln's hand in front of the eternal flame of liberty, entitled "Washington and Lincoln, the Father and the Saviour of Our Country."⁶³ The New York Herald reported that the room in the Illinois Capitol building designed for Lincoln's lying-in-state included but two inscriptions on its walls:

SOONER THAN SURRENDER THIS PRINCIPLE, I WOULD BE ASSASSINATED ON THE SPOT.

WASHINGTON THE FATHER. LINCOLN THE SAVIOR.⁶⁴

The instant connection between Washington and Lincoln in American national mythology generated an immediate desire to depict their spirits together. Though enterprising artists once again co-opted earlier images of Washington's apotheosis to depict Lincoln's ascent to his heavenly throne, for the first time artists could envision a face-to-face meeting between the two great presidents.⁶⁵

In other images, Washington's spirit also welcomed Lincoln's to heaven, sent as an emissary to collect Lincoln from earth and bring him to his rightful place among them. In John Sartain's 1865 print *Abraham Lincoln. The Martyr./ Victorious*, a solemn Washington, along with a small legion of winged angels bearing palms and a crown of olive leaves, opens his arms to Lincoln (fig. 1.7). His right arm welcoming Lincoln, his

⁶³Currier & Ives, *Washington and Lincoln, the Father and the Saviour of Our Country*. (New York, 1865). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>.

⁶⁴"The Funeral Train. The Reception of the Remains at Mr. Lincoln's Home." *The New York Herald*, 4 May 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

⁶⁵See for example D.T. Wiest, *In Memory of Abraham Lincoln./ The Reward of the Just* (Philadelphia: William Smith, c. 1865) after John James Barralet, *Apotheosis of George Washington* (Philadelphia: Simon Chaudron and Barralet, 1802).

left gesturing to heaven as Lincoln's right hand reaches for Washington's shoulder, Washington both points the way to heaven and assists in Lincoln's ascension.⁶⁶

Lincoln seems to have brought out Washington's tenderness through their spiritual reunion. The spirits of Washington and Lincoln display a marked intimacy with one another, especially in images such as S.J. Ferris's 1865 *Washington & Lincoln*. (*Apotheosis*) in which the two leaders share a close embrace (fig. 1.8).⁶⁷ In the next world, as artists imagined it, Washington solaced the pained soul of Lincoln. More than anything, these artists fulfilled an apparent need to see Lincoln cared for in the next world, brought to rest and honored for the long battle he had fought and won.

After all, a peaceful and dignified death was at a premium during the Civil War. Both soldiers and civilians knew that just as bullets could end life suddenly, before one had a chance to prepare to meet death, disease and malnutrition could end life slowly, inducing dangerous melancholia that eroded one's relationship with God. To die well in the nineteenth century, one had to demonstrate calm acceptance of his fate as well as faith in God's promise of salvation.⁶⁸ Such a peaceful end was difficult to muster on the battlefield or in camp hospitals, and citizens on the home front were confronted

⁶⁶John Sartain, *Abraham Lincoln. The Martyr. /Victorious*. (New York: W.H. Hermans, 1865). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>

⁶⁷Ferris, S. J. *Washington and Lincoln (Apotheosis)*. Philadelphia: Phil. Pho. Co., 1865. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online. <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>.

⁶⁸See Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 17.



Figure 1.7. John Sartain, *Abraham Lincoln. The Martyr./Victorious.* New York: W.W. Hermans, 1865. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>>.



Figure 8. S. J. Ferris *Washington and Lincoln (Apotheosis)*. Philadelphia: Phil. Pho. Co., 1865. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>> .

with images that suggested that soldiers' deaths were anything but regal and decorous. Mathew Brady's famous exhibition of photographs of the battlefield dead, which was widely reviewed and attended in New York City as early as 1862, revealed a grisly and meaningless world of empty bodies in various states of decay (fig. 1.9). The ugly reality of death seen in Brady's exhibition undermined the imagined glory of battle and threatened to undermine the valor of the nation's sacrifice.

Most representations of Abraham Lincoln's death, however, retained the serenity and dignity that Americans hoped to accomplish on their deathbeds, and in doing so both ameliorated the shock of his assassination and allowed the bereaved to imagine peaceful deaths for the unprecedented number of men who sacrificed their lives in the war.

Newspapers reported the silence and dignity with which Lincoln passed into the next world, according him a beatific happiness that he scarcely could have mustered in his comatose state. "At twenty-two minutes past seven A.M. his muscles relaxed and the spirit of Abraham Lincoln fled from its earthly tabernacle to that bourne from which no traveller returns," reported *The New York Herald*:

As he drew his last breath the Rev. Dr. Gurley addressed the Throne of Grace with a fervent prayer for his heartbroken family and his mourning country. The countenance of the president was beaming with that characteristic smile which only those who have seen him in his happiest moments can appreciate; and except the blackness of his eyes his face appeared perfectly natural. He died without a struggle, and without even a perceptible motion of a limb. Calmly and silently the great and good man passed away.⁶⁹

⁶⁹"Our Loss," *The New York Herald*, 16 April 1865. Note that here the *Herald* makes reference to Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy: "The undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns, puzzles the will/ And makes us rather bear those ills we have/ Than fly to others that we know not of?" *Hamlet*, ed. Greenblatt et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 3.1.81-84.



Figure 1.9. Mathew Brady, *Confederate Dead behind a stone wall at Fredericksburg, Va.*, c. 1862-1863. National Archives, Mathew Brady Photographs of Civil War Era Personalities and Scenes Collection Online, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/brady-photos/>>.

Artistic reproductions of the deathbed scene reinforced the notion that Lincoln smiled as he expired. In the 1865 print *Death Bed of Abraham Lincoln./ Died April 15th 1865*, Lincoln is wearing a clean white nightgown, his head tipped back in a regal position, a saintly smile upon his face (fig. 1.10).⁷⁰ He looks as if he is positively enjoying the experience of dying. Newspapers were quick to assure their readers that Lincoln had felt no pain during the hours between Booth's shot at Ford's Theatre and his death many hours later. "From the moment that the President was shot up to his death he was insensible, and exhibited no signs of pain," reported the *New York Herald*. "He was watched with tender care, and all that could be was done for him; but his fate had been ruled."⁷¹ Representations of Lincoln's death, rather than exhibiting the violence and terror that governed the event itself and its aftermath, instead emphasized the sentimental sweetness with which the great leader died and the dignity and sorrow displayed by those at his bedside.

Moreover, early tributes to Lincoln in the wake of his death reminded readers that Lincoln's presence—and therefore the ideals for which he fought—lived on, thus consecrating the sacrifices made by the Civil War dead and assuring their continued significance. That Lincoln's values would continue on despite his death had unique

⁷⁰*Deathbed of Abraham Lincoln./ Died April 15th 1865* (1865). Emmet Collection of Manuscripts Etc. Relating to American History, Prints and Photographs Print Collection, New York Public Library Digital Gallery
<<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm>>

⁷¹"Our Loss," *The New York Herald*, 16 April 1865.

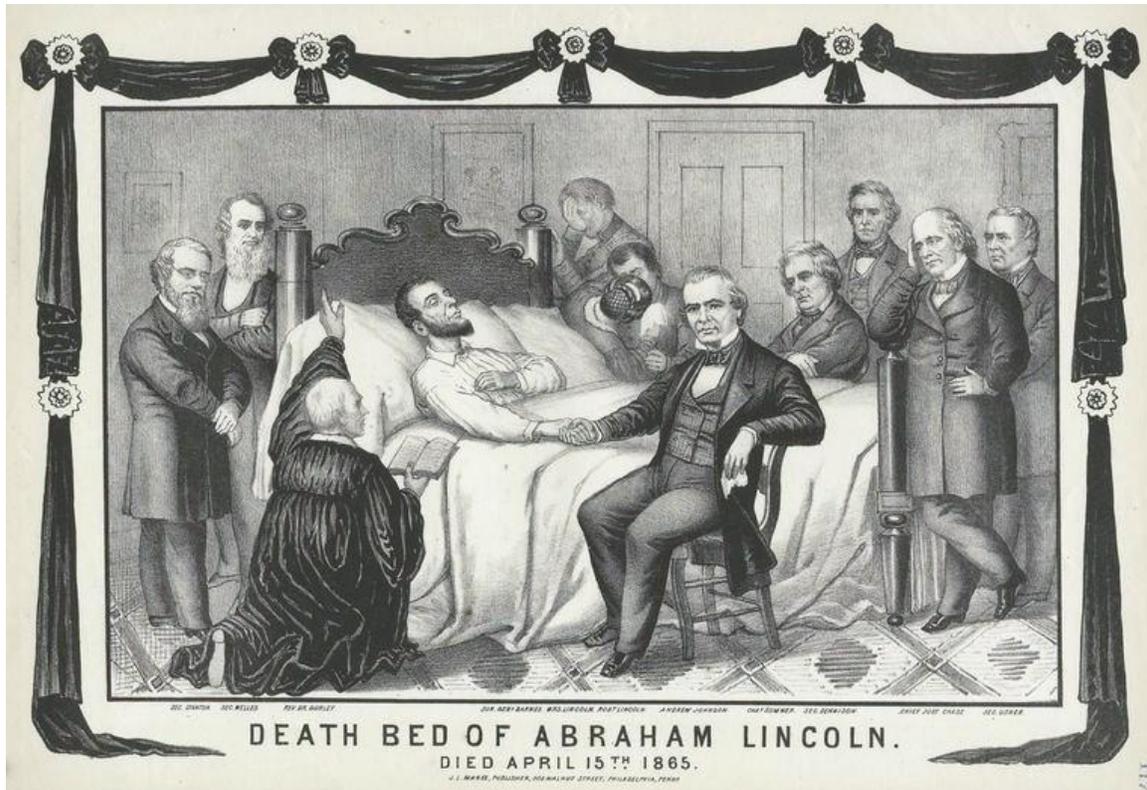


Figure 1.10. *Death Bed of Abraham Lincoln./ Died April 15th 1865.* Emmet Collection of Manuscripts Etc. Relating to American History, Prints and Photographs Print Collection, New York Public Library Digital Gallery <<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm>>.

import to newly-freed African Americans. A funeral ode by George Moses Horton, a former slave living in Chatham County, North Carolina, averred that an assassin's bullet could never truly kill Lincoln:

Still weep, my soul, remain to weep;
That one so noble thus should die;
His spirit mount into the sky,

His hallowed bones can only sleep.
Still, still, the praise to him we give,
Brave President forever live!

Whoever born must live to die---
The King, the Regent and the Peer,
And leave regardless of a tear,
Down trickling from the weeping eye!
The tears of sorrow may be shed,
But Lincoln will be never dead!⁷²

John C. Brock, quartermaster sergeant of the 43rd U.S. Colored infantry, wrote to *The Christian Recorder*, an African American newspaper printed in Philadelphia, exhorting, "Dry up your tears, ye weeping daughters of Columbia. Your Chieftain is not dead, he still lives," he wrote.⁷³ Though he conceded that "President Lincoln is no more," he amended, "No more *as in former years*" (emphasis added). Though the physical body of the president was empty and his tenure on earth had ended, for Brock

He lives in the thousands of brave soldiers, who still keep step to the music of the Union, who are resolved to see that flag, he loved so well, planted victoriously over every foot of American soil, who are bound to see his great principle of

⁷²George Moses Horton, "Assassination of Abraham Lincoln," *Naked Genius* (Wm. B. Smith & Co.: Southern Field and Fireside Book Publishing House, 1865). American Poetry, <http://collections.chadwyck.com/marketing/home_ap.jsp>

⁷³John C. Brock, "Death of the President." *The Christian Recorder*, 6 May 1865. African American Newspapers Collection, Accessible Archives <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

Union and Liberty carried out to the letter, who are bound to see that treason is trampled out from off the face of this Union.⁷⁴

For African-American soldiers, Lincoln would stay alive in hearts and in principles. “God so willed it, that He has taken our beloved father, Abraham Lincoln, from us,” wrote Henry Carpenter Hoyle, a soldier from the 43rd Regiment of the United States Colored Troops. “But although dead, yet he lives. He brought liberty to the slaves, both North and South. He broke the chains of the oppressed in the South, and gave us in the North the freedom of speech. . . . Let us not care for man as long as God is on our side.”⁷⁵ Imagining that Lincoln’s spirit continued to guide the nation reassured African Americans that the project of emancipation Lincoln had initiated would not be abandoned.

Many visualized Lincoln fulfilling the Christian afterlife in heaven, even as he assumed religious overtones as a Christ to the nation and a Moses to the slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. A writer in *The Christian Recorder* hoped to give comfort to readers with the idea that while his body was no more, Lincoln himself was “chanting heavenly praises around the throne of God.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, by virtue of his role as Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson often inherited a symbolic mantle as well. “As Joshua was to Moses, so we expect Andrew Johnson to be as the successor of Abraham Lincoln,” declared the *New York Herald* immediately after Lincoln’s death.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Henry Carpenter Hoyle, “Letter from Brownsville, Texas. Benefit of Colored Soldiers.” *The Christian Recorder*, 25 September 1865. African American Newspapers Collection, Accessible Archives, <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible/>>.

⁷⁶“Our California Letter.” *The Christian Recorder*, 20 May 1865. African American Newspapers Collection, Accessible Archives, <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible/>>.

“We expect him to take up the mantle of the great leader of Israel, and to conduct his people triumphantly into the occupation of the promised land.”⁷⁷

Lincoln, like Moses, had a glorious mission of salvation that ended with his being called back to heaven after he had fulfilled his duty but before he had a chance to enjoy the fruits of life within the nation he had saved. *The Christian Advocate and Journal* summarized the people’s view of Lincoln and Johnson perfectly:

We have learned to consider the selection of our public agents, and the order of public affairs as too manifestly providential to allow us to separate them in our thoughts from the divine guidance. To our limited views it seems that Mr. Lincoln was as manifestly called of God to his high position for the salvation of this nation, as was Moses to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. . . . Like Moses, too, he was permitted to bring the people fully into sight of the great end of their labors and conflict, but not to bring them in. A mission was given him which he has most faithfully and successfully accomplished; but the consummation of the work now devolves upon another.⁷⁸

More often than not, writers simply imagined Lincoln’s spirit sleeping. Given his exhausting role leading the country through the Civil War, and the premature age and misery it conferred upon him, the idea of Lincoln’s spirit earning the rest his body rarely had enjoyed during the years of struggle must have been appealing. Songwriters composed a host of funeral dirges and mournful odes that granted Lincoln rest in song. For example, James M. Stewart and George A. Brown composed “Let the President Sleep” in 1865:

Let the President sleep! all his duty is done,
He has lived for our glory, the triumph is won;

⁷⁷“Our Dead President and Our Living President – The Spirit and Purpose of the Nation.” *The New York Herald*, 16 April 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives, <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

⁷⁸“Death of President Lincoln.” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, 20 April 1865, vol. 40, no.16; APS Online, 124.

At the close of the fight like a warrior brave,
He retires from the field to the rest of the grave.
Hush the roll of the drum, hush the cannon's loud roar,
He will guide us to peace through the battle no more;
But now freedom shall dawn from the place of his rest,
Where the star has gone down in the beautiful West.⁷⁹

Songs like these, which were intended for performance in the family parlor, allowed ordinary Americans to participate in the grieving process for the president in their own homes even as newspapers covered the funeral rites on the national stage. Songs of mourning replicated hymns to the departed that otherwise might have been sung in church, featuring memorial cover art that placed Lincoln as an angel among the clouds (fig. 1.11). Describing the mourning procession in the White House, the *Herald* added, “Every person moved along on tiptoe, as if fearful of disturbing the long and deep sleep of the great and good man whose body lay within those walls.”⁸⁰ The metaphor endured: when *The Farmer’s Cabinet* published a brief note in its January, 1866 issue on the passing of “the illustrious departed of 1865,” at the head of the list was “the noble Lincoln—the President, the Emancipator, the honest patriot and citizen. Peace to his ashes. He sleeps well.”⁸¹

Commentators were careful to discern the remains of Lincoln’s body from his spirit, playing up the absence of the late president’s soul when discussing his corpse. As

⁷⁹James M. Stewart and George A. Brown, “Let the President Sleep.” Providence: J.R. Cory, 1865.

⁸⁰“The Rites. Services at the White House. The White House in Mourning.” *The New York Herald*, 20 April 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives, <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

⁸¹“[President; Emancipator; Lincoln; Edward; Everett; Washington; Cowin].” *The Farmer’s Cabinet*, 4 January 1866, vol. 64, no. 24. Newsbank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers, 2.

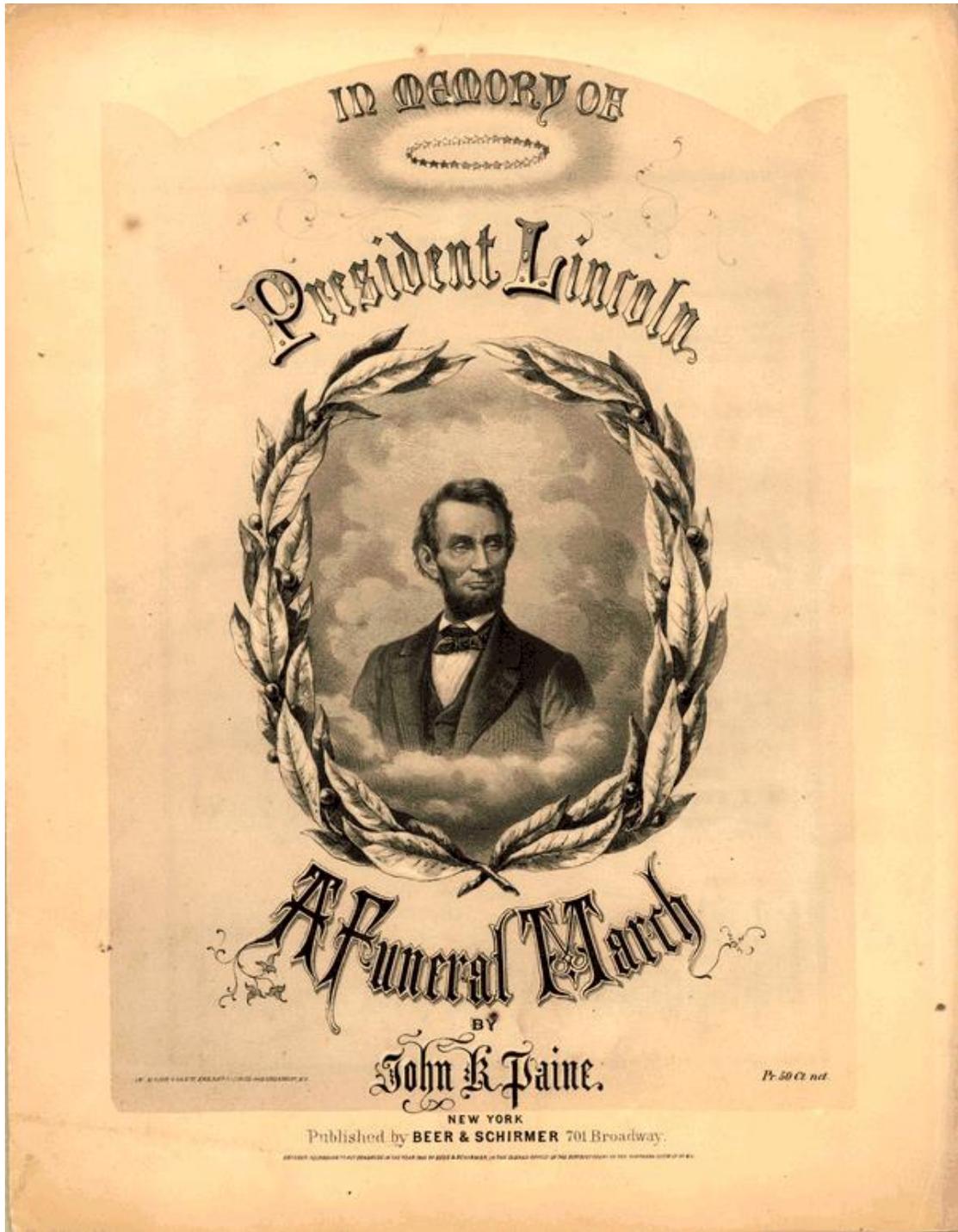


Figure 1.11. John K. Paine, *In Memory of President Lincoln: A Funeral March*. New York: Beer & Schirmer, c. 1865. Sheet Music from the Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

Lincoln's ghost had fled from its earthly tabernacle, leaving his shell empty, empty too were the earthly tabernacles that physically encased him. A description of Lincoln's body lying in state at the White House commented only upon how much "the body" resembled the statesman whose soul it had once contained, as if Lincoln himself were in no way connected with it:

The body was dressed in the suit of plain black worn by him on the occasion of his last inauguration. Upon his pillow and over the breast of the corpse were scattered white flowers and green leaves, offerings of affection. The features are natural. A placid smile is upon the lips. The eyes and upper part of the cheeks are still discolored by the effects of the cruel shot which caused his death. The face, however, is natural, and the broad brow and firm jaw remain as in the portraits of the late President, so familiar to the people.⁸²

Lincoln, as just one more death within the greater national tragedy of war, had passed beyond the suffering of his body too.

Lincoln Among the Spirits

After the initial outpouring of grief over Lincoln's assassination, the flood of popular prints depicting the fate of his ghost slowed to a trickle. But his career among the spirits was only beginning.

Spiritualists were particularly eager to continue their acquaintance with Lincoln. In the late nineteenth century, some prominent Spiritualists attempted to claim him as one of their number. Nettie Colburn, a spirit medium who had conducted séances in the

⁸²“Our Grief. Additional Details of the Terrible Event of Friday Night. The Herald Despatches.” *The New York Herald*, 17 April 1865. The Civil War Collection, Accessible Archives, <<http://www.accessible.com/accessible>>.

White House for Mary Todd Lincoln, contended in her 1891 book *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?* that the sixteenth president had been a believer.⁸³

Their efforts to show that Lincoln's spirit found peace and happiness after death continued into the twentieth century, experiencing another revival in the years after the First World War, another conflict with an astronomical death toll that sent bereaved families to Ouija boards and séance tables.⁸⁴ The 1920s were particularly fertile years for Lincoln's spirit in popular culture. Novels, plays, and magazine stories emerged that attempted to find solace for Lincoln in the afterlife by granting him love and vengeance.

Some even allowed Lincoln's ghost to avenge his own death. Since John Wilkes Booth died within days of assassinating Lincoln, this was difficult to do, but perhaps the attempt speaks to a need for a deeper sense of closure than the brief manhunt for Lincoln's killer could provide. Bernie Babcock, a novelist who repeatedly turned her pen to the Lincoln theme, wrote a tale called *Booth and the Spirit of Lincoln: A Story of a Living Dead Man*. Published in 1925, Babcock's story fictionalized a popular conspiracy theory that Booth had escaped his pursuers after Lincoln's assassination, changed his name, and lived out a life of secrecy in the West.⁸⁵ In *Booth and the Spirit of Lincoln*, though Booth escaped justice, he could never escape Lincoln's spirit, which pursued him

⁸³Nettie Colburn Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?, or Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium*. Philadelphia: Rufus C. Hartranft, 1891.

⁸⁴For more on Spiritualism between the World Wars, see Jennifer Hazelgrove, "Spiritualism after the Great War," *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1999), 404-430.

⁸⁵The rumor that Booth survived the manhunt appeared in many magazine stories and even a book. See Finis L. Bates, *Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth*. Atlanta: J.L. Nichols, 1907.

relentlessly for the rest of his life, intoning “with malice toward none, with charity for all,” until Booth finally committed suicide.⁸⁶

More common than the desire for vengeance was the determination that Lincoln should experience romantic love in the afterlife. Interestingly, the woman with whom he found love in the Great Beyond was not his wife but a girl named Ann Rutledge, whom Lincoln had known as a young man and who had died of typhoid fever at the age of twenty-two. Though there is no convincing evidence that Rutledge and Lincoln ever had a romantic relationship, her legend as the star-crossed love of Lincoln’s life grew out of the popular biography of Lincoln penned by his law partner, William Herndon. Herndon and Mary Todd had never gotten along—Mrs. Lincoln even refused him admittance to the White House when he visited Washington—but Herndon eventually got his revenge. His book, published in 1891, painted Mary Todd as a half-crazed harpy whom Lincoln only married because he despaired of finding another love like Ann Rutledge. In the decades after Herndon’s biography was published, Rutledge’s legend continued to grow while Mary Todd Lincoln’s reputation continued to suffer.⁸⁷

Thus, during the 1920s, several popular stories focused on the reunion of the spirits of Lincoln and Rutledge. In 1927, playwright Harold Winsor Gammans wrote a four-act drama wherein Rutledge dies trying to defend a group of slaves and asks Lincoln to promise her that he will end slavery. In return, she says her spirit will never leave him, and he attributes all of his life’s work to her ghostly guidance: “If it were not for her spirit

⁸⁶Bernie Babcock, *Booth and the Spirit of Lincoln: A Story of a Living Dead Man*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1925.

⁸⁷David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 75-103; William Herndon, *Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, vol. 1-3. Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1889.

urge from beyond,” Lincoln tells her brother when he visits on the morning of the Gettysburg Address, “the spirit of my mother, the spirit of Ann Rutledge, I would not be now leading my people—I would still be a poor store-keeping in a country town spending every leisure moment beside a little grave.”⁸⁸ When Lincoln is assassinated, Ann’s spirit appears in Ford’s Theatre, and the two are reunited. When Lincoln asks her whether he can finish his work binding the broken nation now that he is dead, she responds, “The nation is not broken, Abraham. It has been healed once again, and you shall guide it, for your spirit can never die.”⁸⁹

Perhaps the most famous example of the impulse to join Lincoln’s spirit with that of his fabled love was the so-called “Minor Affair.”⁹⁰ In 1928, Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, received a letter from one Wilma Frances Minor, of San Diego, California. Minor reported that she had written a story about the romance between Lincoln and Rutledge based on their love letters, which had been handed down in her mother’s family, and wondered if it would be eligible for the *Atlantic*’s biennial nonfiction prize. Sedgwick was intrigued, and more than a little anxious to get his hands on a stack of love letters that could be the journalistic coup of a lifetime. He invited Minor and her mother and sister to the East Coast for a meeting. There, he could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the prize documents that the Minor family had kept to itself for so many years: ten letters written by Lincoln, two from Ann Rutledge, pages from the

⁸⁸Harold Winsor Gammans, “Spirit of Ann Rutledge.” (New York: Samuel French, 1927), 46.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 65.

⁹⁰For the best account of the Minor Affair, see Don E. Fehrenbacher, “The Minor Affair: An Adventure in Forgery and Detection,” in *Lincoln and Text and Content: Collected Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 246-269.

diary of Ann's cousin, and several letters verifying the provenance of these treasures. Sedgwick arranged that Minor's story, "Lincoln the Lover," would be published in three installments in the *Atlantic*, with a book contract to follow, should the letters be judged authentic.⁹¹

On the matter of authenticity, the experts were divided. Worthington Chauncey Ford, editor of the Massachusetts Historical Society, dismissed the letters outright, since the script in the letters purporting to be from Lincoln looked nothing like his familiar handwriting. On the other hand, the Reverend William E. Barton, renowned collector of Lincolniana, and Miss Ida M. Tarbell, famed Lincoln biographer, came down in favor of the letters. Sedgwick, already predisposed to believe in them and hoping to promote Christmas magazine subscriptions, went ahead with advertising the story less than a month later. The first installment of "Lincoln the Lover" appeared in the December 1928 *Atlantic*.⁹²

That was when Paul M. Angle, secretary of the Lincoln Centennial Association in Springfield, Illinois—and future Illinois state historian and director of the Chicago Historical Society—got wind of the letters, some of which the *Atlantic* reproduced in photostat. Angle sent a letter to the *New York Times* declaring that the letters were forgeries, noting that the handwriting did not match known samples of Lincoln's from the time period in his life when they claimed to have originated and that they placed Mary Todd in the wrong place at the wrong time.⁹³ When the second installment of the story

⁹¹Ibid., 249-251.

⁹²Ibid., 253-256.

⁹³Ibid., 257-258.

appeared, Angle and two other Lincoln scholars opened fire on its supposed documentation: Ann Rutledge's "cousin," whose diary Minor claimed to own, had never existed, and the diary made reference in pages supposedly written in the 1830s to someone who had not been born until 1843. Furthermore, one of Lincoln's letters made mention of a family leaving the area for "some place in Kansas" before there ever was such a place as Kansas.⁹⁴

When some members of the *Atlantic* staff attempted to contact Minor by telegraph, they received a handwritten response from her mother, Cora DeBoyer, which stoked their suspicions even further: her handwriting bore a striking response to that of the Lincoln letters. Thoroughly discredited, Minor finally made a confession: she and her mother were spirit mediums, who had put their special talents to use by channeling Lincoln and Rutledge. "On another plane those people (Lincoln and Ann and other people) must exist," Minor wrote. "I would write out the questions. I would hand them to my Mother then in the trance; the spirit would come, whoever it might be, and fill out the answers. For instance, I would ask the ages of the two when Ann and Abe first met, and in the place left under the question . . . the [spirit] would answer through my Mother."⁹⁵ Minor then went to old book shops to purchase period paper and filled in details of continuity using books on Lincoln's life. Her only object, she vowed, was to give something worthwhile to the world through her relationship with the spirits of Lincoln and Ann Rutledge.

⁹⁴Ibid., 260-261.

⁹⁵Wilma Minor, *Atlantic Monthly* file on the Minor Affair, quoted in Fehrenbacher, "The Minor Affair," 267.

Conclusion

Many years after William Mumler's death, Lincoln's ghost posed for another photograph. This time, his companion was not his wife, or any acquaintance during his lifetime, but the famous magician and escape artist Harry Houdini (fig. 1.12). Houdini, unlike Mary Todd Lincoln, was not a believer in Spiritualism. After the death of his beloved mother, he had dabbled briefly in séances at the behest of his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, but it had not taken long for the greatest illusionist of the twentieth century to realize that he was being tricked. In response, Houdini became a vocal opponent of Spiritualism and spirit mediums, whom he despised as charlatans perpetrating a cruel ruse on the public by impersonating lost loved ones. During the 1920s, Houdini attended séances in disguise to expose fraudulent mediums, whose techniques for demonstrating the presence of the dead were quite similar to the tricks of stage magic.⁹⁶ He compiled his observations in book called *A Magician Among the Spirits*, published in 1924, which explained in detail how prominent mediums achieved their special effects. Among his targets was the lost, not-much-lamented William Mumler, whose history (and court case) he related in a chapter debunking spirit photography.⁹⁷ As proof positive that anyone could fake a picture of a ghost, Houdini had himself photographed with Abraham Lincoln.

And so the spirit photograph of Lincoln's ghost came full circle, from undeniable evidence of the validity of Spiritualism to unimpeachable proof of its fraudulence.

Despite Houdini's efforts, however, Lincoln's ghost had already taken on a life of its own

⁹⁶See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 145.

⁹⁷Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 117-119.



Figure 1.12. Harry Houdini and the ghost of Lincoln, c. 1920-1930. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online. <www.loc.gov>.

in popular culture. Representations of Lincoln's spirit erased his pain and the collective pain of the nation after the Civil War, eschewing the gritty reality of death in favor of beautiful allegorical images that befitted the sacrifice of a martyr to justice. Furthermore, images of Lincoln as a ghost demonstrate the crisis of American mourning practices occasioned by the Civil War. In picturing Lincoln's ghost, Americans recaptured a vision of noble and sacred death that the Civil War had challenged in every way, even harnessing the emerging technology of photography to ameliorate the trauma perpetrated by the emerging technology of war. The image of his spirit, like his body, returned to his home and family, when so many bodies could not; he died in restful peace, when so many had been cut down without an opportunity to make their peace with God; he died valiantly for a cause, when so many questioned the true meaning of the war. Images and invocations of Lincoln's spirit as saint helped to confirm citizens' faith in the justness of the Union cause and ensured the bereaved that its many fallen soldiers had not died in vain. But they also bred his iconography for the ages, under the auspices of grief. It is this image of Lincoln that has come down to us today: not the Lincoln of victory, but the Lincoln of mourning.

Chapter 2

Becoming Mr. Lincoln: Creating an Abraham Lincoln for the American Stage

On November 19th, 2010, Steven Spielberg announced that he had chosen Daniel Day-Lewis to star as Abraham Lincoln in his forthcoming adaptation of Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Team of Rivals*.¹ Dark, gaunt, solemn, and famously talented at pulling in Oscar nominations for his roles in historical epics, Day-Lewis seemed the natural choice for the part. Dozens of news outlets and blogs published Day-Lewis's picture next to Lincoln's to illustrate the story, inviting comparisons of their not-overly-similar physiques (fig. 2.1). Day-Lewis, in twenty-first century color, posing with a cheeky grin and prominent hoops in his ears, closer resembled Johnny Depp's vision of a pirate than the sixteenth president of the United States, but, armed with Photoshop, the bloggers persevered. They changed Day-Lewis's headshot to black and white and darkened his chin with a beard (fig. 2.2). Not bad, they concluded, and gave Spielberg's endeavor their blessing.²

Less remarked upon was the date that Spielberg's DreamWorks Studio chose to release this choice morsel of film gossip fodder, a Spielbergian wink at—or perhaps paean to—American history. The one hundred and forty-seventh anniversary of the

¹Jay Fernandez, "Daniel Day-Lewis to Play Abraham Lincoln in Steven Spielberg-Directed Biopic." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 November 2010, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com>>.

²Erik Davis, "Daniel Day-Lewis Will Play Abraham Lincoln for Steven Spielberg," *Moviefone*, 19 November 2010, <blog.moviefone.com>.

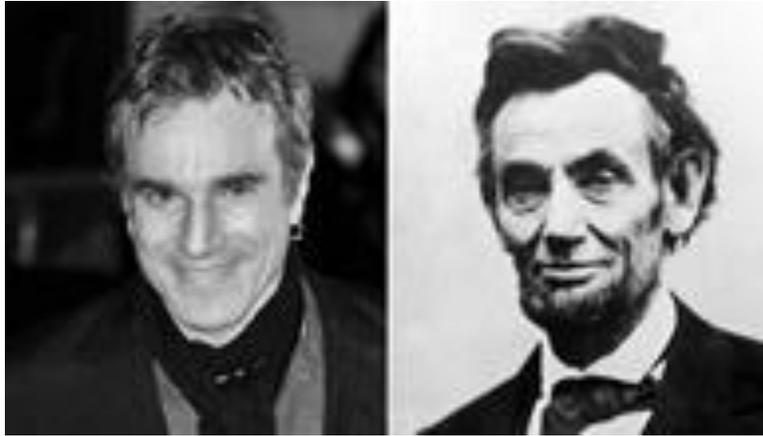


Figure 2.1. The Hollywood Reporter's juxtaposition of Day-Lewis and Lincoln. "Daniel Day-Lewis to Play Abraham Lincoln in Steven Spielberg-Directed Biopic." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 November 2010, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com>.>

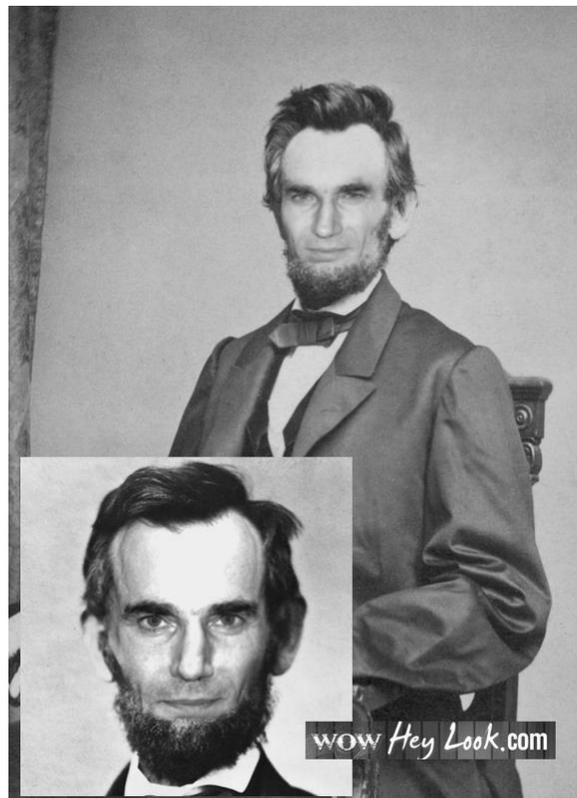


Figure 2.2. An ambitious blogger's attempt to turn Day-Lewis into Lincoln. Mike Acheson, "Daniel Day-Lewis Lincoln," WowHeyLook! 1 Dec 2010, <http://www.wowheylook.com>.

Gettysburg Address must have seemed an altogether fitting and proper day to remind the public that Lincoln would soon be speechifying once again, this time from the silver screen.

In donning this role, Day-Lewis stepped into more than just the enormous shoes of Lincoln. Rather, his feet fit inside the shoes of the many famous actors who portrayed Lincoln before him, a veritable Russian doll of Lincolns stacked upon each other over the last hundred years. Hollywood royalty such as Raymond Massey, Walter Huston, and Henry Fonda all have played Lincoln. Other actors have made an entire career out of being Lincoln, relying either on their resemblance to the man, as in the case of Ralph Ince, or on the painstaking application of make-up and prosthetics, as Hal Holbrook has done.³ He is, according to Lincoln film historian Mark S. Reinhart, the “most frequently portrayed American historical figure in the history of the film and television arts.”⁴

Added to this surfeit of screen Lincolns is an even more dizzying array of Lincoln impersonators, or presenters, the profession’s preferred designation. Since the boom in historical reenacting precipitated by the U.S. bicentennial in 1976, hundreds if not thousands of Lincoln-lookalikes have ambled about the American landscape in top hat and frock coat, giving Fourth of July speeches, selling used cars and good-naturedly waving off entreaties to avoid the theatre. Currently, the Association of Lincoln Presenters, formed in 1990, boasts 150 active Lincolns in twenty-eight states among its membership, many of whom have appeared on the stage as well as in film and

³See Mark S. Reinhart, *Abraham Lincoln on Screen*, 2nd ed. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009.

⁴Reinhart, *Abraham Lincoln on Screen*, 3.

television.⁵

Lincoln actors, like other representations of the assassinated president, have so saturated American culture that they have attained something of an air of inevitability. Abraham Lincoln is by far the most-often portrayed American political figure, and the second-most common subject of impersonation (behind Elvis Presley, of course).⁶ Since the advent of the motion picture, Lincoln has appeared as a live-action character on both the large and small screens well over three hundred times. In addition, the age of prime-time cartoon series and viral videos is rife with animated and spoof depictions of Lincoln. He has been a character five times on just *The Simpsons* alone. All in all, Lincoln has averaged just over three new representations on film and television per year, in addition to roles in several long-running theatrical productions, such as Raymond Massey's thousand-performance stint as the Great Emancipator in John Drinkwater's play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*.⁷

Curiously, Lincoln's very omnipresence has a tendency to obscure rather than elucidate the role his representation has played in American popular culture. Lincoln's image has become, in the words of Ralph Ellison, "hyper-visible": so universal in the cultural imagination that the reality and details of individual iterations are difficult to see

⁵See "History," Association of Lincoln Presenters, <<http://www.lincolnpresenters.net/>>.

⁶The practices of celebrity impersonation and historical reenactment seem to come from similar cultural needs. Leslie Rubinkowski speculates that Elvis impersonators transform their grief over his death so that it assumes the shape of the thing they have lost. See Rubinkowski, *Impersonating Elvis* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1997), 40.

⁷See Raymond Massey, as told to Ray Pierre, "My Life with Abe Lincoln." *Pageant*, May 1950, 132.

behind the associations immediately brought to mind when it is invoked.⁸ But clichés become clichés for a reason; they perform a kind of cultural shorthand that evokes an idea or an emotion with great economy of time and story. In fact, oft-repeated images and recycled stories have long been embraced in the performance arts as a way to cut down on the need for detailed background information on characters as well as to elicit the desired emotional response from audiences. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle ranked theatrical productions that retold familiar stories as the most powerful type of play because audiences would more readily accept them as probable events: since the stories in question would already have been ingrained in culture, theatergoers would be more inclined to suspend their disbelief and favorably receive the actions on stage.⁹ This never-ending cycle of presentation and representation depends on audiences' ability to recognize these tropes and then to compare and combine the current retelling with their expectations, reinforcing and further refining the tradition.

My project here is not to analyze in depth each individual representation of Abraham Lincoln on stage and screen from the last hundred years—not only would such a task be impossible, it would add little to the existing literature on the subject. Mark S. Reinhart, in *Abraham Lincoln on Screen: Fictional and Documentary Portrayals on Film and Television*, has already undertaken the monumental task of cataloguing every screen appearance of Lincoln from 1901 through 2007, evaluating actors' performances and

⁸See Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952; Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

⁹See Bert O. States, *Dreaming and Storytelling* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 119, quoted in Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 21.

makeup in terms of their accuracy in depicting the real Lincoln.¹⁰ Frank Thompson has taken the project further by identifying major themes of the Lincoln stories told in each major media format, from theatre to silent films to television, though his method, like Reinhart's, is more encyclopedic than analytical.¹¹

Instead, I would like to look beyond this superfluity of fictional Abes and question why he is so often portrayed and what cultural work his constantly-resurrected character is doing. Lincoln appears in American visual culture so often that it is easy to forget that his ubiquity is hardly inevitable, but, like any other cultural phenomenon, the representation of Abraham Lincoln as a character has a history of its own. As late as the year 1900, some Americans thought that putting an actor in the guise of Lincoln was tasteless and inappropriate, and the first play to attempt to do so flopped amidst a wave of ridicule.¹² Clearly, that is no longer the case, when you are as likely to see an Abraham Lincoln impersonator schilling a product in a commercial as to see him presented in all his stately grandeur in a Spielberg-directed historical drama. Why and how did Lincoln become such an appropriate, let alone all-pervasive, focus of impersonation?

In fact, actors' representations of Abraham Lincoln are a form of cultural haunting: these "living" representations of the sixteenth president, which move and talk and reproduce his famous words and actions in real time, are so ubiquitous because they are, in fact, attempting to keep Lincoln "alive" in the present. Whereas history and monument seem to be quite enough for most American historical personages, who remain

¹⁰See Reinhart, *Abraham Lincoln on Screen*.

¹¹See Frank Thompson, *Abraham Lincoln: Twentieth-Century Popular Portrayals*. Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1999.

¹²"Is it in Good Taste?" Chicago Daily Tribune, 13 Sept 1891, 32.

in society only through their words or in dead marble, Lincoln is the figure who has burst out of the pages of history and paraded around stage, screen, and the American landscape repeatedly as if quite alive. Lincoln was the first American president to generate an impersonator and the first to be portrayed on film. In this way, Lincoln is unique among historical—and even fictional—figures in American popular culture. Why is it not enough just to remember him? Why must we bring him back to life again and again? This recurring image of a deceased person, visible and active in the present, haunts American culture.

In *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Freddie Rokem has suggested that troubling events from the past resurface as “ghosts” in performances, through which writers, actors and audiences attempt to create useful meaning for the present from the failures of the past.¹³ Like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the murdered king, which appears early in the play to signal that the present order is not what it should be, repeated representations of unsettling historical events on the stage signal a continuing cultural struggle to make sense of events in the past that might otherwise seem senseless: Lincoln’s assassination at his moment of triumph, for example, or the promises and disappointments of racial equality after the Civil War. And, as in Hamlet, it is another performance of the problematic episode that attempts to bring resolution to time out of joint. In Rokem’s words, “The theatre performing history can no doubt be seen as an attempt to create restorative energies, in the sense of recreating something which has been irretrievably lost and attempting, at least on the imaginative level and in many cases also on the intellectual and emotional levels, to restore that

¹³Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 3.

loss.”¹⁴

In a sense, all performances are haunted. Actors and theatrical performances alike accrue ghosts of past roles and productions in the memories of audiences, according to drama theorist Marvin Carlson.¹⁵ The uncanny, unshakable notion that “*we are seeing what we saw before*” accompanies each new production of an existing script, as oft-repeated lines are spoken again; while at the same time, the past roles of actors cling to them as they take on new personae.¹⁶

This phenomenon seems to have particular resonance for Lincoln performances: plays and movies based upon his life retell the same anecdotes (many of which are either apocryphal or outright inventions) again and again, while actors who play Lincoln are judged not only on their physical likeness to the original but also on their fitness for the role in terms of personality, patriotism, and love of all things Lincoln. Frequently, actors who have taken on the guise of Lincoln have done so to the exclusion of nearly all else in their careers, playing Abe in movies, television, commercials, theatre, and reenacting events. In short, to be Lincoln is to become him, and as actors have done so, they have stepped into the liminal space between performance and memory.

Is it in Good Taste?

Before examining the ways in which stage and screen actors have brought Lincoln to life, it is important to demonstrate that it was by no means certain that Lincoln would

¹⁴Ibid., 11.

¹⁵Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 1.

¹⁶Ibid., 1-8.

be deemed a character suitable for impersonation at all, let alone attain the status of the most frequently mimicked American historical figure. The result of trial and error as playwrights and impersonators attempted to hit upon the characterization that most resonated with audiences, Lincoln as a character was not born but *made*.

During the first years of the twentieth century, largely under the aegis of Lincoln presenter Benjamin Chapin, Abraham Lincoln transformed from a character too sacred to mimic into the edifying subject of plays, one-man shows, and biopics we know today. The theatrical image of Abraham Lincoln, and the range of topics and emotions deemed suitable for his character to express on stage and screen, evolved within, and from, the conventions of turn-of-the-century forms of entertainment. Before this transformation was complete, however, what a theatrical version of Abraham Lincoln should be and do remained very much in question. Actors as well as audiences questioned whether Lincoln's legacy on stage would be a political force for the present or a nostalgic wish for the past.

In September of 1891, more than twenty-five years after Lincoln's assassination, a play about Lincoln—the first of its kind—went into production at the Chicago Opera House. Entitled simply “Abraham Lincoln,” it raised eyebrows across the city and engendered a wave of debate in the *Daily Tribune* about its propriety. “Is it in good taste?” the Tribune's editors asked, noting that “public opinion [is] divided . . . as to whether it is not too soon to give a stage presentation of the closing scenes in the life of the martyred president.”¹⁷

Too soon? In our modern, media-saturated culture where retrospectives of

¹⁷“Is it in Good Taste?” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 Sept 1891, 32.

deceased celebrities appear on television within days of their demise, it is difficult to imagine a world in which twenty-five years would not be enough time to show proper reverence before embarking on an artistic rendering of a beloved personage. Then again, Abraham Lincoln was no ordinary dead celebrity. He was not only the president who saved the Union but also the first president to die at the hands of an assassin, a fact that was probably aggravated at the time by the addition of a second such president in James Garfield in 1881. Moreover, Lincoln's assassination came at the end of the bloodiest war in American history, in which some 600,000 Americans—a staggering two percent of the entire population of the United States—lost their lives.¹⁸ One generation later, as the North and South began to creep toward reconciliation, the Civil War was still no laughing matter.

This is not to say that Abraham Lincoln was always considered too dignified a figure for stage antics. On the contrary, during his presidency, the comic theatre relied upon spirited mockery of Lincoln in war farces to bring in audiences and lighten the national mood. As a conflict that was originally expected to end in a matter of weeks stretched into years, the president directing the war effort became increasingly unpopular on the home front.¹⁹ His gangly stature and distinctive facial features made him an easy target for caricature, as did his Republican antislavery political platform. In 1863, Bryant's Minstrels made light of Lincoln's paper money printing scheme with the song "How Are You Green-Backs!" (fig. 2.3) spoofing the popular enlistment poem-set-to-

¹⁸See Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), xi-xii.

¹⁹See David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 331-333.

DAN BRYANT'S
Popular comic Song

HOW ARE YOU GREEN-BACKS!

AS SUNG BY HIM
with immense Success
AT

BRYANT'S
MINSTRELS,
ALSO BY

MRS. JOHN WOOD,
in the grand Fairy Extravaganza
"FAIR ONE WITH THE GOLDEN LOCKS."

WORDS BY ARRANGED BY
E. Bowers, Esq. **Chas. Glover.**

NEW YORK
Published by **Wm. A. POND & Co.** 547 Broadway

BOSTON O. DITSON & Co.	ALBANY J. H. HIDLEY.	BUFFALO. BLODGETT & BRADFORD.	MILWAUKEE. H. N. HEMPSTED.
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Copyright of the Author in the year 1863 by Wm. A. Pond & Co. in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the S.D. of N.Y.

Figure 2.3: The sheet music to "How Are You Green-Backs!" produced by Bryant's Minstrels. New York: William A. Pond & Co., 1863.

music, “We Are Coming, Father Abraham”:

We’re coming, Father Abram,
One hundred thousand more,
Five hundred presses printing us
from morn till night is o’er;
Like magic you will see us start
And scatter thro’ the land
To pay the soldiers or release
the border contraband,
With our promise to pay.²⁰

In the South, which was too ravaged by the war to support a thriving cultural industry, Lincoln was still not spared from dramatic humiliation. Ardent Alabama secessionist William Russell Smith published a dramatic poem entitled “The Royal Ape,” offering a none-too-subtle sneer at Lincoln’s ugly features and linking him to the allegedly simian slaves that he was so foolishly attempting to free. Written as a script for a stage play, “The Royal Ape” amplified the stereotype of Lincoln as a crooked statesman who attempted to hide his incompetence through folksy quips and anecdotes, and depicted the Lincoln family behaving buffoonishly during the first Battle of Bull Run. Faced with the South’s might after its victory at Bull Run, Smith’s stage Lincoln confessed that

I, that was sev’n feet high, am suddenly
Shrunk into seven inches; and my body,
In its vast littleness, doth drag my soul down
To its own dwarf’d proportions—for a fear,
That if I should perceive an enemy,
Armed with a straw, did he but glare on me;
I would be driven to crawl into a crevice,
Or hide me in a cupboard.²¹

²⁰E. Bowers and Charles Glover, “How Are You Green-Backs!” New York: William A. Pond & Co., 1863. The Lincoln Sheet Music Collection, Brown University Library Center for Digital Initiatives, <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu>>.

Imagining Lincoln stumbling thus must have been a boost for Southern morale, which sorely needed boosting at the time of publication. Although Bull Run had been an embarrassing loss for the North, the battle had occurred more than two years before Smith's parody. By the fall of 1863, crippling defeats at Vicksburg and Gettysburg had overshadowed Bull Run's heady promises for the South. Ridiculing Lincoln was a way of whistling in the dark.

After the war, and Lincoln's assassination in April of 1865, such ridicule vanished entirely. Northerners who had not particularly cared for the live Lincoln found themselves in agonies over his murder, and Southerners who had detested every fiber of his being generally knew better than to say so in public. Those who had loved him in life loved him still more in death, fashioning an unpopular wartime American president into a martyr and a saint, a kind of American Jesus who, like the Christian savior, had died on Good Friday.

Having been elevated to such a lofty stature, it is little wonder that the character of Abraham Lincoln did not appear on the American stage for nearly thirty years. To be sure, he frequently was referenced in melodramas set during and shortly after the war, usually by a character that had "met" Lincoln at some point in the past and had occasion to extol his virtues at length at some juncture in the play.²² Even more often, Lincoln's likeness was used as part of production set pieces, his portrait or bust mounted on stage

²¹William Russell Smith, "The Royal Ape: A Dramatic Poem," (Richmond: West and Johnson, 1863), 66.

²²See, for instance, Bartley Campbell's *The Virginian*, 1873, in Napier Wilt, ed., *The White Slave and Other Plays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.

as if to offer moral support to the characters.²³

The absence of the physical presence of Lincoln from the stage was a result not only of the real Lincoln's daunting posthumous reputation but also of the reputation of the American theatre in general during this era. Several prominent cultural historians have noted that this time period saw a distinct shift in the hierarchy of forms of cultural expression and the class divisions of those who consumed them. Lawrence W. Levine, for example, has argued that during the nineteenth century, elite patrons of the arts began to police new categories of "high" and "low" culture in order to segregate social classes between different public spaces.²⁴ Likewise, in his study of nineteenth-century manners, John F. Kasson has noted that "In an astonishingly short time, from roughly the end of the Civil War to the early twentieth century, there arose many of the nation's most renowned institutions of art, theater, and music Equally important but often overlooked, with this growth and specialization emerged an increasingly hierarchical conception of the performing arts."²⁵ In effect, popular entertainment was changing rapidly in this time period, frequently into forms that—ironically—were rather less popular. Where once the theatre was a place where the full gamut of society gathered, from the middling sorts clustered in the pit, to the wealthy in the lower tiers of boxes, to working men, servants, prostitutes, and African Americans in the top tier and cheap seats,

²³See, for example, George Melville Baker, "The Sculptor's Triumph: A National Allegory," in *Amateur Dramas for Parlor Theatricals, Evening Entertainments, and School Exhibitions*. Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1870.

²⁴See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

²⁵John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 216.

by the late nineteenth century this frightful and unrespectable egalitarianism was in the process of being quite literally disassembled.²⁶ The burgeoning wealth of the Gilded Age allowed cultural institutions to subsist on the donations of a select few citizens to keep their doors open, all but obviating their obligations to appease the hoi polloi.

Consequently, in the years after the Civil War, the performance hall transformed from an all-encompassing venue featuring many kinds of acts and many kinds of people to a set of highly individualized, class-oriented entertainments, from the symphony and the opera to nickelodeons and dance halls.²⁷

Of course, the theatre did not magically attain the status of a respectable institution the minute that seats became too expensive for day laborers to purchase. Well over a hundred years of moral suspicion toward the theatre on this side of the Atlantic alone was not likely to vanish overnight, nor was the stigma against actors quick to disperse. Indeed, as theatre historian Benjamin McArthur has observed, “Through most of history, until the late nineteenth century, players existed outside the boundaries of respectable society.”²⁸ Since the English Reformation, the Puritans had frowned on the theatre—objecting to its dishonesty in exhibiting the outward appearance of false emotions and beliefs—and their descendents in the United States were, if possible, even more suspicious of playacting.²⁹ Though the influence of Puritan ministers had flagged

²⁶Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 218-219.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 230-256.

²⁸Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), ix.

²⁹See Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 159-162; Michael O’Connell, “The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm, Anti-

by the late nineteenth century, especially as immigrants entered the nation and the populations of other religious groups eclipsed the Congregationalists, old prejudices died hard.³⁰ A stage representation of Lincoln, who had been likened to Jesus Christ across the pulpits of the nation after his death, may have seemed downright blasphemous.

Last but certainly not least of the reasons that Lincoln remained absent from the stage for so long were the circumstances of his death. Americans did not look kindly on the theatre after Lincoln's assassination occurred in one, and they were not particularly eager to put even a counterfeit version of him back at the scene of the crime. In 1870, the *Christian Recorder*, an African American newspaper published in Philadelphia, warned its readers about the dangers of the theatre, both moral and physical. "No one particular phase of wrong doing is attended with more personal danger than theatre going," the editors cautioned, pointing out that theatre fires had claimed, by its estimate, more than a thousand lives in Europe in the past fifty years. "Who will ever forget that Abraham Lincoln was slain not in the White House, by the cheerful fires of his own hearth-stone, but in a theatre?"³¹

Very few people, as it turned out. Theatre historian Thomas Postlewait has written that "For a history of American theatre, Lincoln's death is especially relevant—

Theatricalism, and the Image of the Elizabethan Theater," *ELH*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), 279-310.

³⁰See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977; Thomas Postlewait, "The Hieroglyphic Stage: American Theatre and Society, Post-Civil War to 1945," in Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol. 2: 1870-1945 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 145-148.

³¹"Theatre Going." *The Christian Recorder*, 21 May 1870. African American Newspapers, Accessible Archives, <www.accessible.com>.

and troubling—because the actor John Wilkes Booth assassinated the president.”³² While the Booth family of actors survived the tragedy with reputations surprisingly intact, Laura Keene, the leading lady of the ill-fated play *Our American Cousin*, never quite lived down her association with Lincoln’s death.³³ If you intended to have a long and prosperous dramatic career, you simply did not mix Abraham Lincoln and the stage.

Thus it came as quite a surprise when, in 1891, a Chicago theatre company proposed to do just that. McKee Rankin and Archie Gordon wrote and produced “Abraham Lincoln,” giving some credibility to the venture as Rankin had been a star of the western stage for many years.³⁴ Still, the public was not convinced that the time was finally ripe for a Lincoln show. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that a friend of Lincoln’s had confided to their editors that “One hundred years later, when two generations of men now living who remember him have been dead a half century or more, would be sufficiently early to dramatize the events of Lincoln’s life.”³⁵ The editors speculated that McKee and Gordon were banking on the boldness of “utilizing the canonized patriot as the central figure of the drama” to turn a profit, but remained

³²Postlewait, “The Hieroglyphic Stage,” 108.

³³Edwin Booth, John Wilkes’ older and more famous brother, was forced to give up acting for several months after Lincoln’s assassination, but as early as 1866 he resumed his career by starring in *Hamlet*, which would be his signature role for the next twenty-five years. In 1910, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* published a story claiming that Keene, along with everyone else who had been present at Lincoln’s death, suffered from a curse. See “Rathbone Ends Long List of Lincoln Party Tragedies,” *New York Times*, 4 September 1910, SM3.

³⁴See David R. Beasley, *McKee Rankin and the Heyday of the American Theatre*, Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002; Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

³⁵“It in Good Taste?” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 September 1891, 32.

suspicious of the producers' claims to have used Lincoln in the most reverent of manners.³⁶ They likened the fashion in which the public shrank from the idea of the play to the alarm generated by the production of a passion play four years earlier, presumably due to the belief that putting Jesus on the stage constituted a sacrilege. But actors, in fact, comprised the most vocal segment of the play's critics, alarmed at the possible ill effects of resurrecting not Abraham Lincoln but John Wilkes Booth on the stage. They were understandably loath to give the public a reminder of the disgrace they had been trying to expunge from the profession for over twenty years.³⁷

The play itself began with a vignette featuring several of Lincoln's cabinet in conference, with Senator Gale of New Hampshire recounting an incident when he had witnessed the President's outrage over seeing a slave girl on the auction block. Lincoln, he said, had sworn "If I ever get an opportunity to hit the institution of slavery, I will hit it, and hit it hard."³⁸ Lincoln's arrival on stage shortly thereafter coincided with his decision finally to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, a tableau of which ended the act on a triumphant note. The second act concerned itself with the conspirators' plotting at the house of Mrs. Surratt, while the third hastily depicted Lincoln's assassination and the subsequent death of Booth. Finally, three allegorical tableaux capped off the play, celebrating what it deemed three epochs of American history: "Independence," represented by Cornwallis's surrender, "Union," represented by Lee's surrender, and

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

“Freedom,” represented by the emancipation of slaves.³⁹

Elmer Grandin, who played Lincoln in the show, received good reviews. Chosen for his considerable stature and relative similarity of feature to Lincoln, Grandin was not particularly known for his great acting ability, but his performance in “Abraham Lincoln” surprised critics who knew him from previous roles in low comedy.⁴⁰ “Mr. Elmer Grandin received an enthusiastic reception when he made his first entrance as President Lincoln; indeed he has done so every night during the engagement,” the *Tribune* reported after the play premiered. “His excellent make-up and dignified appearance interest the auditors at once and they listen to him intently.”⁴¹ Though Grandin was well-received, ultimately the play was not. Theatre patrons evidently agreed with the sentiment that even twenty-five years after the titular character’s death, “Abraham Lincoln” was too soon. Attendance was slim, and the play closed a failure.⁴²

It is worth questioning, however, whether the play failed *only* because too little time had passed since the assassination. Many historians have argued convincingly that the 1890s were years of particularly virulent racism and racial violence in the United States, a time when following through on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment’s promises to African Americans took a back seat to sectional reconciliation. Gail Bederman has demonstrated how the image of the black rapist emerged during this time period in response to white men’s fears of racial and sexual enervation. Consequently, in

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰“Music and Drama.” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1891, 4.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²“Plays and Players.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 March 1906, 17.

1892, the number of lynchings in the South reached an all-time high: white mobs murdered 161 African Americans in that year alone.⁴³ While the act of lynching was confined mainly to the South, white Northerners were more likely to cheer on their southern counterparts than to protest their brutal injustice. The memory of the Civil War was also a casualty of this surge of racist sentiment. David W. Blight has traced how the emancipationist vision of the Civil War—which contended that the conflict was primarily about slavery, and that its true victory was in abolishing slavery—eroded after the war, becoming a dim memory by the fiftieth anniversary of the Gettysburg Address.⁴⁴ According to Blight, in different measures, reconciliationist and white supremacist interpretations replaced the emancipationist interpretation of the Civil War in this time period, the first gently blaming the war on no one, celebrating the bravery of combatants on both sides, and delicately avoiding mentioning slavery at all, the second overtly stating that emancipation and the era of Radical Republicanism had been a tragedy solved only by the “redemption” of white Anglo-Saxon rule.⁴⁵

In this light, Rankin and Gordon’s rendering of Lincoln and his legacy seems remarkably out of touch with prevailing contemporary ideas about the meaning of the Civil War. Placing the Emancipation Proclamation at the ideological center of the narrative and displaying a tableau of the Goddess of Liberty freeing black men and women from cotton fields may have turned off audiences more than the mere act of

⁴³Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 46.

⁴⁴See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 105, 291.

putting an actor in the guise of Lincoln on stage.⁴⁶ The play's reviewers hinted that its best scenes were the "beautiful domestic" depictions of the Lincoln family as well as the reproductions of some key examples of Lincoln's trademark humor and mercy.⁴⁷ "The domestic scenes introducing Lincoln are received with favor and are the most creditable of the piece," the *Chicago Daily Tribune* opined. "Mr. Gordon should continue his work of improvement . . . by obliterating the unnecessary melodramatic rubbish which detracts from the good effect of 'Abraham Lincoln.'"⁴⁸ Mr. Gordon would never get the chance. "Abraham Lincoln" closed, taking its emancipationist vision with it, and the character of Lincoln disappeared from the stage for another decade.

Mr. Chapin's Mr. Lincoln

When Lincoln finally did return to the footlights, it was under very different circumstances. In the early twentieth century, vaudeville ruled the stage, and character impersonations were newly in vogue. In 1905, Julian Eltinge made a splash touring as a female impersonator, starting a trend of cross-gender impersonations as popular entertainment.⁴⁹ The term "impersonator" began to edge its way into common parlance, where "actor" or "player" had been sufficient catch-alls in the past. When the character of Lincoln reemerged in the American spotlight, it was not as a character but as an

⁴⁶"The Stage." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 September 1891, 7.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸"Music and Drama." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1891, 4.

⁴⁹See Wilmeth and Bigsby, *The Cambridge History of the American Theatre*, vol. 2, 58; John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 92-98.

impersonation—a slight but significant difference. Where Rankin and Gordon had failed, a new Lincoln presenter would succeed, by billing his act not as a play or allegory, but as a way of bringing the character of Lincoln to life on stage through respectful imitation.

The new Lincoln was Benjamin Chapin, an Ohio native from the very sort of Puritan family that disapproved of the theatre. But Chapin's penchant for the dramatic won out, and he spent his college days on the amateur stage until a friend suggested that his looks and height might translate into a convincing imitation of the Civil War president.⁵⁰ Chapin believed he was just the man for the job. He was not a professional actor, nor did he intend to be, skillfully evading the question of whether Lincoln was a subject too sacred for representation in the sordid sphere of melodrama. He joked that his resemblance to Lincoln was neither the result of the actor's artifice in making himself up nor mere a coincidence, but rather the result of a kind of physical osmosis. He told the *New York Times* that "It is more probable that I look like him because I have so long studied and revered him."⁵¹ Chapin set his sights on doing one thing and one thing only: becoming so familiar with the ideas, mannerisms, and biography of Abraham Lincoln that he could reproduce the sixteenth president flawlessly for the gratification of genteel audiences.

True to form, Chapin's mission was, first and foremost, educational. In a newspaper profile, Chapin recounted his reasons for becoming Mr. Lincoln: "It always surprised me," Chapin said,

⁵⁰“To Portray Lincoln on the Stage.” *New York Times*, 4 February 1906, X4.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

That while in all the countries of Europe the great dead were made to live again upon the stage, as typical of the pride and patriotism of their respective nations, and that while even in America the history of England was taught by the drama of Shakespeare and others, there were no serious dramatizations of the great characters in American history. Of all the great Americans whose existence and environment were the most intensely dramatic, Lincoln seemed to me to stand foremost.⁵²

Accordingly, Chapin set about the task of creating the character of Lincoln in a way that would delight and edify American audiences by carefully avoiding the miscues of his predecessors. He began his career as Lincoln not on the stage, but in churches, lecture halls and lyceum courses, ensconced within the safe confines of their erudition and piety. From 1903 to 1905, Chapin portrayed “the personality of the late President Lincoln” at the Eastern Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., at a benefit for the Beecher Memorial Fund, at a fundraiser for a Chicago hospital for convalescent children, and at the annual meeting of the New York Presbyterian Union.⁵³ For several years, Chapin built a reputation as an impersonator whose performances were clean, educational, and beneficial to the public.

Chapin also took advantage of a new cultural venue in the burgeoning chautauqua movement. Originally founded as a Sunday school institute in upstate New York, chautauqua became a nationwide summer educational movement with religious overtones. Lecturers, music groups, elocutionary readers, and other performers whose

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³See “Lincoln and Davis Cabin.” *New York Times*, 23 March 1903, 14; “An Evening with Lincoln.” *The Washington Post*, 7 June 1903, 5; “Chapin Portrays Lincoln.” *The Washington Post*, 11 June 1903, 12; “Pound Party for Orphanage.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 November 1903, 56; “Re-enacts Life of Lincoln.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 November 1903, 7; “Christian Activities in New York.” *New York Observer*, 4 May 1905, 18.

messages meshed with chautauqua's goals of religious education and uplift began making a circuit of rural encampments all over the United States starting in 1904.⁵⁴ Chautauqua lectures allowed American Protestants who were wary of the theatre to take in entertainments sanctioned by their churches.⁵⁵ Chapin toured the chautauqua circuit with his Lincoln impersonation for several years, reciting Lincoln's words and imitating his gestures to religious gatherings. For Lincoln's one hundredth birthday in 1909 Chapin presented a play called "Lincoln at the White House" for chautauqua audiences (fig. 2.4). Reverends sung the play's praises in an advertising brochure that Chapin circulated. The Reverend Rockwell Harmon Potter "found the chief worth [of the play] in the interpretation it gives of the great national crisis and of the mighty soul who, in that hour, was chosen of God to lead and lift the people."⁵⁶ Other notables quoted in the brochure—such as Mark Twain, Frederick Grant, and Thomas Dixon, Jr.—extolled the veracity, cleanliness, and tenderness of Chapin's Lincoln.⁵⁷

In building a "holy" Lincoln suitable for religious audiences, Chapin also built an image of Lincoln that was considerably less political than Rankin and Gordon's version.

⁵⁴See Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 1-2; John S. Gentile, *Cast of One: One-Person Shows from the Chautauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 47. Note that while the summer Sunday school institute meetings at Chautauqua Lake started in 1874, independent chautauquas and the "circuit chautauqua" movement did not begin until the early twentieth century.

⁵⁵See Gentile, *Cast of One*, 5.

⁵⁶"Benjamin Chapin's famous historical production: Lincoln at the White House." (New York: Frank Press rey Co., 1908), 5. University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, <<http://hdl.loc.gov>>.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 2, 6.

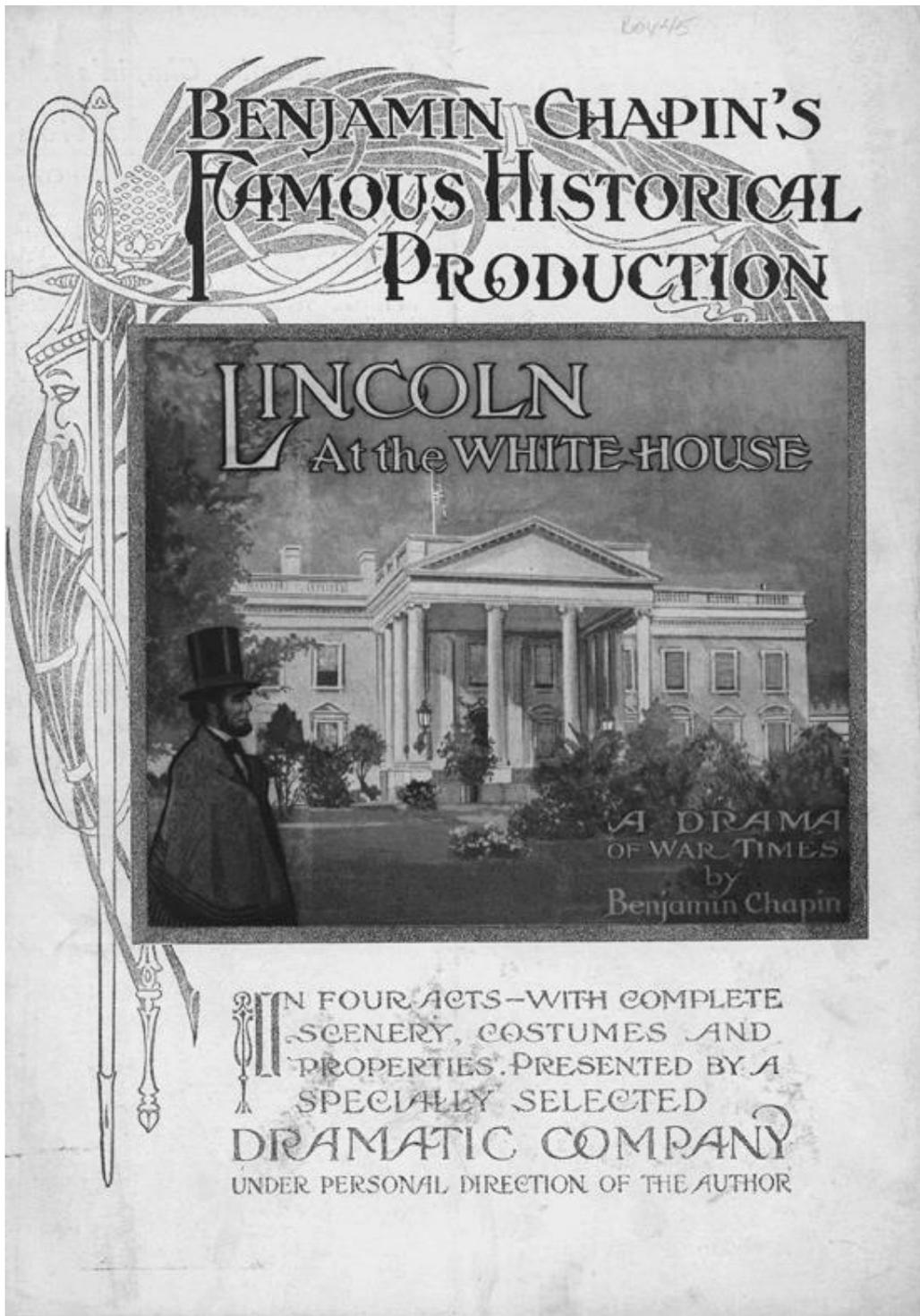


Figure 2.4. A brochure for Benjamin Chapin's chautauqua performance. Benjamin Chapin, "Lincoln at the White House," 1909.

The *Washington Post* reported that Chapin's performance featured Lincoln "in his home life, when he was free from cares of state."⁵⁸ Politics were reduced to Lincoln waiting for news of victory at Gettysburg and "tactfully harmonizing differences" between Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and General Joe Hooker.⁵⁹ Gone was the Emancipation Proclamation; gone, indeed, was all mention of slaves or slavery. Chapin's Lincoln belonged entirely to the era of reconciliation—so much so that the same article in which the *New York Times* announced Chapin's first performance also noted with amusement that the log cabin he had requested to use in his presentation was a startling amalgamation of blue and gray. The editors reported that Frederick Thompson and Elmer S. Dundy, proprietors of Coney Island's Luna Park, had purchased the log cabin in which Lincoln reputedly was born with the intention of exhibiting it at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, along with Jefferson Davis's cabin birthplace. After the exhibition, however, the company mixed up the logs while disassembling the two cabins and shipping them back to Coney Island, and, as a result, had loaned Chapin a half-Lincoln, half-Davis cabin for his performance by mistake. "The parts had fitted so well that the mix-up was not noticed when they were put together at Coney Island," the *Times* noted. "As the press agent put it, the half Lincoln half Davis cabin, representing the North and South in strange union, and a queer wiping out of the Mason and Dixon line, as it were, will be exhibited."⁶⁰

This "queer wiping out of the Mason and Dixon line" was characteristic of

⁵⁸"Chapin Portrays Lincoln." *The Washington Post*, 11 June 1903, 12.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰"Lincoln and Davis Cabin." *New York Times*, 23 March 1903, 14.

Chapin's conciliatory representation of Lincoln, which continued as he began to make forays onto the legitimate stage. In 1906, Chapin's play "Lincoln," a four-act character drama that depicted the president's life from the fall of Fort Sumter to the war's end, premiered in Hartford. Chapin claimed it took him ten years to compile the finished script, as he added and subtracted scenes based on their reception by lyceum audiences.⁶¹ With little of his onstage time taken up by the task of saving the Union, Chapin's Lincoln instead bickered good-naturedly with his hotheaded wife, doted on Tad, and even did a bit of matchmaking between his wife's niece and a young captain.⁶² Chapin claimed that "I have tried to write a play . . . that shall be at once human and full of heart interest, *giving no offense to any section*, and above all which shall show Lincoln the man, as well as the master, his humor and homeliness, as well as his heroism, and before the altar of liberty, his holiness."⁶³ His determination not to give offense to either North or South stripped the political import from his depiction of Lincoln's presidency, particularly as it concerned the most divisive issue of all—the end of slavery.

Reviewers noticed how carefully Chapin had crafted his Lincoln, some more appreciatively than others. Franklin Fyles, entertainment correspondent for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, commented that Chapin's play was "a most sympathetic and respectful Lincoln drama shrewdly calculated to lead church folk to the theatre, and also satisfactory

⁶¹Franklin Fyles, "The Triangle Original; Little in 'The Title Mart.'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 February 1906, G1.

⁶²"A Stage Lincoln." *New York Times*, 27 March 1906, 9.

⁶³"To Portray Lincoln on the Stage." *New York Times*, 4 February 1906, X4, emphasis mine.

to people with the theatrical habit.”⁶⁴ The *New York Times* thought that “People who like to see their historical heroes for a couple of hours from the point of view of an orchestra chair are likely to find much to interest them. . . . For those who shrink from the possible indiscretions of such attempts, Mr. Chapin’s impersonation contains, after all, little to offend.”⁶⁵ Perhaps *too* little to offend. *Town and Country*’s reviewer complained that while his physical impersonation of Lincoln was compelling, “that stern figure in American politics, as represented by Benjamin Chapin, is mildly unconvincing.”⁶⁶ Allowing that Chapin’s capacity for creative imagination was necessarily curtailed by the public’s expectations for Lincoln’s behavior, the magazine’s reviewer still felt that Chapin had exaggerated the “humorously reminiscent, story-telling vein” of the president at the expense of “that forcefulness and unobtrusive determination which achieved so much.”⁶⁷ In other words, this soft, sentimental version of Lincoln, who pardoned often and pondered much, should not be construed as the entirety of the man who had won the Civil War and freed four million slaves.

Nevertheless, Chapin’s sentimental Lincoln was enormously successful. After Hartford, he toured Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. The review of the New York production at the Liberty Theatre observed that “From the moment Mr. Chapin appeared on the stage in his really notable make-up he had his audience with him through the

⁶⁴Fyles, “The Triangle Original; Little in ‘The Title Mart,’” G1.

⁶⁵“A Stage Lincoln.” *New York Times*, 27 March 1906, p. 9.

⁶⁶“The Theatre.” *Town and Country*, 7 April 1906, p. 28.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

somewhat deliberately commingled smiles and tears of his piece.”⁶⁸ When the orchestra played “The Star-Spangled Banner” after Lincoln received the news of the victory at Gettysburg, the audience gave Chapin a standing ovation.⁶⁹ So convincingly did Chapin strip Lincoln of his political message that no one batted an eye when his play premiered back-to-back with a theatrical version of *The Clansman*, Thomas Dixon’s condemnation of Radical Reconstruction, which would shortly thereafter become the film *Birth of a Nation*.⁷⁰ Chapin even served as a last-minute substitute at a Chicago Banker’s Club banquet for Mrs. La Salle Corbell Pickett, widow of the by-then-deceased General George C. Pickett, when she was detained by her son’s illness. In Mrs. Pickett’s letter expressing her regrets, she said “The stories of my old south, of the old plantation days, and a people unto themselves such as the world will never see again, of the old black mummies and daddies who belong to a yesterday that has no dawning tomorrow, I had hoped to give you.”⁷¹ The Banker’s Club gave them Chapin instead, apparently under the impression that his version of the story of the Civil War was more or less interchangeable with hers.

With his reputation thus established, Chapin expanded his Lincoln act into other cultural forms, including the increasingly respectable medium of vaudeville, and the

⁶⁸“A Stage Lincoln.” *New York Times*, 27 March 1906, 9.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰“Abraham Lincoln as a Stage Figure.” *New York Times*, 1 April 1906, X1.

⁷¹“Sad News Keeps Widow Home.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 April 1911, 7.

popular new entertainment of motion pictures.⁷² He offered prizes to local children for essays on Lincoln, usually in the form of tickets to his performances, and advertised his plays and movies as wonderful educational tools.⁷³ Chapin also established the tradition of featuring a “live Lincoln” at events associated with commemorating his birthday or the Civil War at large. Chapin planned his play “Lincoln in the White House” to coincide with the one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, and organizations snapped up the opportunity to have Lincoln himself speak at community events celebrating the occasion. New York City designated February 12, 1909 as a day of celebration, and Chapin impersonated Lincoln at Cooper Union, site of one of the president’s most famous speeches.⁷⁴ The Los Angeles Shakespeare Club invited Chapin as the sixteenth president to their 1911 function for Lincoln’s birthday, and the Chicago chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution did the same the following year, also inviting the members of all thirty-seven Chicago posts of the Grand Army of the Republic.⁷⁵ Evidently the D.A.R. believed that the G.A.R would find Chapin a convincing replacement for their lost commander-in-chief.

The contemporary military also liked Chapin’s living representation of Lincoln.

⁷²See Gentile, *Cast of One*, 48; “Music and the Stage.” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1907, 115; “Vaudeville.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 August 1907, 12.

⁷³See “Benjamin Chapin’s famous historical production: Lincoln at the White House,” 8; “Additional Offer to Public School Children; One thousand seats for ‘Lincoln at the White House,’ at the Garden Theatre, to selected participants in the Lincoln Contest.” *New York Times*, 31 January 1909, S3.

⁷⁴“Whole City to Join in Honoring Lincoln.” *New York Times*, 11 February 1909, 5.

⁷⁵“Cities and Towns of Los Angeles County – Assiduously Doing Politics.” 12 February 1911, 110; “Society, Meetings and Entertainments.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 February 1912, 12.

When the United States finally entered the First World War, Chapin appeared as Lincoln to encourage enlistment at a 1917 recruitment rally in New York City.⁷⁶ In a review of Chapin's cycle of Lincoln biopics entitled "The Son of Democracy," released in 1918, one critic remarked that the films were of particular interest because "President Wilson . . . and other great men who are directing America's part in the war, continually go to Lincoln for guidance, and his spirit dominates the conduct of America's fight for democracy."⁷⁷ Chapin's onscreen portrayal had become a direct conduit to the spirit of Lincoln.

Indeed, Chapin's impersonation of Lincoln was so successful that audiences sometimes had difficulty judging where Lincoln ended and Chapin began. The *Hartford Post* wrote that in viewing Chapin's impersonation, "The auditor forgot it was a play and viewed history in the making, a great man's character in its hour of trial, and saw the throes of a nation, suggested, not painted."⁷⁸ One reviewer said that he "wanted to rush out into the street and shout 'Come, come quick! Lincoln has come back and is in the White House! I've just seen and heard him! It was his sad deep face—and I heard him talking about the War, and then he smiled and told a story. Come, hurry, or he will be gone!'"⁷⁹ More than just forgetting that Chapin was *not* Lincoln, however, contemporaries often used Chapin's image to substitute for Lincoln, even when Chapin's performances were not involved. When running a story about Abraham Lincoln in June,

⁷⁶"Army's 'Live Wire' Tells of Recruiting." *New York Times*, 10 July 1917, 5.

⁷⁷"Mr. Chapin's Lincoln." *The Sun*, 3 February 1918, SO9.

⁷⁸"Benjamin Chapin's famous historical production: Lincoln at the White House," 5.

⁷⁹"Benjamin Chapin as Lincoln." *Bay View Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 8 (May 1911), 538.

1906, the magazine *Current Literature* illustrated an article about a biography of Lincoln with pictures of Benjamin Chapin (fig. 5).⁸⁰

Chapin's depiction of Abraham Lincoln has endured in many ways in American popular culture, and indeed the precedent he set would go on to characterize the major facets of Lincoln's representation on stage and screen throughout most of the twentieth century. It is worth keeping in mind that Lincoln the tender-hearted Christian and Lincoln the gentle family man were not necessarily natural representations of an American figure whose first duties were political, not emotional. This narrative of Lincoln does not reflect historical reality—at least, not all of it. While the real Lincoln *did* have rather a soft heart, and he *was* a kind father, he was also a man of indefatigable ambition, a shrewd politician, and a backcountry lawyer who could wax downright crude. He spent every day in the White House directing a war, not living a heartwarming folk tale. The theatrical and cinematic conventions we associate with Lincoln today did not organically evolve from the historical record; rather, they were deliberately created to appease white, largely middle-class audiences of the early twentieth century, who preferred the tender emotions of sectional reconciliation to the political message of emancipation.

“There he is! There’s the President. Hurray for Mr. Lincoln!”

Chapin's legacy for Lincoln and Lincoln actors went beyond just his onscreen persona. The slippage between Lincoln impersonators and Lincoln himself, demonstrated by

⁸⁰ “The Most Perfect Ruler of Men the World Has Ever Seen.” *Current Literature*, June 1906, vol. XL, no. 6, p. 608-609.



SLEEPLESS BENEATH A LOAD OF CARE

Lincoln's gauntness in his closing year of life—a gauntness made effective in Benjamin Chapin's impersonation—is attributed in part to his lack of opportunities to get to bed.

Figure 2.5. *Current Literature's* substitution of Chapin's image for Lincoln's. "The Most Perfect Ruler of Men the World Has Ever Seen." *Current Literature*, June 1906, vol. XL, no. 6, 609.

Current Literature's use of photographs of Chapin when describing the historical Lincoln (when there was certainly no shortage of photographs of the original), became a recurring phenomenon over the next three generations of Lincoln performance. Lincoln actors and impersonators became at times interchangeable with the real Lincoln, appearing at state functions, answering questions as Lincoln, even defending Lincoln's causes when not in character. Audiences who saw actors who played Lincoln in the street often addressed them as if they were actually the sixteenth president, even when they weren't in costume.

As Chapin's career as Lincoln wound down with the close of the First World War, new actors and impersonators took up the role. The burgeoning movie industry embraced Lincoln as a character, and many of the earliest films depicted the popular topic of the Civil War. Joseph Henabery played the doomed president in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, which cast Radical Reconstruction as a time when black rapists and corrupt black politicians terrorized the South, forcing the valorous Ku Klux Klan to restore order. *The Crisis*, an adaptation of a novel about the western theatre of the Civil War, chose Sam Drane, Benjamin Chapin's understudy, to play its Lincoln.⁸¹ But it was Frank McGlynn, Sr., who became the next household name synonymous with Lincoln.

McGlynn, like Chapin, built his reputation through his stage interpretation of Lincoln, but he would go on to play Lincoln in twelve feature films as cinema moved into its golden age, including *The Littlest Rebel*, *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, and *The Plainsman* (fig. 2.6). McGlynn came into the spotlight when he was cast as the lead in

⁸¹“Press Club Sees ‘The Crisis.’” *The Washington Post*, 9 March 1917, 5.



FRANK MCGLYNN as ABRAHAM LINCOLN
BLACKSTONE PHOTO BY NITZL

Figure 2.6. Frank McGlynn as Lincoln. "Frank McGlynn as Abraham Lincoln." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 September 1920.

John Drinkwater's 1919 Broadway hit, "Abraham Lincoln."⁸² As a total unknown, McGlynn came with no prior associations for audiences or reviewers, and consequently they seemed to embrace him as truly *being* Lincoln without reservation. Alexander Woollcott, the *New York Times*' drama critic, actually referred to the distracting memories of actors in previous roles as "ghosts," commenting outright that one of the most important reasons for "the success of 'Abraham Lincoln' is the fact that Mr. McGlynn trails behind him no such 'ghosts' of former roles."⁸³ Woollcott continued:

As the play advances and its curious spell takes hold of you, you no longer think how like McGlynn is to Lincoln. You forget McGlynn entirely and feel father that this is Lincoln. By the great fifth scene you have the complete illusion that you are eavesdropping on history.⁸⁴

Reviewers were so impressed with McGlynn's likeness that they even compared him to those other three-dimensional representations of Lincoln on the landscape: statues. "In appearance he suggests the strange Barnard statue, tall, lanky, awkward, but he has caught in a wonderful way the interior spirit of Lincoln," the *Baltimore Sun* commented, referring to a particularly lean statue of Lincoln by George Grey Barnard in Cincinnati. For the *Sun*, it was as if the statue had come to life: "The great man seems to live again."⁸⁵

So much did the great man seem to live again that some members of the audience felt that they ought to have a say in how Lincoln's story should go—after all, if Lincoln

⁸²“What News on the Rialto?” *New York Times*, 14 March 1920, BR5.

⁸³“Rewriting ‘Abraham Lincoln.’” *New York Times*, 11 April 1920, X2.

⁸⁴“Ghosts that Mar Illusions.” *The Washington Post*, 18 April 1920, 44.

⁸⁵“This Week’s Offerings at Local Theatres.” *The Sun*, 7 December 1919, SN6.

had come back to life through McGlynn, unsatisfying or unsavory aspects of his life's narrative could be solved or sanitized. An article in the *New York Times* called "Rewriting 'Abraham Lincoln'" related the letters that McGlynn received from playgoers suggesting (or demanding) that he alter his performance in various ways. The Anti-Saloon League objected to Lincoln serving hard cider to the Republican delegates who came to his home to announce his presidential nomination. (They were also of the opinion that Grant's whiskey bottle ought to be taken away from him.) A Congressman wrote that he wished Ann Rutledge were in the play as Lincoln's love interest rather than the much-maligned Mary Todd. One man wrote to McGlynn with an entirely different script for the last scene of the play. He thought that Lincoln should sit up on his death bed and quote the last verse of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Then, after he died, something similar to a Greek chorus would instruct the audience on the immortality of Lincoln's memory, and "sing very slowly and softly: Glory, glory, hallelujah; his soul goes marching on."⁸⁶ If Lincoln had come back to life through McGlynn, then his story could be altered to suit the needs and ideals of the present.

Contemporaries also expected McGlynn to live as Lincoln not only on the stage but also in the street. The Springfield, Illinois Chamber of Commerce was miffed when McGlynn refused to be filmed on the streets or in the Lincoln homestead dressed as the town's favorite son; evidently several motion picture companies had hoped to film him walking around Lincoln's old haunts in his costume and makeup.⁸⁷ When Drinkwater's

⁸⁶"Rewriting 'Abraham Lincoln,'" X2,

⁸⁷"Plays Lincoln on the Stage, But Not in Springfield Street." *New York Times*, 22 March 1922, 1. McGlynn received widespread approbation for his decision not to wander the streets of Springfield in the guise of Lincoln; ironically, that McGlynn refused to do so

play opened in the Illinois capital McGlynn did, however, go to visit the tomb of Lincoln (dressed as himself in suit and tie). He knelt to pray by the gates of the tomb and left a wreath of remembrance.⁸⁸

Although McGlynn resisted overstepping his bounds in portraying Lincoln outside of the theatre, he was less reticent to consort with Lincoln's things. He was the guest of honor at a 1920 tea party given by the Chicago Historical Society, which used the chairs and tea service from Lincoln's White House. McGlynn posed for photographs wearing Lincoln's own hat and shawl, sitting in the Lincoln family pew from his Springfield church.

McGlynn later wrote a memoir about his experiences acting as Lincoln in Drinkwater's play in theatres across the country. *Sidelights on Lincoln* included McGlynn's thoughts on everything from the exact way Lincoln wore his famous shawl to whether he emphasized the words 'of,' 'by,' and 'for' when delivering the Gettysburg address to his real position on emancipation and African American citizenship.⁸⁹ On this last point, McGlynn, like his predecessor Chapin, tended toward the reconciliationist point of view. He thought that "In his play, Drinkwater makes Lincoln very much more of an Abolitionist than does history," and took pains to illustrate the ways in which

was seen as a sign of his truly Lincolnesque nature. See McGlynn, *Sidelights on Lincoln*, (Los Angeles: Wetzel, 1947), 135-139. He would later break his personal commitment to never appear as Lincoln outside of the theatre when the faculty of Knox College asked him to work with their students to stage a reenactment of the Lincoln-Douglas debates on their seventieth anniversary. See McGlynn, 143-144; "History Repeats Itself Seventy Years Later," *New York Times*, 14 October 1928, C1.

⁸⁸"Bears Tribute to Tomb of Lincoln." *Los Angeles Times*, 31 August 1922, II13.

⁸⁹Frank McGlynn, *Sidelights on Lincoln*, 58, 86-90, 97, 148-154.

Lincoln had disavowed any interest in freeing the slaves in the South.⁹⁰ He also recounted a few of his experiences touring in states with southern sympathies. In Louisville, Kentucky, during a scene in which Lincoln was talking about states' rights and slavery, he observed "a man and a woman in the auditorium rise and deliberately walk out of the theatre."⁹¹ He continued: "My thought was that they had taken offense at the argument on the stage; and if that were the case, I feel sure that, had they remained to see the entire play, they would have changed their attitude and realized that Mr. Drinkwater had placed in the language of Lincoln, sentiments which showed his great love for the people of the South."⁹² When a woman presented him with a series of political cartoons drawn by her father during the Civil War, which "lampooned Lincoln and represented him as a sort of baboon dancing with a lot of negroes," he was "so incensed . . . that I tore the contents into bits and threw them in the wastebasket."⁹³ Throughout the book, McGlynn advocated destroying anything that might impugn the good name of Lincoln—which apparently included evidence that he was an ardent supporter of abolition.⁹⁴

⁹⁰Ibid, 157.

⁹¹Ibid., 154-155.

⁹²Ibid., 155.

⁹³Ibid., 58.

⁹⁴One item that McGlynn thought should be destroyed was a spurious almanac, once shown to him at the Chicago Historical Society. Lincoln reputedly saved his childhood friend Jack Armstrong from a murder conviction by using an almanac to show that his accuser, who claimed to see Armstrong "in the moonlight" could not have done so because the crime was committed during the new moon. One twist on this tale was that Lincoln had doctored an almanac from another year to fool the jury. McGlynn refused to

McGlynn was conscious of the difficulty of the task of acting the part of a beloved historical figure and the unique challenges it posed compared to acting fictional characters or general types. "I was appalled by the enormity of my responsibility," he wrote. "The task of presenting to the American people a characterization which would convince them of the living presence of Abraham Lincoln was mine."⁹⁵ Consequently, he took special care to record his triumphs, especially when Lincoln's contemporaries told him how he had brought Lincoln to life for them once more. On one occasion, he reported, a Lieutenant General Nelson A. Miles had found him after a performance to say that he had served in the army during the Civil War and met Lincoln on many occasions. "I don't know where they dug you up," the General said, "but *you're Lincoln*."⁹⁶ Another man, who said he had spent time in the White House as a young man because his father was an army contractor who frequently met with Lincoln, wrote to McGlynn to tell him that

Your impersonation of the great man was so lifelike and so absolutely perfect in pose, manner, gesture and facial expression that it put me in a trance. I lost all knowledge of time, of the theatre, of the audience, even of the other actors on the stage and, for the moment, I was transplanted back to the days of the Civil War, and I sat spellbound, seeing and hearing my beloved Lincoln in the very flesh as I had so often done nearly sixty years ago.⁹⁷

It is possible that McGlynn, with his fastidious research, managed to reproduce Lincoln's mannerisms so exactly that acquaintances of Lincoln were fooled, though at times it

believe that Lincoln would stoop to such dishonesty and insisted that the false book ought to be destroyed. See McGlynn, *Sidelights on Lincoln*, 191-193.

⁹⁵McGlynn, *Sidelights on Lincoln*, 37.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 84-85.

seemed as if audiences were so eager to see McGlynn as a perfect Lincoln that they projected McGlynn's personal characteristics back onto Lincoln. When McGlynn asked Civil War veterans what Lincoln's voice was like, some said they could not remember, others—after seeing the play—said, "Well, very much like yours."⁹⁸ The editor of Munsey's magazine probably said it best when he commented that "Really, the portrait of the great martyr as expressed through Frank McGlynn is so Lincoln-like that in fifty years from now it will be difficult to separate *Frank* from *Abraham*."⁹⁹

McGlynn, as a kind of Lincoln incarnate, often was presented with bits of Lincolniana by admirers, or at the very least opportunities to handle Lincoln relics, out of some apparent inclination to reunite objects imbued with Lincoln's spirit with a man who looked like him. When Drinkwater's play came to Washington, D.C., McGlynn was invited to visit the War Department, where he had the privilege of seeing the items preserved from Lincoln's assassination, including the derringer which Booth used to kill Lincoln and the flattened bullet that the surgeons had pried from Lincoln's skull.¹⁰⁰ During his 1922 trip to Springfield, McGlynn was honored with a private tour of the Lincoln home, where he saw the letters of Lincoln's son Willie, who died early in Lincoln's presidency.¹⁰¹ The owners of Lincoln's famous shawl even gave McGlynn a bit of it to keep, along with a letter stating its provenance and authenticity.¹⁰²

⁹⁸Ibid., 95-96.

⁹⁹Ibid., 259.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 65-55.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 142.

¹⁰²Ibid., 91-92.

Lincoln impersonators had become rather commonplace by the 1930s, a decade of particular interest in Lincoln. The Great Depression increased the nation's appreciation for the common man, and Lincoln was the king of common men. Three major biopics about Lincoln came out in these years, starring three very different Lincolns: Walter Huston in D.W. Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln*, which premiered in 1930, Henry Fonda in John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* in 1939, and Raymond Massey (fig. 2.7) in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), adapted from Robert Sherwood's play of the same name. Meanwhile, Frank McGlynn continued to star as Lincoln in cameo roles in no fewer than eleven motion pictures.¹⁰³

In the 1940s and 1950s, Massey assumed the mantle as the "reigning Mr. Lincoln," passed on to him from McGlynn and Chapin. He played Abraham Lincoln on stage over 900 times in Sherwood's play before the screen adaptation, and claimed that he never tired of the role.¹⁰⁴ He, too, reported being frequently mistaken for the "real Lincoln," but he didn't have McGlynn's scruples about appearing as Lincoln outside of the theatre. He attended Roosevelt's third inauguration in 1941 as Lincoln, and when the police escorted him into his reserved seat, someone in the crowd shouted, "There he is! There's the President! Hurray for Mr. Lincoln!"¹⁰⁵

A Canadian by birth, Massey felt it necessary at times to defend his worthiness to

¹⁰³See *Are We Civilized?* (1934); *The Littlest Rebel* (1935); *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936); *The Plainsman* (1936), among others.

¹⁰⁴Raymond Massey, quoted in Frank S. Nugent, "The Role I Liked Best," *New York Times*, 23 February 1940, Margaret Herrick Library, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* production files.

¹⁰⁵Raymond Massey as told to Ray Pierre, "My Life with Abe Lincoln." *Pageant*, May 1950, 133.

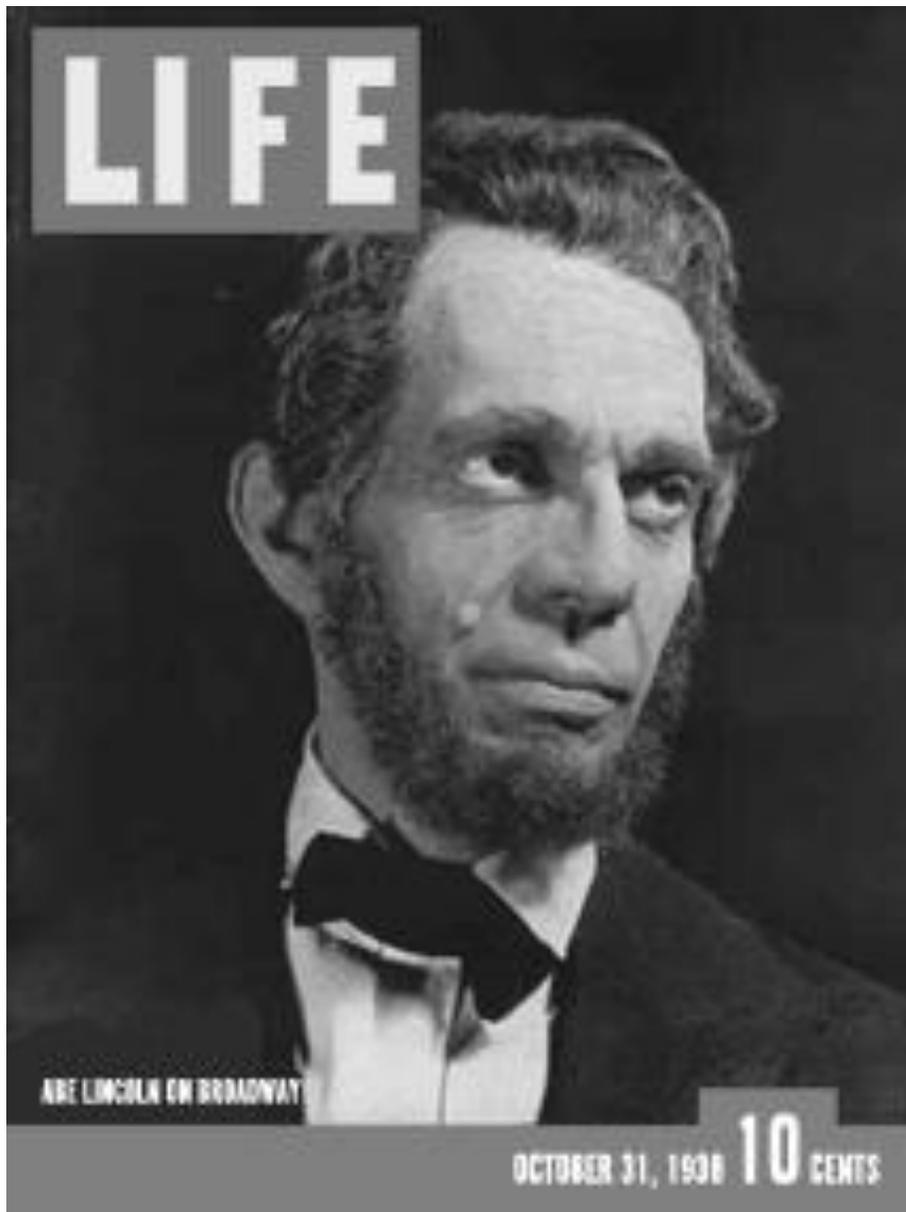


Figure 2.7. Raymond Massey as Abraham Lincoln. *Life*, 31 October 1938.

play the great American hero. In an “autobiography” published after *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* came to theatres, Massey proudly reported that his ancestors had lived in the same town as Lincoln’s ancestors during the early seventeenth century. “Had my family been more prophetic people perhaps they would have been more observant of the Lincoln family . . . [they] could have handed down to me three centuries later valuable data which I used in interpreting the Lincoln spirit on stage and screen.”¹⁰⁶ Despite the lack of documentation, Massey concluded that it was highly likely that his family and the Lincolns had been acquainted during the 1630s.

Like Benjamin Chapin’s educational chautauqua performances, Massey’s promoters emphasized the value of his films for schoolchildren. The Motion-Picture Committee of the Department of Secondary Teachers of the National Education Association recommended *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and provided a guide to for discussion which encouraged children to muse about the life of Lincoln by looking at stills of Massey. One, which showed Massey dressed as a twenty-something Lincoln, asked students “What can you read in the face of young Lincoln?” as though Massey were the historical figure and not just a representation.¹⁰⁷ The guide’s introduction raved, “Raymond Massey *is* Abe Lincoln! These scenes bear the very stamp of *reality!* And so we get the distinct impression that we are witnesses to ‘greatness passing by’ as we watch

¹⁰⁶Raymond Massey, “An Autobiography . . .” *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* production file microfiche, Margaret Herrick Library, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

¹⁰⁷“A Guide to the Appreciation of ‘Abe Lincoln in Illinois.’” *Photoplay Studies*, vol. V, no. 25 (1939), 7. *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* production file, Margaret Herrick Library.

the character and destiny of Abraham Lincoln unfold before our very eyes . . .”¹⁰⁸

Moreover, the guide suggested that when audiences watched *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, they could feel like participants in the events of Lincoln’s life, from “the wild chase of the pigs through the water and up the steep banks of the river” to “carrying proudly aloft our banner, ‘Sangamon County for the Tall Sucker.’”¹⁰⁹ Not only did Massey’s performance bring Lincoln back to life, its promoters claimed, but it acted as a kind of time machine that allowed viewers to feel they had known and supported Lincoln in the days long before he became a president or a national myth.

Ready, Willing, and Abe L

Massey was the last of the great screen Lincolns, known for inhabiting the role. After his final turn as Lincoln in 1962’s *How the West Was Won*, professional Lincoln impersonation moved away from the silver screen and back toward the lecture circuit whence it had come. From the 1960s through the 1990s, playing Lincoln for an audience was more akin to impersonating Elvis than any other form of entertainment, albeit with considerably less singing.

Unlike the early days of Lincoln presenting, when a single person like Benjamin Chapin held the title of reigning Lincoln, in the late twentieth century hundreds of men made it their vocation or avocation to impersonate Lincoln. Perhaps inspired by the growing interest in Civil War reenactment occasioned by the Civil War centennial in the

¹⁰⁸Roy W. Hatch, introduction, “A Guide to the Appreciation of ‘Abe Lincoln in Illinois.’” *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* production files, Margaret Herrick Library, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

early 1960s, ordinary men took on the role in unprecedented numbers.¹¹⁰ A Lincoln presenter—and Virginian—named John C. Collison reenacted Lincoln’s first inaugural address in Washington, D.C. on its one hundredth anniversary in 1961.¹¹¹ Being Mr. Lincoln was a growing profession, which even developed its own professional organization and newsletter, full of tips and tricks and anecdotes for those who wished to don the beard and stovepipe hat.

Amateur Lincolns began to sell their entertainment through pamphlets advertising their services of inspiration and edification. Charles L. Brame, a Lincoln presenter active in southern California during the 1970s, billed himself as “The Living Lincoln,” available to give presentations of varying lengths to area schools and business meetings. He advertised his one-man show with a pamphlet featuring an image of the Lincoln penny bearing his face, which matched Lincoln’s features better than his bouffant hairstyle (fig. 2.8). Brame’s pamphlet was filled with testimonials from the school teachers of San Bernardino, who professed that he captivated their students and made history live for them. But, like all Lincolns since Benjamin Chapin, Brame’s list of possible topics for his shows focused on Lincoln’s family and personal life. According to his pamphlet, his monologue “includes anecdotes about his early childhood, his relationships with his footloose father, his beatdown mother, and the supportive, beloved stepmother,” as well as tales about his courtship, marriage, and children. It did not include anything

¹¹⁰See Rory Turner, “Bloodless Battles: The Civil War Reenacted,” in *TDR*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Winter, 1990), 123.

¹¹¹“Lincoln’s Inauguration Marked in Washington,” *Illinois State Journal-Register*, 5 March 1961, p.6, Lincoln Impersonators file A-L, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

The Living Lincoln



*A Dramatic Monologue
presented by
Mr. Charles L. Brame
M.A., American History, University of Missouri*

Figure 2.8. A pamphlet advertising Charles L. Brame's Lincoln performances. Image courtesy the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL.

about slavery or emancipation.¹¹²

By the 1990s, Lincoln impersonation had become so widespread that practitioners began to meet among themselves to share stories and advice. In 1990, Lincoln presenter Dan Bassuk, of New Jersey, decided that he wanted to “Link the Lincolns” that he knew into what became the Association of Lincoln Presenters (motto: “Ready, Willing, and Abe L.”)¹¹³ In addition to helping advertise their performances, the Association held—and continues to hold—a conference every year for the Abes, Marys, and assorted other reenactors of historical figures who belong to the organization (see fig. 2.9). By 1995, the ALP had seventy-six Abes and twenty-two Marys among its ranks; by 2004, it had over 160 Lincolns alone, hailing from thirty-five different states.¹¹⁴ Starting in 1992, the Association began to give annual awards for the best Lincolns and Mary Todds, as well as lifetime achievement awards for presenters like Dan Bassuk, whose run as the living Lincoln stretched over twenty-five years.¹¹⁵

Lincarnations, the Association’s newsletter, offered tips for novices on how to be a better Lincoln presenter. The “Old Pros” counseled would-be Lincolns on topics such as how to structure their performances for kindergarteners with short attention spans, how to glue on Lincoln’s pesky mole, and the dangers of purchasing subpar hats. Most of all,

¹¹²Charles L. Brame, “The Living Lincoln.” Pamphlet, printed 1978. Impersonators file, A-L, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹¹³Dan Bassuk, quoted in “History,” The Association of Lincoln Presenters online, <<http://www.lincolnpresenters.net/history.html>>, last accessed 4 July 2013.

¹¹⁴Ibid.; Dan Bassuk interview with Chris Small, 18 April 2004, p. 1. The Association of Lincoln Presenters online, <<http://www.lincolnpresenters.net/DanBassuk-Transcript18April2005.pdf>>, last accessed 4 July 2013.

¹¹⁵Ibid.



Figure 2.9. Abraham Lincoln presenters arrayed at the 2003 Annual Convention of the Association of Lincoln Presenters in Lincoln City, Indiana. Image courtesy the Association of Lincoln Presenters.

they encouraged newcomers to become more like Lincoln in their souls in order to better impersonate him. One method to accomplish this feat of transference was to read extensively, for—as two-time award winning Lincoln B.F. McClerren warned—“Looking like Lincoln is not enough If you do not saturate yourself with Lincoln, you could become an embarrassment to Lincoln.”¹¹⁶ Another way to become Lincoln was through a strict adherence to his principles. Gerald Payn of Ohio reminded novice Lincolns that “While in costume (and always, if possible), practice the traits Mr. Lincoln was known for—honesty, humbleness, consideration, respect, commitment Never, ever say or do anything to bring Mr. Lincoln down.”¹¹⁷ Like Benjamin Chapin nearly one hundred years earlier, modern day Lincoln impersonators feel keenly the depth of their responsibility to portray Lincoln with the respect his stature demands.

The Lincoln presenters of the last forty years also moved away from the one-man play format into ever more interactive forms of entertainment. Although Lincoln impersonators still gave the Gettysburg Address or other memorable speeches as part of their routines, they also increasingly added elements borrowed from modern-day politics to help Lincoln come to life in the present. Chief among these was the press conference, where Lincoln presenters answered questions from children arrayed like journalists in the White House briefing room. Although this technique made Lincoln seem more like a living man than ever before to his audiences, it also meant that presenters could no longer rigidly control the script of their interactions. Out of the mouths of babes came both

¹¹⁶B.F. McClerren, quoted in “Advice to the Novice: The ‘Old Pros’ Speak Out,” *Lincarnations*, vol. 14, no. 3 (March 2006), 7. Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹¹⁷Gerald Payn, quoted in “Advice to the Novice: The ‘Old Pros’ Speak Out.” Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

humor and wisdom. *Lincarnations* provided a forum for Lincoln presenters to share the most unusual questions audiences had asked them. Children asked Lincoln impersonators whether he was wearing clean underwear, whether he used soap or shampoo on his beard, and what it was like to be shot.¹¹⁸ Bill Ames, a Lincoln presenter from Michigan, reported that the comment he heard most frequently was, “I thought you were dead!” His response captured the essential principle behind Lincoln impersonation: “People can do terrible things to your body, including killing you, but they can never take away what you are, and that is your spirit which lives on. Hopefully, you can see that spirit of Lincoln through me.”¹¹⁹

Teenagers, full of disdain at the indignity of being lectured by a man playing dress up, frequently tried to embarrass or discomfit Lincoln presenters. To the question, “Are you gay?” one Lincoln reported that his stock answer was, “Sometimes I am jolly and jovial, and at other times I am downright glum.”¹²⁰ Sometimes the hostility of the crowd was a bit more telling. One presenter, asked to share one of his most difficult experiences while playing Lincoln, told of a racially charged episode in a Southern high school. He wrote:

Speaking before an entire auditorium of 14- to 18-year-olds, I was repeatedly interrupted by a few rowdy, male, African-American students. I asked if they had a question, and one of the young lads did finally make a query, but it was unintelligible. I asked him to repeat it, but I still couldn't decipher what he was

¹¹⁸Chet Damron and Randy Duncan, quoted in “Our Members Share. . .” *Lincarnations*, vol. 15, no. 1 (February 2007), 3. Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹¹⁹Bill Ames, quoted in “Our Members Share. . .,” 3. Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

¹²⁰Joe Woodard, quoted in “Our Members Share. . .,” 4. Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

trying to say. Again he repeated himself, and again, I couldn't understand him. We both were getting embarrassed. Finally, one of his associates translated for him, asking wasn't it true that Lincoln was really a racist? That he thought blacks were inferior to whites? The room was getting more tense by the moment, enough so, that some of the football coaches moved forward to advertise their presence. After a quick reflection, I replied, 'Yes, young man, that's one of the few things I am prepared to acknowledge I was dead wrong about. I did not think that recently freed slaves could compete on an equitable basis with their former white masters. . . . But with your presence here today, young man, you have proven me oh so wrong.'¹²¹

Freed from the confines of scripted performances through press conferences, Lincoln impersonators of the present have had to confront the issue of race. Although their answers to questions such as this last reflect the considerable racial progress made after the Civil Rights movement, the overwhelmingly white profession still struggles with how to relate to the African American community. On one hand, the presenter's answer demonstrated a new willingness on the part of Lincoln's admirers to view his contributions with the eye of history rather than hagiography, divesting Lincoln of the Christ-like perfection ascribed to him in the first part of the twentieth century. On the other hand, his confession that he found black voices "unintelligible" seems symptomatic of a larger ambivalence towards the role of race in Lincoln's story. Dan Bassuk, during his term as president of the ALP in 2004, declared that he was particularly eager to get African Americans involved in the Association and that Lincoln presenters of every race were welcome to join. But, in the same interview, he worried that African Americans were not sufficiently grateful to Lincoln for emancipation or aware of his importance. According to him, "Poorly educated Black people in America very often, when they saw Lincoln in a public place, they would turn away. They didn't care for it. But well-

¹²¹"Our Members Share.," 4. Impersonators files, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

educated, better educated Blacks often came up to a Lincoln . . . and would want to shake our hands and thank us for what we did for their race.”¹²² In short, some Lincoln impersonators preferred to borrow Lincoln’s mantle of emancipation without having to bear the weight of African American history linked to it.

This conflict between the whitewashed, family-entertainment Lincoln of the stage and the complex history of racial inequality to which he is inextricably linked is at the heart of the most interesting play of recent history featuring “Lincoln” as a character. Suzan-Lori Parks, a modern playwright who studied under legendary writer James Baldwin while a student at Mount Holyoke College, won the Pulitzer Prize for her 2002 Broadway play, *Topdog/Underdog*. The play features two African American brothers named—what else?—Lincoln and Booth. (As Lincoln explains, this was their father’s idea of a joke.)¹²³ Lincoln, or “Link,” for short, is a former champion Three-card Monte hustler who has given up the game in favor of the “honest” work of playing Abraham Lincoln in an arcade (fig 2.10). There, made up in white face, he sits in a replica of the presidential box at Ford’s Theatre, pretending to laugh at an invisible “Our American Cousin” as paying customers come in one after another and shoot him in the back of the head with a fake pistol. After Link’s wife throws him out of the house, he stays with Booth, who is on the make and dying to learn the Three-Card Monte scam.

During the course of the play, which is set entirely in Booth’s run-down

¹²²Dan Bassuk, interview with Chris Small, 18 April 2004, p. 11, 16. The Association of Lincoln Presenters online, < <http://www.lincolnpresenters.net/DanBassuk-Transcript18April2005.pdf>>, last accessed 4 July 2013.

¹²³Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001), 24.



Figure 2.10. Jeffrey Wright as Lincoln in *Topdog/Underdog*. Still from *The Topdog Diaries: an Intimate Portrait of Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks*, dir. Oren Jacoby. Storyville Films, produced in association with the Independent Television Service, 2002.

apartment, the brothers struggle with each other and with the unforgiving world outside. Link fears that his boss at the arcade is going to replace him with an Audioanimatronic Lincoln robot to save money. After all, however much he might resemble Lincoln, his whiteface makeup strains credulity. Booth, for his part, is trying to recapture the affections of a young woman, whom he hopes to impress with shoplifted suits and champagne. The brothers both advise and mock each other about their respective woes. Booth coaches Link to thrash wildly and scream after being shot to increase the drama of his performance, but after Link tries the histrionic approach he concludes that Booth's new method will get him fired. "People are funny about they Lincoln shit," he says. "Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming."¹²⁴

The endless patter of Three-Card Monte ties the play together. Booth wants his brother to teach him the scam, but Link has sworn off the cards ever since his friend died at the hands of an angry mark. Tensions rise in the final act after Link loses his job and Booth fails to woo his woman. Finally, Booth bets his inheritance (a nylon stocking filled with \$500 that their parents left him when they abandoned their children) that he can win Three-Card Monte against Link teaching him the tricks of the card game. When Booth loses, he shoots Link in the back of the head in a fury, killing him. "You stole my *inheritance*, man. That aint right. That aint right and you know it. You had yr own. And you blew it!"¹²⁵ The curtain closes on Booth's scream as he realizes what he's done.

¹²⁴Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 52.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 110. Parks uses little punctuation in her scripts.

Topdog/Underdog was not the first play in which Parks featured a black Lincoln impersonator. The character that would become Link first appeared in her 1995 work *The America Play*, an abstract play about an African American gravedigger whose resemblance to Lincoln prompted him to act in an arcade show. Whereas the historical Lincoln is referred to as the Great Man, he—the impersonator—is called the Lesser Known. To make his fortune, the Lesser Known decides to go out west and build a replica of the “Great Hole of History,” a fictional attraction where he and his wife honeymooned that seems to be something like the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and a carnival sideshow all rolled into one. He tells his story in the first act, until he is—predictably—shot. The second act consists of his wife and son walking around his replica Great Hole of History, trying to find some trace of him or his belongings.¹²⁶

Parks has steadfastly resisted explaining what her plays are “about” or categorizing them as commentary about race relations in America, although it’s impossible to escape that conclusion. When an interviewer pressed her on the subject, she countered, “Black people, when they hang out, is it an exploration of race?” When asked why she chose Lincoln, she responded, “He chose me.”¹²⁷ Nevertheless, themes emerge from Parks’ Lincoln-play. One is a sense of the futility of a black man playing Lincoln: despite endless repetition, physical resemblance, and any amount of osmosis through learning Lincoln’s words and behavior by heart, Parks’ black Lincolns would

¹²⁶Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

¹²⁷See *The Topdog Diaries: an Intimate Portrait of Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks*, dir. Oren Jacoby. Storyville Films, produced in association with the Independent Television Service, 2002.

never be regarded as the living Lincoln in the way that Chapin or McGlynn were. Even if the illusion holds for a moment, it is only long enough for someone to shoot him in the head. For all of their striving, neither Lincoln nor Booth (or even the Lesser Known) succeeds in his dreams, instead doomed to play out an old script of suffering and betrayal over and over again. Their inheritance—of a future, a chance to make their own choices, of an independent and free identity—has been stolen.

Parks's plays about African American Lincoln impersonators also speak to the idea of haunting in the theatre. Parks's insistence that she did not choose to write about Lincoln, but that *he* chose *her*, is one aspect of this ghostliness. But more haunting is the sense of what is lost and absent: Link's blown inheritance, the brothers' missing parents, the "Great Hole of History" where a mother and son go searching for evidence that their father ever existed . . . these are not unlike the search for black voices and presences on the pages of history. Like the victims of the Three-Card Monte scam, Parks' characters are forever the victims of the bait-and-switch.

Conclusion

On February 24, 2013, Daniel Day-Lewis accepted his Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his performance as Abraham Lincoln. While the audience gave him a standing ovation and Steven Spielberg and costar Sally Field applauded enthusiastically, Day-Lewis took to the stage with an endearingly humble mien. Taking the gold statue from Meryl Streep, he quipped that the film would never have been possible had he and

Streep not agreed to a straight swap of their roles as Lincoln and Margaret Thatcher.¹²⁸

All humor aside, Day-Lewis continued his acceptance speech with the usual thanks and praise, singling out a few notable individuals for their help and support as he took on the arduous task of converting himself into Lincoln. As a method actor, Day-Lewis prepares for his roles by completely inhabiting the characters he portrays during the entire run of production. “Since we got married sixteen years ago, my wife Rebecca has lived with some very strange men,” he acknowledged. While he played Lincoln, she cohabitated with the sixteenth president of the United States—or at least the closest facsimile that Day-Lewis could manufacture. Through him, Lincoln lived and spoke once more, both on screen and off. In closing, Day-Lewis thanked the three men to whom he owed the most in winning his Oscar: Spielberg, screenwriter Tony Kushner, and “the mysteriously beautiful mind, body, and spirit of Abraham Lincoln.”¹²⁹

Whether or not Day-Lewis knows it, becoming Mr. Lincoln is not just an acting technique but a tradition dating back over one hundred years. Impersonators and actors have attempted to bring Lincoln back to life for audiences through the medium of their own bodies. They hope that attaining an ever greater resemblance to Lincoln both inside and out will somehow elevate their performances from mere representation into a channel to Lincoln’s soul.

Despite all of their labors, Lincoln actors and impersonators did not bring the historical Lincoln back from the dead, but rather revived a sanitized, less complex representation of Lincoln that they substituted for the original. The observation that Link

¹²⁸Daniel Day-Lewis, speech at the 85th Academy Awards ceremony, Los Angeles, California, 24 February 2013.

¹²⁹Ibid.

makes in *Topdog/Underdog*—that people don't want their Lincoln history messy, but rather folded up neatly like a book—seems particularly appropriate when discussing the men who have played Lincoln in the last century. Actors like Chapin, McGlynn, and Massey all constructed Lincolns that looked and acted in ways that were nearly interchangeable with the martyred president, but they catered to a nostalgic white vision of Lincoln that lifted him out of the troubled context of the Civil War's battle over slavery and into contemporary mores. If, as Freddie Rokem has suggested, we perform troubling events from history over and over again in an attempt to achieve a different and more satisfying result, the more satisfying version of Lincoln was one unencumbered by the difficult history of slavery, emancipation, and African American equality inextricably tied to his life story.¹³⁰

For all of these shortcomings, the long history of Lincoln impersonation demonstrates a larger cultural desire to keep Lincoln alive in a way that transcends memory by its insistence on rendering him in living flesh. What could be more haunting than the continual reincarnation of a man who died one hundred and fifty years ago?

The performances of Lincoln actors are haunted not only by their eerie quality of bringing the dead back to life, but also by all the things that go unsaid. Ever since Benjamin Chapin altered the Lincoln story first presented by Rankin and Gordon to remove those political messages that might give offense in the era of reconciliation, stage Lincolns have focused on the heartwarming tales of his childhood, family, and relationships, not on his antislavery politics or role in ending slavery. Just as Suzan-Lori Parks' characters go searching in the Great Hole of History for the echoes of the Lesser

¹³⁰Rokem, *Performing History*, 3.

Known black Lincoln, so must we go searching for the Lincoln who is missing from the stage. Meanwhile, an unbroken chain of men pretending to be Lincoln has existed in the United States since Benjamin Chapin first took on the role, ensuring that someone, somewhere will always be wearing a beard and a stovepipe hat, headed for the theatre.

Chapter 3

Not Pictured: Haunted Paintings and Lincoln's Ghost

In 1965, Norman Rockwell was surprisingly at home in an America that seemed to be the antithesis to all he was supposed to represent. He was aged, newly married for the third time, a white-haired denizen of the picture-postcard village of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, whose residents admitted after the fact that they drove a little slower in the afternoons to avoid hitting the septuagenarian and his wife on the couple's daily bicycle rides.¹ He was, after all, Stockbridge's most famous resident, whose wildly popular paintings of a particularly innocent and largely fictional brand of American life had graced *Saturday Evening Post* covers since the First World War. He had created some of the twentieth century's most famous popular characters and images: Willie Gillis, the everyman American GI, who represented the average white soldier on eleven *Post* covers during and after World War II, and Rosie the Riveter, the bulging-bicep beauty who symbolized all of the women who went to work in Willie's stead.²

In short, Norman Rockwell was an institution, and his paintings evoked nostalgia for the kind of American life that the turmoil of the 1960s seemed determined to upend.

¹Laura Claridge interview with Mary Quinn, Sept. 2000. See Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2001), 470.

²Willie Gillis appeared on eleven *Saturday Evening Post* covers, starting with *Willie Gillis: Food Package*, oil on canvas, 38 x 50 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, October 4, 1941, collection of CNA; Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, oil on canvas, 52 x 40 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* May 29, 1943, collection of Crystal Bridges Museum of Art.

His most celebrated works belonged to a white, vanishing world, where families still prayed before a meal at the diner, where bashful white young men still took bashful white young women to the prom and out for a milkshake afterwards.³ “You’d never know from his work of the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s,” commented Roberta Smith of the *New York Times*, “that the Stock Market Crash, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl or Jim Crow had ever existed.”⁴ Indeed: for fifty years, Norman Rockwell grudgingly had adhered to the rules set down by the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, George Horace Lorimer, who decreed that no person of color was to be depicted on the magazine’s covers except in a position of servitude.⁵ If it were possible to capture the cultural consensus of the 1950s in an image, Norman Rockwell would have painted it.

But in the summer of 1965 Norman Rockwell was at work on a very different kind of painting. Frustrated with the instability of the *Saturday Evening Post* as it entered its death throes in the early sixties, he had dissolved his relationship with the family-friendly magazine in 1963 in favor of the contemporary-issues periodical *Look*, which was enjoying what would turn out to be a rather short-lived heyday.⁶ Despite what the bulk of his subject matter suggested, Rockwell was at heart a Yankee do-gooder, born and raised in New York City, and his newfound freedom of expression at *Look*, in addition to the influence of his liberal new wife, were leading him away from the ball

³See Rockwell, *Saying Grace*, oil on canvas, 42 x 40 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* November 24, 1951, Private Collection; *After the Prom*, oil on canvas, 31 x 29 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* May 25, 1957.

⁴Roberta Smith, “The Complexities in Rockwell’s Simple Images,” *The New York Times*, 7 July 1989, C27.

⁵See Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 21.

⁶See Claridge, *Norman Rockwell*, 449.

fields and swimming holes that had dominated his career. Already, he had stunned his considerable fan base with his first illustration for *Look*, entitled *The Problem We All Live With*, which marked the tenth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision by depicting a small black girl walking to school guarded by four U.S. marshals.⁷ At long last, Norman Rockwell was tackling the issue of race.

His new painting was an illustration for an article by Charles Morgan, Jr., “Southern Justice,” about the 1964 Ku Klux Klan murder of three civil rights workers near Philadelphia, Mississippi (see fig. 3.1). After the mutilated bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were found buried in an earthen dam, national outrage swelled over the unchecked violence of the KKK in the South. Rockwell, in his new position as a current affairs illustrator and advocate of social justice, was determined to capture the event in a way that would provoke readers.

He cast his considerable talents of realism toward recreating the night that the three civil rights workers were killed. He was nothing if not meticulous, and he relied on the same painstaking preparation for this painting, which he called *Murder in Mississippi*, as he did for all of his works. He culled newspapers for reports about the incident, collecting headshots of the young men. In his diary, Rockwell noted the grim details about the condition of the men’s bodies when they were recovered, from the “beatnik sneakers” and blue jeans they were wearing to the injuries they had suffered: “Goodman + Schwerner: single bullet to the heart . . . no messing of their clothes . . . Chaney’s arm

⁷Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 58 inches, illustration for *Look* magazine, January 14, 1964, Norman Rockwell Museum Collection.



Figure 3.1. Color study for *Murder in Mississippi*. *Look* magazine published Rockwell's color study rather than his finished painting because the editor preferred the raw emotion in this version. It was the only time in his career that Rockwell published a color study. *Look*, 29 June 1965.

and shoulder crushed . . . He was shot three times.”⁸ With so little concrete information about what really had taken place that horrific night in Mississippi, Rockwell turned to his much-vaunted storytelling skills to imagine a scene that would convey the gravity of the events as well as inspire sympathy or even action from *Look* readers.

He also had his assistant, Louie Lamone, photograph models in a number of possible poses for reference. On March 20, 1965, he gathered his models: his son, Jarvis, posed as Schwerner, Oliver McCary took the role of Chaney, and Kittredge Hudson stood in for Goodman. Lamone’s flashbulb flared again and again, as Rockwell tried out various configurations of the three figures, each standing, kneeling, and laying down in turn. For inspiration, Rockwell pulled out another canvas: his own 1964 full-length portrait of Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln the Railsplitter*, a life-size painting of the sixteenth president’s younger days swinging an axe with one hand while holding a book with the other. Rockwell set it up on an easel behind the models (fig. 3.2). After Rockwell dressed him in a costume of jeans and open-collared shirt, with his head tilted at an angle, Jarvis perfectly echoed the clothing and stance of Lincoln.⁹

The resulting reference photographs have an eerie quality, as if Lincoln is looking down on the models as they reproduce a ghastly scene from the continuing struggle. As Rockwell thought about this scene, designed it, and finally painted it, he clearly turned to Lincoln for guidance, both visually and ideologically. But Lincoln does not appear in the final illustration published in *Look* magazine in June 1965, and it is unlikely that anyone

⁸Norman Rockwell papers, “Victims,” handwritten reference notes for Murder in Mississippi, c. 1965, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

⁹Louie Lamone, reference photo for Murder in Mississippi, negative, 4 x 5 inches, 1965, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.



Figure 3.2. Jarvis Rockwell and Oliver McCary posing as Michael Schwerner and James Chaney, with *Lincoln the Railsplitter* in the background. Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

but a visitor to Rockwell's studio or a devoted fan of his work would have recognized the influence of *Lincoln the Railsplitter* on *Murder in Mississippi*. Lincoln is simultaneously absent and present—absent from the finished painting, but present in every step of its conception and crucial to its very essence.

In this way, Lincoln haunts *Murder in Mississippi*, but in a completely different fashion than how he “haunted” the spirit photograph taken by William Mumler nearly a century earlier (see chapter 1, fig. 1.1).¹⁰ Mumler's circa 1870 *carte-de-visite* showed the translucent, ghostly figure of Lincoln standing behind his wife in a testament to his continuing presence in her life and in the nation after his assassination. Rockwell's 1965 painting was the inverse: Lincoln stood behind the painting, literally, but within its confines, his spirit is marked not by its visibility, but by its invisibility.

Works of art like *Murder in Mississippi* demonstrate yet another mode of haunting, characterized by the influence of an undeniable, yet invisible presence in some American cultural productions. This chapter examines two images, *Murder in Mississippi* and *The Janitor Who Paints*, by the African-American artist Palmer C. Hayden, which do *not* outwardly depict Abraham Lincoln. Instead, I argue, Lincoln's spirit haunts these paintings, not literally, of course, but by the way his image and legacy influences them and troubles them. Through their relationship with Lincoln's ghost, *Murder in Mississippi* and *The Janitor Who Paints* demonstrate two conflicting visions of the enduring significance of Abraham Lincoln's memory for African American equality.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon characterizes haunting as “how that which appears to be not there is often a seething

¹⁰William Mumler, *Mary Todd Lincoln with the spirit of Abraham Lincoln*. c.1870-1875. The College of Psychic Studies <<http://www.collegeofpsychicstudies.co.uk>>

presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities. . . . The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us.”¹¹

Images, too, are subject to these invisible minefields. Although the idea that a painting could be “haunted” sounds like the stuff of a gothic novel, even some of the most seemingly uncomplicated, even *safe* images in American culture can be subject to this kind of haunting. The fields of semiotics and art history traditionally have analyzed what is present in an image, not what is absent; after all, extant evidence generally makes for better visual analysis than murky speculation. In short, history is so much a field of facts, and art history of minute inspection of all of the details of a visual object that what is missing is often missed. But, because art is so frequently referential—consciously or subconsciously—its evolution over time can provide markers for the things that have disappeared or are carefully avoided, like a chalk outline on an otherwise unremarkable canvas.

This chapter is by no means intended to be an exhaustive study of Lincoln’s iconography or his influence on American visual culture, which several scholars have analyzed at length.¹² Lincoln is not the only figure who performs this kind of haunting;

¹¹Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

¹²See Alan Trachtenberg, *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2007; Gabor Boritt, ed., *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Harold Holzer, G. S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print*. Fort Wayne: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1984; Holzer, *Lincoln Seen and Heard*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000; Holzer, *Washington and Lincoln Portrayed: National Icons in Popular Prints*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993; Holzer, et. al., *Changing the Lincoln Image*. Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1985.

however, his broad representation and symbolic resonance make him an ideal example to demonstrate this process of haunting in visual culture. Many twentieth-century artists, both black and white, painted Lincoln in interesting ways, from the modernist Marsden Hartley to the self-taught African American artist Horace Pippin.¹³ The images I have chosen, however, do not belong to the common iconography of Lincoln, and therefore they show that what seems to be absent can be not only present but an animating spirit.

The references, evasions, and revisions of the image of Lincoln that Norman Rockwell and Palmer Hayden made as they painted *Murder in Mississippi* and *The Janitor Who Paints* demonstrate the complexity of Lincoln's legacy for Civil Rights in twentieth-century art. Although both artists turned to Lincoln as a symbol of the ongoing struggle for racial equality, ultimately, neither could invoke him unquestioningly or even directly. Instead, Lincoln's ghost haunts these two paintings, as Rockwell and Hayden attempted to make sense of his role in the present.

A Second Look at Norman Rockwell

In some ways, Norman Rockwell could be considered the foremost artist of the twentieth century; at the very least, he enjoyed the longest popular acclaim. He was born in 1894, dropped out of school at age sixteen to study illustration at the Art Students League, and painted his first *Saturday Evening Post* cover—considered the pinnacle of the illustrator's achievement—at age twenty-two. Success came early for Norman

¹³See, for example, Marsden Hartley, *The Great Good Man*, oil on Masonite, 39 7/8 x 30 1/8 in., 1942, collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Horace Pippin, *Abe Lincoln's First Book*, 1944. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

Rockwell, and it stuck around. By 1963, he had done 320 covers for the *Post*.¹⁴ When he died in 1978, he had been a household name for over sixty years.

Rockwell, though known as an illustrator, had not really *illustrated* for the *Saturday Evening Post*; as a cover artist, he had been free of the responsibility to match the details of his paintings with the details of a story. Instead, his job had been to catch the eye of newsstand browsers by dreaming up and painting an instantly-legible, pictorial story. His success as a popular artist—and his failure to gain recognition as a fine artist—rested on his genius in doing so. As Blake Gopnik of the *Washington Post* put it, “To sell the publications and goods his pictures were in aid of, Rockwell’s images needed to be grasped and digested in seconds – and, unlike really notable art, they reliably achieved such fast-food effects.”¹⁵ The fine art of the fifties and sixties, dominated by the Abstract Expressionism of artists like Jackson Pollock and Hans Hoffman, consciously defined itself in contradistinction to Rockwell: where Rockwell was commercial, it was disinterested; where Rockwell was bourgeois, it was bohemian. Rockwell’s American genre painting was the antithesis of real art, difficult art, art that made a statement. Even he claimed that he was no good at presenting a challenge to his viewers: “My worst enemy is the world-shaking idea,” he wrote in his 1960 autobiography. “Every so often I try to paint the BIG picture, something serious and colossal which will change the world, save mankind. . . . And before I know it I’m sprawled on the ground with my nose in the mud, battered and bruised. I just can’t handle world-shattering subjects. They’re beyond me, above me. Not that I ever stop

¹⁴See Roberta Smith, “The Complexities in Rockwell’s Simple Images.” *New York Times*, 7 July 1989, C27.

¹⁵Blake Gopnik, “Norman Rockwell exhibit open at the Smithsonian American Art Museum,” *The Washington Post*, 4 July 2010, E1.

trying.”¹⁶

Rockwell chronicled every major American event, fad, and technological innovation in that long succession of decades, from the first presidential election in which women could vote (marked by an image of a lover’s spat over candidates on the cover of the October 9, 1920 *Post*) to the election of Richard Nixon, from the party line telephone to the television, from the Model T Ford to the Apollo space shuttle.¹⁷

In some respects, Rockwell’s most popular images, from a decidedly Victorian world—where merry gentlemen sing Christmas carols and barbershop quartets harmonize amidst a shave and a haircut—seem at odds with this century of progress.¹⁸ At first glance, this racially-homogeneous realm, where conflict never escalated above good-natured mischief, could be taken for a complete and honest reflection of American life.

Certainly, some saw it that way. In 1931, the *Los Angeles Times* (very taken with

¹⁶Norman Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960, 375.

¹⁷Norman Rockwell, *Man and Woman Seated Back to Back*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 9 October 1920, whereabouts unknown; Rockwell, *Mr. President ‘Weighed, yet buoyed, by the American past and present, Richard M. Nixon, 37th President, faces the future in this Rockwell portrait.’ (Portrait of Richard M. Nixon)*, oil on canvas, 18.25 x 26.25 inches, 1968, illustration for *Look*, February 4, 1969, p. 24-25, collection of the National Portrait Gallery; Rockwell, *Party Line*, oil on canvas, 22 x 19 inches, 1919, illustration for *Leslie’s*, March 22, 1919, private collection; Rockwell, *New Television Antenna*, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 43 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 5 November 1949, Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Rockwell, *Couple in Rumbleseat*, oil on board, 21 x 17.5 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 July 1935, private collection; Rockwell, *Apollo and Beyond*, oil on canvas on panel, illustration for *Look*, 15 July 1969, p.44-46, Collection of the National Air and Space Museum.

¹⁸Norman Rockwell, *Christmas Trio*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 8 December 1923; Rockwell, *Barbershop Quartet*, oil on canvas, 28.25 x 21.5 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* 26 September 1936, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

Rockwell after he married a Californian woman, his second wife Mary Barstow) wrote that “No artist living so faithfully records the pleasures, habits and types of average Americans of our day. A collection of Rockwell’s Saturday Evening Post covers . . . will furnish future historians the best composite picture of the people.”¹⁹ Little did the *Times* suspect how historians later would revile Rockwell for his sanitized vision of life, but for the most part, Rockwell himself was open and unapologetic about his propensity to depict only the cheerful aspects of white society. “Maybe as I grew up,” Rockwell said, “I unconsciously decided that, even if it wasn’t an ideal world, it should be and so painted only the ideal aspects of it—pictures in which there were no drunken slatterns or self-centered mothers, in which on the contrary, there were only Foxy Grandpas who played baseball with the kids and boys fished from logs and got up circuses in the back yard.”²⁰

Rockwell’s rose-colored glasses, glued fast to his nose, could not help but set some critics’ teeth on edge. His frank sentimentality and nostalgia for an American way of life that may not ever have existed could be read, on one hand, as a deliberate attempt to shut out the multiplicity of voices clamoring for representation in the twentieth century. At times it seemed as if Rockwell were holding up a “magic mirror” for white, middle class audiences, who could see in his *Post* covers a reflection of only what they wanted to see: an ideal version of themselves, untroubled by the strife of race or class or the nuclear age.²¹ Rockwell’s way of looking at things past could seem like a way of

¹⁹A.M., “America’s Genre Painter.” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 June 1931.

²⁰Norman Rockwell, quoted in Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, 13.

²¹Leon Whipple, “SatEvePost: Mirror on These States,” *Survey* 59 (March, 1928): 699, quoted in Jennifer A. Greenhill, “The View from Outside: Rockwell and Race in 1950.” *American Art*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 75.

avoiding looking at the present—or worse, like an antidote to it. One of Rockwell’s more notorious paintings of race relations, *Boy in Dining Car*, depicts a black porter smiling indulgently at a young white boy, who is attempting to calculate his tip (fig. 3.3).

Published on the cover of the *Post* on December 7, 1946, after the 1943 race riots in Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles, and as black veterans were returning from World War II and demanding equal treatment at home in return for their service to the country abroad, *Boy in Dining Car* seems not only out of step with contemporary events but like a deliberate reassertion of the prewar racial order.²² After Rockwell’s death, thirty years later and on the other side of Vietnam, some could not even stomach obituaries that lamented the loss of the unjaded America that “died with him”; an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* written days after Rockwell’s funeral fumed that “Rockwell chose not to see the whole, but only the positive side of life. . . . America seems to have some difficulty believing that it could be wrong or in any way capable of evil. Norman Rockwell along with Walt Disney helped us believe that about ourselves.”²³

But were Rockwell’s images really so simple? Disney is perhaps an apt comparison for Rockwell in more ways than one; both presented idealized visions of American society, grounded in a fictionalized past, but those visions were considerably

²²See Norman Rockwell, *Boy in Dining Car*, oil on canvas, 38 x 36 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* 7 December 1946, Norman Rockwell Museum Collection. For more discussion of *Boy in a Dining Car* and the 1943 race riots, see Alan Wallach, “The Norman Rockwell Museum and the Representation of Social Conflict” in Patricia Johnston, ed., *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 284-285.

²³For “the country had not yet grown jaded” dying with Rockwell, see Bob Greene, “Norman Rockwell—portrait of a visionary,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 November 1978, B1; James R. Gorman, “Limited vision,” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 November 1978, D2.

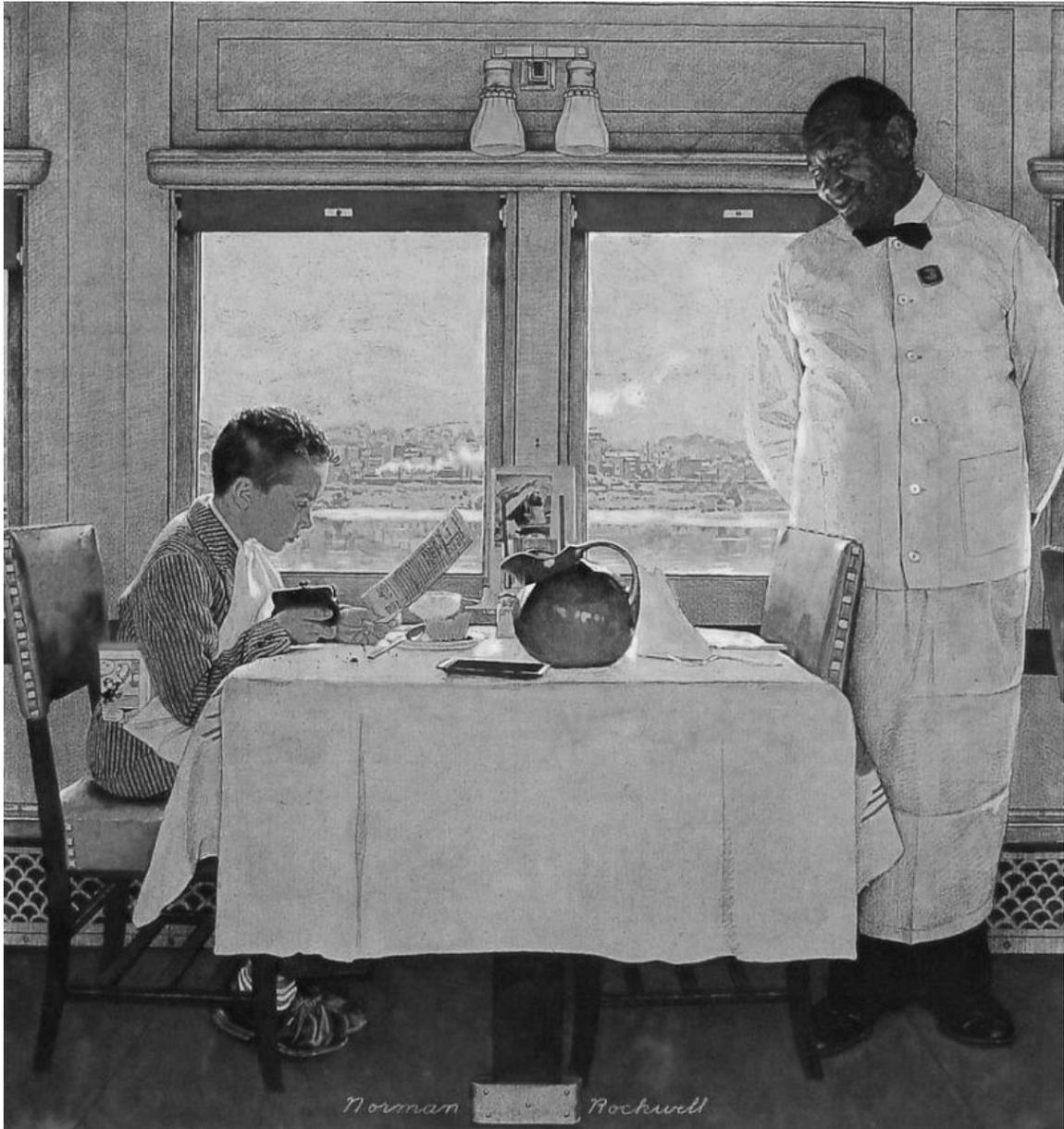


Figure 3.3. Norman Rockwell, *Boy in Dining Car*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 7 December 1946.

more complex than a cursory assessment might suggest. Although they seemed to shill an equally wholesome brand of Americana—shilling and branding being key words in both cases—in some ways Rockwell’s work was the inverse of Disney’s. Rockwell’s commerciality was right there on the surface; he illustrated for advertisements and made his money by supplying the image his patrons desired. Disney, on the other hand, invented his own image of America in his theme parks—that of clean streets with paint that never faded, paddleboats and parades—and then sold tickets.²⁴ While Disneyland’s Main Street hearkened back to the McKinley era and its Tomorrowland dreamed of a distant, utopian future, resolutely avoiding the messy and contentious present, Rockwell’s images were generally contemporary. His characters, usually either a bit past their prime or well before it, sometimes daydreamed about their glory days, be they long ago or yet to come. But the past was past and the future was the future—Rockwell’s characters could never quite escape the present. With his nostalgic style, Rockwell often made the new seem familiar, shepherding his viewers through the changing times by reassuring them that men arranging the antenna of a brand-new television on the roof were the same old slightly grubby men who unclogged the drain and put up the fence out back.²⁵

In fact, on closer inspection, Rockwell’s paintings are less sanitary—literally—than popular usage has led us to believe when it uses “Rockwellian” as an adjective, which carries a connotation not unlike the snowy-white Christmas prints of Currier and Ives. “The world that Rockwell shows is always pretty shabby,” art critic Arthur C.

²⁴For further discussion of the Disney theme park aesthetic, see Richard Francaviglia, “Main Street U.S.A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes in Disneyland/Walt Disney World.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (June 1981), 149.

²⁵See Marling, *Norman Rockwell*, 57-61.

Danto has pointed out, and it's true: while the scenes in Rockwell's images are frequently heartwarming, they are rarely particularly clean.²⁶ In *After the Prom*, one of Rockwell's most famous scenes of youthful innocence, cigarette butts litter the floor of the diner where the young couple has come in all of their finery, and the dishcloth of the waiter admiring the corsage is covered in a shift's worth of grime. Rockwell's streets, unlike Disneyland's, usually need a good sweeping: the family in *Walking to Church* picks their way through cracked, rubbish-strewn sidewalks in pursuit of Sunday services, and the young G.I. in question in *The Homecoming* returns not to his suburban single-family home but to a crowded tenement in a dirty alley.²⁷

This is one of the most interesting conundrums of Rockwell's work: his quick-hitting ideas and scenes read as plausible because of the infinite amount of detail he put into every inch of his paintings, but those details tend to be the very things that memory effaces. And that's one reason why Rockwell is worth a second look.

Rockwell's characters are rarely as conformist as we have been led to believe, either. Rockwell was not much for moralizing, and his more memorable characters blew raspberries at prissiness. More often than not, his little girls were black-eyed and scabby-kneed, unwillingly scrubbed-up and be-pinafores for the birthday party of the boy next door.²⁸ Fathers ducked behind their newspapers on Sunday mornings to avoid going to

²⁶Arthur C. Danto, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 160.

²⁷Rockwell, *Walking to Church*, oil on board, 16¼ x 15¼ inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 4 April 1953; Rockwell, *The Homecoming*, oil on canvas, 28 x 22 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 May 1945.

²⁸See Rockwell, *Girl With Black Eye*, oil on canvas, 34 x 30 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 23 May 1953; Rockwell, *Day in the Life of a Girl*, oil on canvas, 40 x 37¼

church.²⁹ And tough guys weren't so tough: Rockwell painted a craggy old cowpoke listening to his favorite record, "Dreams of Long Ago," with a glint in his eye, and even depicted reigning Hollywood leading man Gary Cooper in the midst of being made up for the camera, a tube of lipstick sliding over his manly mouth.³⁰ Most people in Rockwell's world were a little ridiculous, neither as good as they hoped to be in little moments of pride and puffery, nor as bad as they feared in the inevitable bouts of insecurity that followed. It was not their perfection but their imperfection that made them sympathetic, and therefore, popular.

This attention to detail was what made Rockwell a genre painter of the first order, a painter of amusing or poignant scenes of everyday life. He followed in the footsteps of several famous genre painters before him, from nineteenth-century American artists like William Sidney Mount and Eastman Johnson to eighteenth-century European masters like William Hogarth and Johannes Vermeer. Despite his frequent protestations that he was no artist, just an illustrator, Rockwell was keenly aware of his place within the lineage of genre painting and frequently made subtle references to the work of other artists. His well-known *Triple Self-Portrait*, the cover of the February 13, 1960 *Saturday Evening Post*, depicts him from behind, working on a rather optimistic reproduction of his own visage with several other famous artists' self-portraits tacked to the side of his

inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 August 1952, Norman Rockwell Museum Collection.

²⁹See Rockwell, *Easter Morning*, oil on canvas, 53 x 59 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 16 May 1959, private collection.

³⁰See Rockwell, *Cowboy with Gramophone*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 August 1927; Rockwell, *Gary Cooper as the Texan*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 24 May 1930.

canvas for good luck, notably those of Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn, both of whom were popular printmakers in addition to revered artists.

Rockwell's sly allusions to genre paintings of the past complicate his paintings' outward simplicity and suggest that what might seem like "fast-food art" actually takes a bit longer to digest. Rosie the Riveter's buff physique was Rockwell's obvious spoof on Michelangelo's figure of the prophet Isaiah on the Sistine Ceiling, while the art critic training his magnifying glass on the décolletage of an all-too-obliging female portrait has been compared to Jean-August-Dominique Ingres' 1826 classical painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.³¹ In her excellent essay, "The View from Outside: Rockwell and Race in 1950," Jennifer A. Greenhill has shown that several of Rockwell's scenes derived from nineteenth-century American genre paintings that depicted African Americans.

Shuffleton's Barbershop, Rockwell's 1950 *Post* cover illustration of a group of musicians playing in the backroom of an after-hours barbershop, is similar in composition and theme to William Sidney Mount's 1847 painting *The Power of Music*, in which a black man stops outside a barn to listen to a trio playing within (see figs. 3.4 and 3.5). In Rockwell's version, however, he has replaced the black man with a stove. Likewise, *The Homecoming* is clearly patterned on Eastman Johnson's 1859 painting *Negro Life at the South*, from its roof in disrepair to the identical tree on one side of the canvas, right down to the dog in the foreground (see figs. 3.6 and 3.7).

What was Rockwell's intention when he referenced these two works? On the one

³¹See Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*; Rockwell, *Art Critic*, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 36.25 inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 16 April 1955, Norman Rockwell Museum Collection. For the connection between *Art Critic* and *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, see Richard Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 89-92.



Figure 3.4. Norman Rockwell, *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, oil on canvas, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 April 1950.



Figure 3.5. William Sidney Mount, *The Power of Music*, 1847. Oil on canvas, 17 1/8 x 21 1/8 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

hand, he effaced black figures—though a few African-American children have remained at the top of *The Homecoming*—and replaced them with white figures or even inanimate objects, in the case of the stove.³² On the other hand, Rockwell’s treatment seems to encourage his largely-white viewership to stand in the place of African Americans or other cultural outsiders and share their experiences. For example, his rendering of *Shuffleton’s Barbershop* seems particularly odd: the canvas is crisscrossed by the window panes that bar the viewer from the cozy music indoors. The viewer, like the stove that stands in for the black man in *The Power of Music*, is an outsider, alienated from the circle of inclusion within. *The Homecoming* turns the exoticized figures of African Americans in the South into likeable, lower-income whites in what is presumably a Northern city. But they remain in a mixed-race neighborhood—the neighbors shown on the right side of the painting are darker-skinned than the redheaded family of the title soldier, and the stars in their upper story window indicate that they have sent three sons to war. This joyful reunion of at least three families, all of different races, seems to encourage racial harmony and the appreciation of the contributions of all races to the war effort.

Even *Boy in a Dining Car*, the Rockwell image that has most frequently come under fire for its representation of race relations, with its smiling, adult black man waiting on a young white boy, could be subjected to an alternative reading. In his autobiography, Rockwell noted that he based this painting on an earlier image by H. K. Browne, an

³²Greenhill argues persuasively that Rockwell’s choice of a stove in place of the black man in *The Power of Music* was no accident; stoves, with their shiny black surfaces, grotesque shapes, and servile function have often been interchanged with caricatures of African Americans in visual culture. See Greenhill, *The View from Outside: Rockwell and Race in 1950*, 79-80.



Figure 3.6. Norman Rockwell, *The Homecoming*. Cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 May 1945.



Figure 3.7. Eastman Johnson, *Negro Life at the South (The Old Kentucky Home)*. Oil on linen, 37 x 46 in. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

English artist famous for illustrating the works of Charles Dickens. Browne's illustration, *The Friendly Waiter and I* accompanied a scene in *David Copperfield* when the protagonist was being fleeced by his waiter, who drank David's ale, helped himself to most of David's meal and then talked himself into a very exorbitant tip besides.

"Remembering that scene, I painted a *Post* cover of a boy on a train trying to figure out how much to leave for a tip while the waiter looked benevolently down on him,"

Rockwell wrote. "The feelings conveyed by my picture and H.K. Browne's are very different, but the composition is similar and Browne's did spark mine."³³ The composition of Rockwell's picture does suggest that it is the waiter, not the little boy, who is in control. Generally, black figures in American art were consigned to stooping, even grotesque positions—and black heads were never placed above white heads, in a visual reproduction of the established racial hierarchy.³⁴ Here, the waiter towers above the boy, literally looking down on him. His experience and serenity stand in stark contrast to the boy's inexperience and fluster. *Boy in a Dining Car* seems to smirk a bit at white supremacy, as if to say, "Who's really in control here?"

This competing interpretation of *Boy in a Dining Car* does not, however, erase the initial recoil present-day viewers have felt looking at it—and even after hearing of Rockwell's intention to rework the H.K. Browne illustration, there is a certain quality of symbolic inversion around the painting. Perhaps Rockwell, in noting that "the feelings conveyed by my picture and Browne's are very different" meant that while David

³³See Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 86; Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1850), 48-51.

³⁴See Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, war, and Monument in Nineteenth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8-12.

Copperfield may have been outwitted by a mere servant, in the United States the tables had turned.³⁵

What Rockwell really meant by *Boy in a Dining Car* will, of course, always remain subject to interpretation. His record on race was riddled with contradictions—although he chafed at the restrictions on racial depiction at the *Saturday Evening Post*, he surrendered to them; although he corresponded with the Bronx Inter-Racial Conference about painting a series similar to his *Four Freedoms* propaganda paintings to showcase the contributions of African Americans, he never undertook the commission.³⁶ Rockwell believed in racial equality, but all of his action was indirect—until the 1960s and *Murder in Mississippi*.

Norman Rockwell's American History

Murder in Mississippi was far from the first time that Rockwell had looked to Abraham Lincoln to inspire American values; the famous figures of American history were vital tools in his artistic vocabulary of sentiment. Though Rockwell rarely hesitated to poke fun at ordinary Americans, American historical figures generally were exempt from his gentle mockery. Yankee Doodle and Ichabod Crane, fictional as they were, were fitting subjects for caricature, but Rockwell sensed the power of symbols in American history and treated them with appropriate reverence.

It was no surprise that he should be so attuned to these icons: his real work was in advertising, and he knew the importance of creating a brand image that consumers could

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶See Karal Ann Marling, *Civil Rights in Oz: Images of Kansas in American Popular Art* (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas Press, 1997), 7.

rely upon. He greatly admired the work of J.C. Leyendecker, who until Rockwell's ascendancy had been the reigning illustrator for the *Post*, and who had, in the words of Karal Ann Marling, "defin[ed] the iconography of the American festival cycle," creating a "common vocabulary of Americanism, a kind of America psalter of works and days" to which Rockwell would contribute.³⁷ Leyendecker created the modern images of nearly all of the popular characters of American holidays that have remained with us up until the present: the smiling Santa Claus, the New Year's Day baby. Leyendecker understood the almost-mystic appeal of holidays to Americans and captured it with his illustrations.

Rockwell did the same with American history. From his earliest published illustrations, featured in the Boy Scout national magazine *Boys' Life* (which, other than the *Saturday Evening Post*, was Rockwell's longest publishing association), Rockwell bestowed his representations of American historical figures with a numinous dimension. His ordinary characters, living in the ordinary world, frequently found themselves in extraordinary, even supernatural company. Boy Scouts were haunted by George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, Peace Corps volunteers were joined by the assassinated John F. Kennedy. Historical figures sometimes reappeared to comment on present-day events, as well: when the *Saturday Evening Post* published its last issue in 1969, Rockwell returned to his old magazine one last time to paint an image of Benjamin Franklin weeping for their final cover.³⁸

³⁷Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell*, 20.

³⁸See Rockwell, *The Spirit of America*, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, 1927, cover of *Boys' Life*, February 1929; Rockwell, *A Scout is Loyal*, oil on canvas, 39 x 29 inches, 1940, cover of *Boys' Life*, February 1942; Rockwell, *Benjamin Franklin Weeping Over the Demise of the Post*, 1969, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

Rockwell was not just pandering to the notion that history haunted the present; he felt it himself. In his autobiography, he noted that his earliest memory was of President McKinley's assassination; his recollection of the event seems like an eerie, ersatz version of something he might later have painted:

I remember the streets were dark except for the yellow pools of light beneath the gas lamps. The newsboy were shouting: "Extra, Extra, Extra. McKinley assassinated. Extra. Extra." And people were gathering under the gas lamps, reading the news and brushing off their faces the moths and flies which swarmed about the light. There was a kind of horror in the streets. Because I did not understand the meaning of the word "assassinate," I thought McKinley had been killed in some cruel, torturing way. I was only seven at the time. The next day we went to church, where they played "Nearer, My God, to Thee," McKinley's favorite song, and my father and mother cried.

Later, as Rockwell traveled to a number of New England towns to paint small-town life and scenes from American history, he often found himself imagining the past coming to life in the present. When the *Woman's Home Companion* asked him to illustrate a biography of Louisa May Alcott, he went to the preserved Alcott house in Concord, Massachusetts in order to sketch her bedroom. "Sitting in her bedroom, where everything was just as it had been when she was alive," Rockwell wrote, "I felt as if the door would suddenly open and Miss Alcott would walk in with a shawl about her shoulders and the unfinished manuscript of *Little Women* in her hand."³⁹ He continued:

It was the same sort of feeling I once had in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum when I noticed a sign saying, "These Rooms Must Be Clear at *Twilight*" (not closing time or five o'clock but "twilight"); I felt that if I stayed I'd see colonial men and women come out of the walls.⁴⁰

³⁹Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 306.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

Perhaps, when Rockwell set up his portrait of Abraham Lincoln behind his easel as he set about painting *Murder in Mississippi* he was only making tangible a presence he always felt—the ghostly ambiance of the past that suffused contemporary events.

Lincoln was a particular favorite of Rockwell, who may have seen something of himself in the gawky, low-born president who made it big; Rockwell painted him no fewer than nine times.⁴¹ Rockwell’s earliest depictions of the president were for the Boy Scout calendar, one of the most popular calendars in the United States—one advertising agency estimated that Americans looked at it 800 million times each day.⁴² With the numbered days and months on separate tear-off sheets below it, the image on the Boy Scout calendar would have hung on the wall all year long.⁴³ In *The Spirit of America*, painted in 1929, Rockwell depicted a clean-cut, ruddy-cheeked white Boy Scout in profile, with blue-toned “spirits” of great Americans, dead and alive, clustering in profile behind him, including, most prominently, Lincoln, with George Washington in back, Teddy Roosevelt at the top right corner, and Charles Lindbergh on the right edge of the canvas. These men of the past literally stand behind the Boy Scout in the foreground, who looks into the future. In this image, Rockwell seems to suggest that the past is constantly with us, with our children, inspiring them and embodied in them.⁴⁴ During World War II, Rockwell returned to this theme again with an even more direct, and far

⁴¹See Laurie Norton Moffatt, *Norman Rockwell: A Definitive Catalogue*. 2 vols. The Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, Stockbridge, Mass. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986.

⁴²Reeves, “Norman Rockwell Is Exactly Like a Norman Rockwell,” *The New York Times*, 28 February 1971, SM14.

⁴⁴See Rockwell, *The Spirit of America*, oil on canvas, image for the 1929 *Boy Scout Calendar*, reproduced on the cover of *Boys’ Life*, February 1929.

more overtly patriotic, reference to the “spirit of America”: *A Scout is Loyal*, the cover the February 1942 issue of *Boys’ Life*, shows a white, teenaged scout standing on a hilltop with the translucent spirits of Lincoln and Washington (clutching the Declaration of Independence) behind him, along with an eagle and the American flag (fig. 3.8).⁴⁵

Rockwell also saw Lincoln as a continuing presence in the lives of young men who aspired to improve their lives through hard work and fair play. In 1927, he painted a *Post* cover celebrating Lincoln’s birthday called *The Law Student*, which depicted a young white clerk bent over a thick tome, seated at a cracker barrel and wearing an apron. Pictures of Lincoln were tacked onto the wall behind him, as if to inspire the clerk to rise to greatness from poverty through the study of law just as Lincoln had done.⁴⁶

Clearly, Rockwell made the easy connection between Lincoln and patriotism, both in simple, symbolic terms and later, in a subtle and more complex connection between capitalism and American democracy. In 1955, as Cold War fears heightened, Rockwell painted a poster that showed the Lincoln Memorial formed, ghostly, by the smoke exhaled from chugging factories. Up on the clouds, Rockwell’s interpretation of Daniel Chester French’s Lincoln statue seems to be alive, presiding from a heavenly throne. Rockwell painted his version of Lincoln statue from the sculptural studies made by French, whose preserved studio, Chesterwood, was just a few miles away from his home in Stockbridge. In the foreground, an area painted to resemble a scroll reads:

⁴⁵Rockwell, *A Scout is Loyal*, 1940.

⁴⁶Rockwell, *The Law Student*, oil on canvas, 36 x 27½ inches, cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, February 19, 1927, Norman Rockwell Museum Collection.



Figure 3.8. Norman Rockwell, *A Scout is Loyal*, *Boys' Life*, 1942.

No man living is more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty – none less inclined to take or touch aught which they have not honestly earned. Nor should this lead to a war upon property or the owners of property. Property is the fruit of labor, property is desirable, is a positive good to the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.

A. Lincoln⁴⁷

In this image, Rockwell seems to give life to Lincoln's statue with the purpose of bolstering the relationship between Lincoln's cultural authority as an American hero and the merits of the capitalist system, which seemed increasingly vulnerable as more and more countries in Asia fell under the influence of Communism.

It was not the first time Rockwell had marshaled Lincoln's image for political goals, directly or indirectly. During World War II, Rockwell produced a series of paintings illustrating the "Four Freedoms" that Franklin Roosevelt had enumerated in the Atlantic Charter, which later toured the country to aid in the sale of war bonds. One of these, *Freedom of Speech*, showed a dark-haired white man in workman's clothes speaking his mind at an old-fashioned New England town meeting (fig. 3.9). Though the man was not necessarily intended to represent Lincoln, his features and expression are similar to Lincoln, especially as compared to Rockwell's other images of Lincoln as a young man, and Rockwell portrays him from the same viewpoint—looking up from below—that he used to give Lincoln heroic stature.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Rockwell, *The Spirit of Lincoln*, oil on canvas, 66 x 42 inches, 1941, advertisement Brown & Bigelow, 1955, collection of Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School, Hamilton, Massachusetts.

⁴⁸See Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech*, oil on canvas, 45.75 x 35.5 inches, illustration for the *Saturday Evening Post*, 20 February 1943, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust; Rockwell, *Lincoln the Railsplitter (Young Woodcutter)*, oil on canvas, 84 x 42 inches,

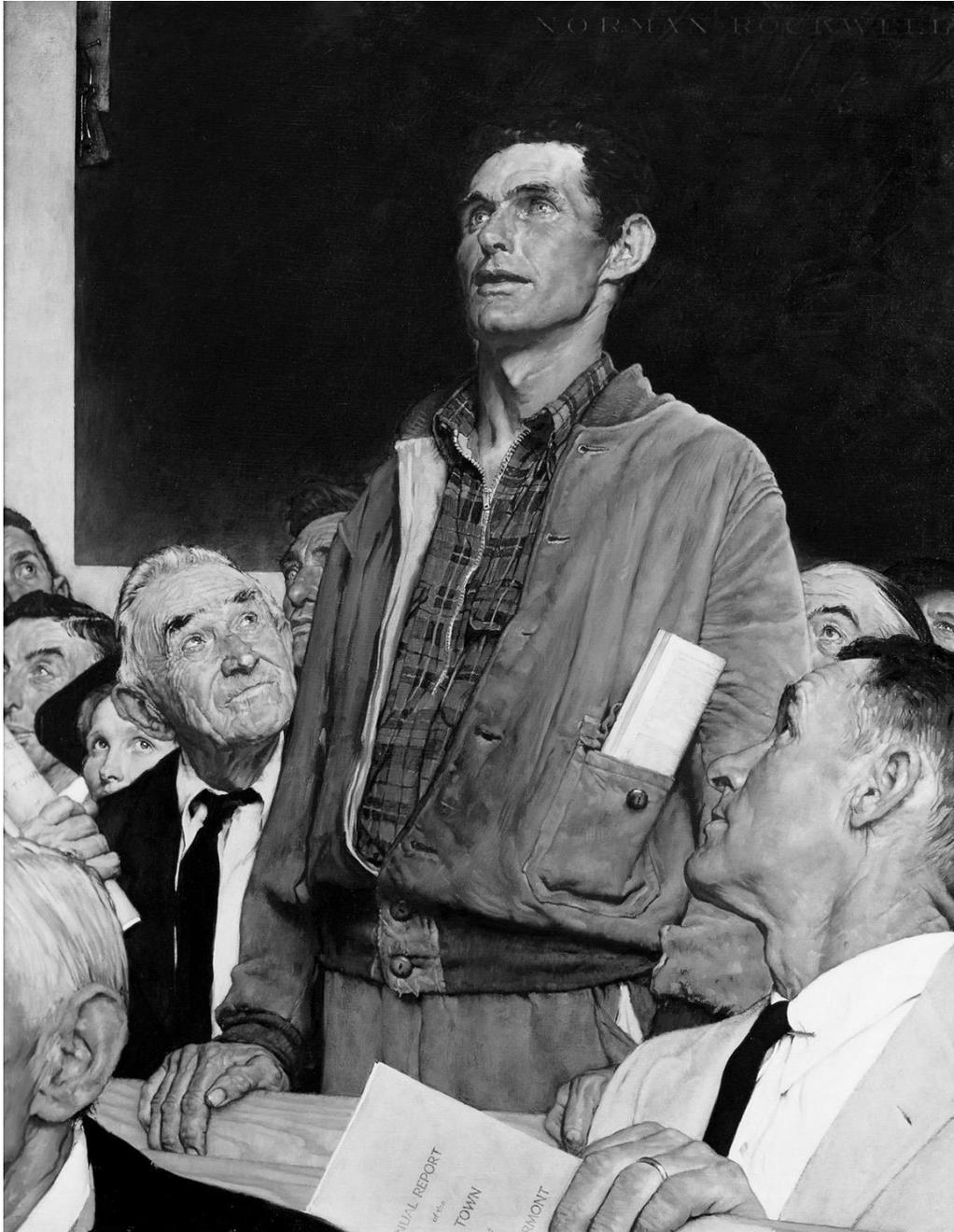


Figure 3.9. Norman Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech*. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 20 February 1943, 85.

1964, advertisement for Lincoln Savings, collection of the Butler Museum of American Art; Rockwell, *Lincoln for the Defense (Abe Lincoln)*, oil on canvas, 49¾ x 17½ inches, illustration for Elisa Bialk, "Lincoln for the Defense," *Saturday Evening Post*: 10 February 1962, 25, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

Audiences read the figure as Lincoln as well. Martha Rhyne of the *Washington Post* reported that when the paintings were displayed in a Washington department store, “a little Negro boy who upon gazing at the rangy, homely young man featured in [*Freedom of Speech*] said in a tiny voice, “That looks like Abraham Lincoln, mother.”⁴⁹ Perhaps Rockwell wanted viewers to identify themselves with Lincoln as they practiced their dearly-held Freedom of Speech at home and supported the war that fought for it abroad. As in the *Spirit of Lincoln* advertisement, Rockwell used Lincoln’s image to perform the task of equating contemporary American political goals with the essential values of democratic capitalism, which Lincoln seemed to embody. In his autobiography, Rockwell wrote that he even intended to use Lincoln’s spirit as a way to bless the mission of the United Nations, which Rockwell thought was “our only hope” to “help the world out of the mess it’s in.”⁵⁰ His first idea was to paint the Security Council chamber at night, empty except for an old janitor sweeping the floor. “He’d be turned toward the rear of the chamber as if he’d suddenly felt a presence in the chamber and glanced up,” Rockwell speculated. “And there, in the darkness, would be the figure of Christ. And maybe Lincoln. Or just Lincoln, perhaps. I hadn’t worked it out yet.”⁵¹ But when Rockwell went to the UN building to make sketches for the painting, he discovered that the real Security Council Chamber had nowhere for these two venerable deities to stand,

⁴⁹Martha Rhyne, “Children Enthralled With America as Rockwell Sees It.” *The Washington Post*, 5 May 1943, B5.

⁵⁰Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 375.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 375-376.

and he gave up the idea, deciding that Lincoln and Jesus were not figures universal enough to capture the notion of world peace.⁵²

Not all of Rockwell's Lincoln images were in such direct service to ideology. His most compelling depictions of Lincoln were, arguably, two of his full-length portraits, *Lincoln for the Defense* (fig. 3.10) and *Lincoln the Railsplitter* (fig. 3.11), painted in 1962 and 1964, respectively. It seems that Lincoln was increasingly on Rockwell's mind—and the nation's—as the one hundredth anniversary of the Civil War arrived in the early 1960s, and the Civil Rights movement got underway in force. Both were rectangular, vertically-oriented paintings, which seemed to emphasize Lincoln's towering height with their very dimensions. *Lincoln the Railsplitter* featured Lincoln as a young man, reading a book and holding an axe as he walks away from a prairie cabin in the distant background.⁵³ *Lincoln for the Defense* depicts Lincoln as a lawyer, presumably making an impassioned and no-doubt eloquent argument to free the huddled figure in manacles who sits behind him.⁵⁴

Lincoln for the Defense illustrated a 1962 *Post* article about the famous episode in Lincoln's life when he defended his friend Jack Armstrong from a charge of murder, allegedly by producing an almanac that proved that the witness who had claimed to see Armstrong commit the murder by the light of the full moon must have been lying, since

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Rockwell, *Lincoln the Railsplitter*, 1964.

⁵⁴Rockwell, *Lincoln for the Defense*, 1962.



Figure 3.10. Norman Rockwell, *Lincoln for the Defense*, oil on canvas, 1962.



Figure 3.11. Norman Rockwell, *Lincoln the Railsplitter*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 84 x 42 in. Collection of the Butler Museum of American Art.

there had been no moon that night. The story had grown in stature after the 1939 movie *Young Mr. Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda, had dramatized the incident.⁵⁵ But Rockwell's version is curious: the figure in the background is not easily recognizable as Amstrong. Cast in shadow, face hidden, wrists manacled, the figure instead looks as though he could be a slave. Lincoln's all-white clothing emphasizes the difference between his coloring and that of the man behind him, whose hands, clasped together in weary supplication, are several shades darker than Lincoln's even where they catch the light. Furthermore, the positioning of the figure's body—stooping while Lincoln stands, hands raised as if waiting for Lincoln to strike off the manacles—recalls several statues commemorating emancipation, such as Thomas Ball's 1876 Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C. (fig. 3.12).⁵⁶ Statues such as these, which proliferated in the late nineteenth century, played a strange iconographic trick. On one hand, they celebrated the Civil War as a fight for the emancipation of slaves, and Abraham Lincoln for his role as emancipator, which became an increasingly radical position after 1877, when Reconstruction failed in the South and a narrative of the Civil War that emphasized the heroism of both Union and Confederate soldiers began to eclipse the emancipationist narrative that had underscored the moral issue of slavery.⁵⁷ But, on the other hand, statues that portrayed slaves kneeling at Lincoln's feet seemed to comfort their white viewers that emancipation did not necessarily mean racial equality; blacks were still below whites, literally and

⁵⁵Lamar Trotti, *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Directed by John Ford. Los Angeles: 20th Century-Fox, 1939.

⁵⁶Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Memorial (Freedmen's Memorial)*, bronze sculpture, 1876.

⁵⁷For more about how the reconciliationist narrative of the Civil War replaced the emancipationist narrative, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.



Figure 3.12. Thomas Ball, *Freedman's Memorial*, bronze, 1876. Washington, D.C.

figuratively. In addition, depicting Lincoln striking off slaves' bonds gave the impression that African Americans had been mere recipients of emancipation at the hands of merciful whites, as opposed to active participants in the achievement of their own freedom. In effect, the story of emancipation became a self-congratulatory myth about whites' heroism in lifting helpless blacks out of slavery—and a subtle reassurance that blacks were incapable of acting to secure political and social rights without white intervention.⁵⁸

Lincoln for the Defense, then, is another of Rockwell's paintings that is not quite what it seems. A casual glance gives the impression that Rockwell has depicted Lincoln the emancipator, but further investigation reveals its true subject as the Armstrong story. Perhaps Rockwell intended to portray Lincoln's involvement in freeing Armstrong from a false accusation of murder as foreshadowing of his future act of justice in freeing the slaves.

At the very least, *Lincoln for the Defense* demonstrates that, as in images like *Shuffleton's Barbershop* and *The Homecoming*, a complicated and ambivalent notion of race haunted Rockwell's depictions of Lincoln. Is *Lincoln for the Defense* really about slavery, although it purports to depict an incident unconnected with race? Since Rockwell was illustrating an article about the Armstrong case, it would have made more sense for him to paint a clear portrait of Armstrong, who was, after all, a well-known figure from the story of Lincoln's youth, and therefore something of a folk figure in his own right. Armstrong was a local bully whom Lincoln supposedly wrestled when he first

⁵⁸For more about changes in Civil War memorial statuary iconography, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

arrived in New Salem, Illinois, and when Lincoln bested him, the two became friends. The evidence, then, points to a deliberate choice on Rockwell's part to introduce a subtle but undeniable ulterior meaning in *Lincoln for the Defense*.

On further consideration, Rockwell's overall Lincoln iconography is somewhat surprising. Rockwell always portrayed Lincoln with reverence, never subjecting him to the episodes of lovable embarrassment that dogged many of his characters. In retrospect, it seems rather a strange choice for an illustrator who loved folksy, down-home Americans—and Lincoln was the undisputed champion of folksy, down-home Americanism. On a similar note, Rockwell was the king of heartwarming images of little boys getting into scrapes, and the early twentieth century saw a marked rise in interest in tales about Lincoln's boyhood, when he got into many picturesque and probably apocryphal scrapes, but Rockwell never painted Lincoln's childhood.⁵⁹ Lincoln loved telling stories, and Rockwell loved painting them, but Lincoln the storyteller is missing from Rockwell's oeuvre, as is Lincoln the ugly but goodhearted, Lincoln the practical joker, Lincoln the loving and humorous father. In a way, Lincoln was the prototype of the kind of American that Rockwell loved to paint, the ultimate hero of everyday life, but Rockwell never quite worked up the courage to wrestle with Lincoln on that level. Although he lamented that the big picture was beyond him or above him, for Rockwell, Lincoln was always in the big picture.

A Ghost in Mississippi

When Rockwell began to paint his "big pictures" about race in the mid-sixties, he

⁵⁹For more about the rise of tales of Lincoln's boyhood, see Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 266-270.

carefully redirected those elements that had made his work so popular and so effective—grubby realism, relatable characters, skilled storytelling, and emotional poignancy—to a new end. *The Problem We All Live With* (fig. 3.13) was a case in point: Rockwell, whose images of boys and girls at play were celebrated for capturing the essence of twentieth-century American childhood, put all of the innocence and humanity of his beloved child characters into the little girl at the center of *The Problem We All Live With*. In doing so, he insisted that she, too, was part of the essence of American childhood.

The Problem We All Live With depicted the experience of Ruby Bridges, a six year old girl who endured such vicious abuse as she walked to her school in New Orleans—integrated by federal mandate in 1963—that U.S. Marshals had to guard her every day. Rockwell was particularly attuned to the case of Bridges because of his friendship with his Stockbridge neighbor Erik Erikson, the psychologist who conducted the famous study of the damage Jim Crow wrought on the psyches of African American children.⁶⁰ Erikson's work had been instrumental in overturning segregated education in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, and he met with Bridges during her integration ordeal in order to gauge her emotional state and to learn her reactions to the white supremacists that harassed her daily.⁶¹

Rockwell arranged for Lynda Gunn, whose grandmother sewed her signature

⁶⁰See Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton, 1950; Karal Ann Marling, *Civil Rights in Oz: Images of Kansas in American Popular Art* (Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1997), 11.

⁶¹*Ibid.*



Figure 3.13. Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, oil on canvas, illustration for *Look*, 14 January 1964.

white dress just for the occasion, to pose for the painting.⁶² Rockwell had long been famous for pressing his neighbors and the townspeople of Stockbridge into service as models, and it must have been a happy surprise for the Gunn family finally to be included among their ranks, no longer the unseen and unmentioned residents of a town whose familiar faces had been plastered over the newsstands of America. Rockwell depicted Gunn's small, resolute form marching in step with four enormous, faceless U.S. marshals. It was unusual for Rockwell to avoid an opportunity to give a unique personality to anyone in his paintings, but this was no ordinary image of the foibles of everyday life. Instead, the marshals in their suits, badges and yellow armbands act as the impersonal force of the law. The subject is Ruby and Ruby alone, whose crisp white pinafore and tiny white shoes contrast sharply with her dark skin, underscoring the innocence of a six year old forced to suffer the taunts and tomatoes of adult whites because of a system of racial injustice instituted hundreds of years before her birth. Like *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, in which Rockwell placed the viewer on the other side of the window, standing in the shoes of an outsider, *The Problem We All Live With* places the viewer so as to stand outside the canvas with the crowd that has scrawled racial epithets on the wall and has just hurled a tomato at a child. Perhaps, Rockwell suggests subtly, the viewer threw it.

Some viewers were unabashedly part of that crowd. G. L. LeBon of New Orleans wrote to Rockwell that "Your drawing of the negro child being accompanied by U.S. Marshals is just one more of the vicious lying propaganda being used for the crime of racial integration by such black journals as LOOK, LIFE, etc." LeBon suggested that

⁶²Norman Rockwell, letter to Allen Hurlburt, 1963. Norman Rockwell Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives.

incidents of “black savages” raping white women would be better subjects for Rockwell’s talents, and called him a “traitor to the white race, and a traitor to the illustrious white founders of this country,” especially Abraham Lincoln, “who said repeatedly he was opposed to integration.”⁶³ For LeBon, Rockwell’s sympathetic portrait of Bridges was an all-too-effective argument against segregation, and he feared the magnitude of its influence in generating outrage from *Look* readers.

Perhaps LeBon was right about the impact of *The Problem We All Live With* as propaganda: although Rockwell’s intention may have been to castigate white Southerners for their treatment of African Americans, outside of the United States the painting served as an indictment of the country as a whole. Stan Barsky, the Soviet desk officer for the U.S. Information Agency, sent Rockwell an article from *Pravda*, the Soviet Union’s leading newspaper and official organ of the Central Coordinating Committee of the Communist Party, which used the painting to illustrate an article about racial injustice in the United States (“typical Soviet misrepresentation,” Barsky griped).⁶⁴ *Pravda*’s piece, “Behind the Free World’s Façade: Democracy American Style,” enumerated the many racial incidents occurring across the country, both North and South, paying special attention to the dogs and fire hoses unleashed on Civil Rights demonstrators.⁶⁵ The United States’ treatment of minorities at home was a key diplomatic weakness in its bid

⁶³Norman Rockwell papers, G.L. LeBon, letter to Norman Rockwell, 6 January 1964. Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

⁶⁴Norman Rockwell papers, Stan G. Barsky, letter to Norman Rockwell, 3 March 1964. Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

⁶⁵Norman Rockwell papers, “Behind the Free World’s Façade: Democracy, American Style.” *Pravda*, 28 February 1964, p. 4, trans. Stan G. Barsky. Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

for influence abroad, where the notion of liberating countries in Africa and Asia from “Communist oppression” fell flat amidst reports of its brutal repression of African Americans within its borders.⁶⁶ After decades of illustrations that glorified the American way of life, with *The Problem We All Live With* Rockwell had provided an instrument for international critique.

Perhaps that was one reason that Rockwell felt the need to hang a portrait of Abraham Lincoln behind his easel as he set to work on *Murder in Mississippi*; after LeBon called him a traitor to the founders of the country, the approving gaze of Lincoln may have provided some comfort and encouragement as Rockwell embarked on his second Civil Rights painting for *Look*.

Murder in Mississippi was, in one way, strict reportage; unlike his imaginative covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Rockwell had to depict real people in a real world event. Generally, Rockwell’s engagement with true-to-life paintings of his contemporaries had begun and ended with portraits, most notably his portraits of presidential candidates. Now, he had the task of painting three real people, who had died under horrific and unknown circumstances, in their final moments. To recreate what the murders of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner might have looked like before the details of the killings emerged, Rockwell examined other images of violent death; he borrowed his composition from the 1963 Pulitzer-Prize winning news photograph *Aid from the Padre* by Hector Rondon. Rondon had captured Father Manuel Padrilla holding a soldier wounded at Puerto Cabello Naval Base in Caracas during a revolt against the Venezuelan

⁶⁶For a detailed discussion of American civil rights abuses and their impact on Cold War propaganda, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

government.⁶⁷ Rockwell replaced the priest with Schwerner and the wounded soldier with Chaney, dressing Schwerner in Lincoln's clothes and adjusting his stance to mimic *Lincoln the Railsplitter*. However Rockwell may have intended the pose, the effect is, yet again, similar to the Freedmen's Memorial—a huddled black figure kneels before a white figure, grasping at him for help.

Rockwell then sent a “color study”—though it could be termed more accurately a colorless study, done in sepia tones, black, and a tiny splash of red to capture the nighttime setting of the murders—to *Look*, which was thrilled with the concept and encouraged Rockwell to go ahead with the final painting.⁶⁸ Interestingly, Rockwell's color study originally included depictions of the group of Klan members who committed the murder: a rotund sheriff pointing a pistol, accompanied by five other men shouting and carrying shotguns. The hood of one car is visible in the bottom right corner, and the long shadows of the Klansmen, along with the turned head of one man in the right foreground, suggest the headlights of a second car behind them. As in *The Problem We All Live With* and *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, Rockwell's positioning of the viewer vis-à-vis the action of the painting suggests that he or she may be part of the mob descending on this trio.

But Rockwell drastically resized the final version of the color study, framing it so that only the long shadows of the Klansmen remained in the scene. Perhaps he felt that unknown assailants were more frightening and effective than a pudgy sheriff and his

⁶⁷Hector Rondon, *Aid from the Padre*, 1962.

⁶⁸Allen Hurlburt, letter to Norman Rockwell, 18 June 1965, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

good old boys, or perhaps implicating both law enforcement and the viewer in the crime was a bridge too far.

Rockwell then went on to finish the final version of *Murder in Mississippi*, a polished, infinitely detailed painting, with every rock and strand of hair rendered with typical Rockwellian precision (fig. 3.14). Chaney's white t-shirt is smeared red with blood, the only splash of color on an otherwise stark canvas. The long shadows are perfect outlines of figures wearing hats and carrying shotguns. Schwerner stares at them with dignified defiance. When Rockwell sent it to Allen Hurlburt he wrote, a bit apologetically, "I tried in a big way . . . to do an angry picture. If I just had a bit of Ben Shahn in me it would've helped. Please call me and give me your reaction. I sure tried anyway."⁶⁹

Rockwell and Hurlburt eventually agreed that Rockwell's color study was a better illustration for Morgan's article than the polished final canvas. It was the only time in Rockwell's career that an editor had preferred a study to the full Rockwell treatment, and it was a testament to Rockwell's commitment to making a difference with his artwork that he was willing to undermine his signature style in service to the overall effectiveness of the image. The rapid brush strokes and blurry figures of the color study contribute to its raw power, as if the artist had sketched from life in those dark hours. Instead of dignified men, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman look like young boys, about to face down a merciless, faceless firing squad.

The long shadows are all that remain of the Klansmen, inviting the viewer to imagine what evil lurks outside the frame of the image. In this way, *Murder in*

⁶⁹Norman Rockwell, letter to Allen Hurlburt, 8 April 1965. Norman Rockwell papers, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.



Figure 3.14. Norman Rockwell, *Murder in Mississippi*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 35 x 42 in. Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust.

Mississippi is as much about what is *not* in the image as what is in it—its power derives from the force of the unknown about to descend on these three men. The viewer is helpless to save them, just as Schwerner is helpless to save Chaney or himself.

And what of Lincoln, looking down over this canvas in Norman Rockwell's Stockbridge studio? A different Norman Rockwell would have painted Lincoln there in the Mississippi sky, observing these events like a disappointed Christ, as in the aborted United Nations picture. But Lincoln is missing from *Murder in Mississippi*, for all his image watched over its creation, a ghost of the past incapable of acting in the present. Lincoln could not save them either.

From Peyton Cole Hedgeman to Palmer C. Hayden

Seen today in the collection of the American Art Museum at the Smithsonian, Palmer Hayden's painting of approximately 1937, *The Janitor Who Paints*, looks like a rather unremarkable canvas, a sweet scene of an African-American artist wearing a beret and painting a woman and infant (fig. 3.15). On the wall in the background hangs a picture of a dozing cat, the very image of contented domesticity. Although Hayden certainly seemed to be making a statement with the painting—that though this man was black and worked as a janitor for a living, he was still an artist—it was a relatively gentle one.⁷⁰

In the 1980s, however, an X-ray of the canvas revealed a very different *Janitor Who Paints* underneath the painting that is visible today. Instead of a beret, the artist had

⁷⁰Palmer Hayden, *The Janitor Who Paints*, oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 32 7/8 inches, c. 1937, collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

a bulging, distorted head, and the facial features of all three figures—artist, woman, and child—were deformed into the grotesque caricatures of minstrelsy (fig. 3.16). Instead of a cat dozing on the wall, a portrait of Abraham Lincoln presided over the scene.⁷¹

The resulting painting is disturbing and unsettling. What is its message, and why did Hayden eventually paint over it? Hidden beneath the second, outer version of *The Janitor Who Paints*, the image of Lincoln nonetheless continues to haunt this painting, a marker of Hayden's complicated relationship with the country he lived in and the white art establishment within which he worked.

At first glance, Palmer Hayden and Norman Rockwell seem odd bedfellows. Rockwell was white, and he nearly always depicted white subjects, and Hayden was African-American, and he concentrated on African-American subjects. Rockwell's active period stretched from the early twentieth century through the 1970s, while Hayden's fame was greatest in the interwar period. Rockwell was the best known commercial artist of the century, and Hayden was a lesser-known fine artist of the Harlem Renaissance.⁷²

But Hayden and Rockwell had more in common than meets the eye. For one thing, they were near-contemporaries: Rockwell was born in 1894, Hayden in 1890 (though he listed his birthdate as 1893 for most of his life).⁷³ Both served in World War

⁷¹See Driskell, et. al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 33.

⁷²For more on the Harlem Renaissance and Hayden's role in it, see David Driskell et. al., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987.

⁷³See Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 68.



Figure 3.15. Palmer Hayden, *The Janitor Who Paints* (second version), c. 1940. Oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 32 7/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 3.16. Palmer Hayden, *The Janitor Who Paints* (first version). Oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 32 7/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

I: Rockwell as an already-famous artist drawing portraits of generals and keeping the home fires burning no farther than South Carolina, Hayden in a cavalry detachment in West Point.⁷⁴ Both went to Paris to enrich their artistic practices. And, strangely enough, both were reviled for their representations of race.

Palmer Hayden was born Peyton Cole Hedgeman in Widewater, Virginia, the son of Nancy Bell Cole Hedgeman and James Hedgeman. Hayden began drawing pictures of sailboats in the Chesapeake with chalk on the school slates, since he couldn't afford paper. His schoolteachers encouraged his drawing talent, and one even told him, "Keep at it and you'll be a famous artist."⁷⁵ When he was sixteen, Hayden left home to live with an aunt in Washington, D.C., where he worked as a drug store delivery boy. He drew constantly, dreaming of becoming a successful commercial artist. Hoping to further his goal, he put an advertisement in a Washington newspaper: "Young art student would like a position with a commercial artist." A few days later, he received an answer, requesting that he visit the artist and bring along some of his work. "So I took some of my best sketches under my arm and went down to Georgetown," Hayden later recalled, "[I] rang the bell, and a man came to the door. I said, 'I'm here about the advertisement in the paper about an artist.' He said, 'Oh, I didn't know you were Colored.' That was the end of the interview. I tucked my things back under my arm and went home."⁷⁶

In an interview late in his life, Hayden confided that he "wanted to illustrate like

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 67.

⁷⁶James Adams, Camille Billops, and James V. Hatch, interview with Palmer Hayden, May 14, 1972, 99.

Rockwell and make thousands.”⁷⁷ But in the early twentieth century, the opportunities for artistic advancement that Rockwell enjoyed as a white man were not open to African Americans. Instead, the doors that Rockwell could pass through—into the Art Students League, into a course with legendary illustrator Thomas Fogarty, into the office of *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Horace Lorimer—would have been slammed in Hayden’s face.⁷⁸

Instead, Hayden worked odd jobs. He traveled with the Ringling Brothers circus, keeping the grounds, seeing to the animals and tents, and painting posters and advertisement cards when his employers learned of his artistic skill.⁷⁹ Then, in 1912, when his mother suggested his wanderlust could be satisfied in a slightly more respectable way, he joined the army.⁸⁰ While Norman Rockwell was making a name for himself as a rising star at the Art Students League, Peyton C. Hedgeman was being given a name by somebody else: one of his odd job supervisors wrote him a hasty letter of recommendation for his army post, mistaking his name as Palmer C. Hayden. Hayden worried that revealing the error to the army recruiters might jeopardize his ability to enlist. He went by that name for the rest of his life.⁸¹

In the 24th Infantry, Hayden was stationed in the Philippines, which Spain had

⁷⁷Hayden interview, 105.

⁷⁸ Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 87.

⁷⁹Allan M. Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden* (Los Angeles: The Museum of African American Art, 1988), 11.

⁸⁰Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 67.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 68. An alternate version of this story has one of Hayden’s white commanding officers in the Philippines unable to pronounce Peyton Hedgeman, and therefore rechristening him Palmer Hayden. See Driskell et. al, *Harlem Renaissance*, 131.

“entrusted” to the United States in 1899. Many African American soldiers fought in the Philippine-American war between 1899 and 1902, as American military strategists believed that blacks were biologically suited to hot climates and immune to sub-tropical diseases.⁸² Hayden arrived ten years after the U.S. army prevailed over the Filipino nationalist forces, and he served on the islands of Panay, Negros, Luzon, and Corregidor.⁸³ There, he encountered the strange amalgam of Jim Crow racism and economic freedom that the U.S. occupation had bred in its outpost in the South Pacific. On one hand, African-American soldiers endured the same kind of treatment abroad they had fled at home; whites established segregated restaurants and barbershops in Manila, and black soldiers were subjected to racial epithets and even mob violence from their white comrades-in-arms.⁸⁴ These indignities surely gave African-American soldiers pause as they participated in the “civilizing” mission of American imperialism in the Philippines, and many felt they had more in common with Filipinos, whom white officers lumped into the same lower racial caste as blacks.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the economic depression of the area meant that African-American soldiers, even with their comparably low salaries, were wealthy by Filipino standards. Many saw the Philippines as an area of opportunity for African Americans, and several soldiers wrote to newspapers at home

⁸²See Scot Ngozi-Brown, “African American Soldiers and Filipinos: Racial Imperialism, Jim Crow, and Social Relations.” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 82, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 44.

⁸³Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 68.

⁸⁴Ngozi-Brown, “African American Soldiers and Filipinos,” 44-45.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 46.

promoting its possibilities for black businessmen and professionals.⁸⁶ After the conclusion of the Philippine-American war, more than a thousand African-American soldiers chose to remain behind, the largest proportion of African-American soldiers in history who opted not to return to the United States after military service abroad.⁸⁷

Though Hayden did not reflect in detail upon his experience serving in the Philippines, his army record hints at a similar conflict. After his drawing prowess came to light, Hayden was set to work making maps. He earned a special commendation for his work by Brigadier General Frederick H. Funston, but one wonders how genuinely it was given or how gratefully it was received.⁸⁸ Funston was evidently a proponent of lynch law, ordering the lynching of two Filipino prisoners without trial and writing of his desire to see African American defector David Fagen “stretch a Picket rope.”⁸⁹

After Hayden returned from the Philippines in 1914, he reenlisted and found a position at the 10th Cavalry Unit at West Point, where he spent ten dollars per month of his eighteen-dollar salary on a correspondence course in drawing.⁹⁰ His enlistment ended in 1917, but with the United States at war, Hayden was not immediately permitted to

⁸⁶Savannah Tribune, May 7, 1900, May 4, 1901, as quoted in Ngozi-Brown, “African American Soldiers and Filipinos,” 49.

⁸⁷Ngozi-Brown, “African American Soldiers and Filipinos,” 51.

⁸⁸Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past*, 12.

⁸⁹Frederick Funston, *Memories of Two Wars: Cuban and Philippine Experiences* (Constable and Company, 1912), 376, quoted in Ngozi-Brown, “African American Soldiers and Filipinos,” 45.

⁹⁰Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 68.

leave the army. He stayed another three years.⁹¹

After his discharge in 1920, Hayden moved to New York City. He worked night shifts as a letter carrier in order to take summer classes in art at Columbia University during the day. At first, he lived in Harlem, but he soon moved to Greenwich Village to live the life of an artist and to search out instruction in painting. He boarded in an attic room for three dollars a week, sweeping floors, washing windows, and painting. By coincidence, he got a job cleaning the studio of Cooper Union art instructor Victor Perard, who encouraged Hayden in his work and sometimes took him painting *en plein air*.⁹²

One night, Hayden was on his way to meet his friend Cloyd Boykin when he encountered a man running down the street, looking for help moving the furniture of a wealthy, elderly woman. He promised a rate of seventy-five cents an hour, enough for a good dinner, and Hayden agreed—good dinners were in short supply. After a few days of hauling her earthly possessions from Montclair to Ninth Street, he mentioned to the woman—Alice Dike Miller—that he was trying to be an artist. She requested to see his work, and when he brought her a few of his paintings, Miller told him he had talent and that she might be able to help him some day.⁹³

The next year, Hayden went to work as a janitor for a summer at the Boothbay art colony in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, in exchange for instruction from Asa C. Randall. He worked in the mornings and went out with the painting class in the afternoons. He got

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²See John Ott, “Labored Stereotypes: Palmer Hayden’s The Janitor Who Paints.” *American Art*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 103, Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 70.

⁹³Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past*, 13.

room and board but no salary, and at the end of the summer he had to write to Miller to ask for enough money to pay his fare home. She sent him a check for ten dollars. Back in New York in 1927, Hayden resumed working for Miller, who told him about a competition that the Harmon Foundation was having for “outstanding achievement in art by a Negro,” including prizes for art, literature, drama, and history.⁹⁴

Real estate baron William Harmon established the Harmon Foundation in 1922 with the goal of assisting individuals to self-help. Harmon’s father had been a white officer in the black Tenth Cavalry in the Midwest, and Harmon’s childhood contact with African-American soldiers inspired him with “sympathy for the colored people” and their aspirations to “stimulating creative work,” according to the 1926 announcement of the creation of the foundation’s Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes.⁹⁵ The foundation offered gold medals and four hundred dollar first prizes for literature, music, fine arts, business and industry, science and invention, education, religious service, and race relations, the last category open to both whites and blacks.⁹⁶ Hayden submitted one of his Boothbay scenes to the first-ever competition and won the gold medal for fine arts.⁹⁷

Scholars of African American art have seen the Harmon Foundation as both a blessing and a curse for early twentieth-century black artists. To its credit, it provided

⁹⁴Hayden interview, 93.

⁹⁵George E. Haynes, “William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement,” *Opportunity*, IV (April 1926), 129, quoted in Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, eds., *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1989), 28.

⁹⁶Reynolds and Wright, *Against the Odds*, 29.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 107.

artists with recognition, financial support, and opportunities to exhibit their work, which were infrequent in the Jim Crow era, even in New York. But the Harmon Foundation also saw itself essentially as a paternal organization, and its beliefs and practices often validated the stereotypes and racial divisions African-American artists and intellectuals were working to dismantle. Though the Harmon Foundation exhibited black artists, it exhibited them in black-only, segregated shows, effectively defining “black art” as a separate entity from “art” as a whole.⁹⁸ It also gave credence to the stereotypical notion that African Americans possessed innate qualities that suited them for vital artistic work; their exhibition catalogue *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of Their Achievements* argued that African Americans had “physical strength, a sense of rhythm, optimism and humor, simplicity and aplomb.”⁹⁹ Harmon Foundation press releases stressed the humble origins of the artists they supported and lingered on their status as day laborers, effacing their artistic training in favor of casting them as self-taught amateurs. Though Hayden had taken art classes at Columbia and studied at the Boothbay Art Colony, the press release announcing his receipt of the first William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement in Fine Arts stated that “Palmer C. Hayden, a house-cleaner jobber in Greenwich Village . . . while making his living doing odd work in general cleaning he has devoted his spare time for several years to the brush, and previously his art work has come to the attention of but few outside his circle of acquaintances.”¹⁰⁰ By portraying

⁹⁸Ott, “Labored Stereotypes,” 106.

⁹⁹Harmon Foundation, *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of their Achievements* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1935), quoted in Ott, “Labored Stereotypes,” 106.

¹⁰⁰Harmon Foundation press release, December 7, 1926, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 3, Publicity—Negro Awards folder, quoted in Ott, “Labored Stereotypes,” 105.

Hayden as a poor dabbler enriched by the largesse of its patronage, the Harmon Foundation both magnified the impact of its philanthropy and subtly reassured white audiences that a janitor who painted was still just a janitor.

On the heels of his success with the Harmon Award, Alice Miller Dike gave Hayden three thousand dollars to study art in Europe.¹⁰¹ He wrote to William Harmon to inform him of the generosity of his new patron, and the Harmon Foundation helped Hayden make travel arrangements and contacts abroad, in addition to publicizing the ongoing accomplishment of their star protégé by releasing a press notice titled “Negro Housecleaner Will Study Art in Europe.”¹⁰² By the spring of 1927, Hayden was on a ship headed to Paris. He had met sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller in New York, who gave him Henry O. Tanner’s contact information. In Paris, Hayden took up residence in a hotel and met all of the famous black expatriate artists and writers—Tanner, Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Augusta Savage, Countee Cullen. He took his paintings to Clivette Lefebvre at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts for criticism, and then headed to Brittany to paint the sea coast.¹⁰³ He exhibited in a number of Parisian shows between 1928 and 1931, including the Salon des Tuilleries, the American Legion Exhibition, and the Galerie Berheim-Jeune.¹⁰⁴ During this time, he continued to exhibit in Harmon

¹⁰¹Hayden interview, 93.

¹⁰²Harmon Foundation Press release, “Negro Housecleaner Will Study Art in Europe,” Harmond Foundation Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 73.

¹⁰³Hayden interview, 95.

¹⁰⁴Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *Harlem Renaissance Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 250.

Foundation shows and traveling exhibitions, and in 1933 he won Mrs. John D. Rockefeller's prize for painting with a canvas called *Fetiche et fleurs*: a still life of a Fang bust on a table with a flower arrangement and draped Bakuba raffia cloth.¹⁰⁵

Life in France was a liberating experience for Hayden, as it was for many African Americans who lived abroad as part of the "lost generation congregating in Paris after World War I. Beyond the reaches of the oppressive racial climate in the United States, black expatriate artists had greater opportunities for instruction and met with greater interest in their work from the public at large.¹⁰⁶ Hayden reflected on his improved circumstances abroad in his sketchbook, in which he drew a cartoon of himself sitting at the base of the Eiffel Tower, thinking back on leaving a silhouette of America where a police officer stands over two huddled figures. At the bottom of the page, he concluded with an image of himself evidently enjoying the Paris nightlife, sitting at a café table with a glass of wine and the sketchy figure of a cancan dancer and a palette floating in front of him to symbolize the pleasures of his new life.¹⁰⁷

After five years in France, Hayden's money finally ran out. He wrote to the Harmon Foundation asking for a loan, but its acting director, Mary Beattie Brady, turned him down. The Foundation felt it had done quite enough to help Hayden. "I am wondering if your assistance that came about through the recognition of the Harmon Foundation has not in your case proved more of a hindrance than a help," Brady

¹⁰⁵See Driskell et. al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 132; Palmer Hayden, *Fetiche et fleurs*, oil on canvas, 29½ x 29 inches, 1932-33.

¹⁰⁶See Driskell et. al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 31.

¹⁰⁷Palmer Hayden, *Untitled Sketch*, in sketchbook, graphite on paper, 4 x 6 inches, c. 1927, Palmer Hayden Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

snipped.¹⁰⁸ Instead, Hayden borrowed money from the American Aid Society to pay his third-class passage back from Europe to New York.¹⁰⁹

The Janitor Who Paints

Hayden returned to the United States in the midst of the Great Depression, and was at first denied relief because he was a single man. But when the Roosevelt administration established the Federal Arts Project in 1935, Hayden joined the easel division. In exchange for a weekly salary of twenty-three dollars, Hayden turned in one painting every month.¹¹⁰

While he had been in Europe, Hayden had become increasingly interested in depicting scenes of African-American life. Two of the canvases he exhibited at the American Legion show had been paintings of black subjects, and *Fetiché et fleurs*, with its African sculpture and patterned cloth, clearly showed the influence of contemporary black intellectuals like Alain Locke, who argued that African-American artists had to eschew the canon of Western art in favor of their African roots if they wanted to create an aesthetic that did not appropriate the visual language of their oppressors.¹¹¹ But Hayden felt a much stronger connection to the African-American culture in the United States than to any African culture, and he turned his talents toward depicting scenes from black communities in New York and in his native Virginia. His interest in images of ordinary

¹⁰⁸Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past*, 13.

¹⁰⁹Hayden interview, 97.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

¹¹¹See Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1925), 254-267.

people and everyday life was in keeping with the larger aims of the Federal Art Project, which hoped to build a body of uniquely American works by paying artists to produce art. Likewise, it was similar to the goals of the popular Regionalist painters of the 1930s, including Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Currie, and Grant Wood, who strived to capture the character of specific communities in America.¹¹² In 1936, Hayden painted *Midsummer Night in Harlem*, a street scene showing neighborhood residents sitting on the front steps of crowded brownstones, talking, laughing, and promenading.¹¹³

Also during this period, Hayden completed the first version of *The Janitor Who Paints*, a much-discussed portrait of his friend Cloyd Boykin.¹¹⁴ It depicted Boykin painting in a garret room, holding a palette and applying brush to canvas with a trashcan in the foreground and a broom and feather duster hanging on the wall. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln hangs on the wall near the top of the canvas. But, strangely, Hayden depicted Boykin, as well as the woman and child he is presumably painting, with the cartoonish, exaggerated features of blackface minstrelsy. All three figures in the painting have grotesque, bulbous heads, and huge lips and noses. Far from eschewing Western aesthetic tropes, Hayden seemed to have reproduced the cruelest stereotypes of black representation in white popular culture.

Hayden's contemporaries were alternately befuddled and outraged by his style. Along with *Midsummer Night in Harlem*, which used a similar technique, representing the denizens of a Harlem street with the big white eyes, smiling mouths, and kerchiefs that characterized the "Mammy" and "Zip Coon" figures common in minstrel shows, *The*

¹¹²See Nancy Heller, *The Regionalists*. New York: Watson-Guption, 1976.

¹¹³Palmer Hayden, *Midsummer Night in Harlem*, 1938, oil on canvas.

¹¹⁴Hayden interview, 92.

Janitor Who Paints seemed to suggest that Hayden had internalized white stereotypes of African-Americans. June E. Roberts has suggested that Hayden and William H. Johnson, another African-American painter who utilized minstrelized representations of black life were only conforming to the demands of the marketplace, hoping to play to white audiences in order to sell their paintings: “The construction of racialized conventions of representation in America authorized minstrel figures as the only socially acceptable and therefore marketable portrayures of blacks.”¹¹⁵

Of course, that was far from the case. Later, when asked about the painting, Hayden explained that he intended *The Janitor Who Paints* as a tribute to Boykin: “It’s a sort of protest painting,” he said. “I painted it because no one called Boykin the artist. They called him the janitor.”¹¹⁶ Hayden’s characterization of Boykin was intended as a bitter, ironic critique of the possibilities afforded to a black artist in a society that could only see him through the distorting lens of black stereotypes. Hayden, too, had been called a janitor rather than an artist, and some scholars have seen this work as a self-portrait.¹¹⁷ The first version of *The Janitor Who Paints*, with its minstrel caricatures and painting of Abraham Lincoln hanging in the background seemed to say to white audiences, “Is this what you want?” *The Janitor Who Paints* looked through white eyes at a black artist, to see him and his subjects enacting stereotypical roles and paying homage to the great emancipator.

¹¹⁵June E. Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora Through Folk Culture and Religion* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 196.

¹¹⁶Ott, “Labored Stereotypes,” 102.

¹¹⁷Eric Hanks, “Journey from the Crossroads: Palmer Hayden’s Right Turn.” *International Review of African America Art*, vol. 16, no. 1, (1999), 38.

Some critics got the joke, but they didn't think it was funny. James Porter, a scholar at Howard University, commented on Hayden's work in his 1943 book *Modern Negro Art*:

Lately he has tried to paint satirical pictures of Negro life in Harlem, and in these, including the one entitled "The Janitor Who Paints," we see a talent gone far astray. Not only are the forms in these works confused, but the application of humor is ill-advised, if not altogether tasteless. His "Midsummer Night in Harlem" is like one of those ludicrous billboards that once were plastered on public buildings to advertise the black-face minstrels.¹¹⁸

Although Porter saw the dark humor in *The Janitor Who Paints*, he felt it was counterproductive to the project of achieving recognition for black artists, not to mention African-American citizenship in the United States as a whole. Hayden's critics feared that continuing to circulate minstrel caricatures in any way, even as an attempt to subvert them, would only reify them in white culture.¹¹⁹

Sometime late in the 1930s or early in the 1940s, Hayden came to agree with his critics. He went back to *The Janitor Who Paints* and removed its ironic aspects, covering the bulge in the artist's head with a beret (to serve as a symbol of his artistic, Parisian *bona fides*) and repainting the facial features of all three figures. He covered up the portrait of Abraham Lincoln with a painting of a cat. The painting's days of being a searing critique of white views of African Americans were over. Instead, Hayden let it stand for itself, allowing its argument to be self-evident. The racial system in the United States might have forced this man to be a janitor, but it could not stop him from being an artist.

¹¹⁸James Porter. *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943), 100, quoted in Phoebe Wolfskill, "Caricature and the New Negro in the Work of Archibald Motley Jr. and Palmer Hayden," *Art Bulletin* 91, no. 3 (September 2009), 343.

¹¹⁹Eloise E. Johnson, *Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance: The Politics of Exclusion*. (United States: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 112.

Conclusion

Both Hayden and Rockwell left their protest days behind them as they progressed into their later careers. Hayden continued his interest in the African American folk tradition, and in the 1950s he produced his most famous work, a series of paintings about folk hero John Henry, who raced the steam drill to build the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia.¹²⁰ Each painting in the series depicted a different line from the folk song *The Ballad of John Henry*, from his birth “with a hammer in his hand” to his fatal battle with the steam drill. Hayden rendered all of the figures in these paintings with as much dignity and realism as possible. He never painted minstrel characters again.

After *Look* folded in 1971, Rockwell continued working in his Stockbridge studio, completing commissions for the Boy Scout calendar each year and fewer and fewer advertisements. His brief dalliance with Civil Rights turned out to be just that. He painted two more images of race relations, 1967's *The New Kids in the Neighborhood*, which envisioned a meeting between white children and their new black neighbors, soon to be united by their mutual love of baseball if the gloves they are carrying are any indication, and *Blood Brothers* in 1968, an image of a white and an African American soldier lying dead in a pool of their mingled blood in Vietnam, which *Look* ultimately decided not to publish.¹²¹ When Richard Reeves interviewed Rockwell in 1971, Rockwell confessed that “I was doing the racial thing for awhile But that’s deadly

¹²⁰See Hayden, *John Henry Series*, twelve oil paintings, 1944-1947, The Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles.

¹²¹Rockwell, *The New Kids in the Neighborhood*, oil on canvas, 36½ x 57½ in., *Look*, 16 May 1967, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust; Rockwell, *Blood Brothers*, oil on canvas, 1968.

now – nobody wants it.”¹²² In 1975, Rockwell painted Lincoln for the last time in *Mathew Brady Photographing Lincoln*, an interesting image about the process of image-making.¹²³ Lincoln sits at the far right of the canvas, his guise familiar from the well-known resulting photograph, and Brady stands near the center, timing the exposure. The wall of the room is decorated with portraits, reminders of the products of Brady’s art.

But this painting, too, shows Rockwell’s complicated relationship with race. In the charcoal study Rockwell made before the final painting, a black janitor stands at the right side of the image, watching the proceedings. But in the final version, Rockwell replaced the man with a marble bust. The janitor haunted his painting of Lincoln just as Lincoln haunted Hayden’s painting of a janitor.

For both Rockwell and Hayden, the image of Abraham Lincoln played a vital role as they struggled with the problem of race. Hayden used Lincoln’s image as a symbol of the white concept of racial justice, a caricature of equality to match the caricatured figures in *The Janitor Who Paints*. When he decided that his ironic approach did more harm than good, he painted over the image of Lincoln. Rockwell, on the other hand, never really managed to connect Lincoln and race outwardly; although he turned to Lincoln’s image for inspiration when he painted *Murder in Mississippi*, when he painted Lincoln alone, he removed the janitor.

At the end of the day, neither of these paintings depicts Lincoln. But examining the histories of their creation demonstrates how the image of Lincoln continued as a presence as these artists attempted to agitate for Civil Rights. Neither Rockwell nor

¹²²Reeves, “Norman Rockwell is Exactly Like a Norman Rockwell,” SM18.

¹²³Rockwell, *Mathew Brady Photographing Lincoln*, oil on canvas, 38 x 66 in., 1975.

Hayden could embrace Lincoln's legacy of emancipation wholeheartedly, but their paintings serve as evidence of his ghostly presence in twentieth-century American art.

Chapter 4

The Ghost in the Machine: Walt Disney's Abraham Lincoln Robot at the New York World's Fair

Lincoln. Summoned live from the grave of technology, fathered by a romantic, drawn by need, slapped to life by small lightnings, given voice by an unknown actor, to be placed there to live forever in this far southwest corner of old-new America!

-Ray Bradbury, "Downwind from Gettysburg"¹

It was December 1963, and Ray Bradbury was Christmas shopping. The much-acclaimed author of *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles* was adrift in a teeming sea of holiday shoppers in the Beverly Hills Saks Fifth Avenue, when what to his wondering eyes should appear but Walter Elias Disney, the pop culture visionary who had been delighting American audiences with cartoons, films, television shows and even a theme park for over thirty years. Disney was like a *GQ* Santa Claus in a tailored suit and skinny tie, carrying beautifully-wrapped gifts stacked neatly up to his pencil-thin mustache.²

Bradbury had a childlike awe of Disney; he had loved *Fantasia* and *The Skeleton Dance*, and as a boy he had spent hours staring at animation cels from *Steamboat Willie*

¹Ray Bradbury, "Downwind from Gettysburg," in *I Sing the Body Electric!* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 77.

²Sam Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 271.

at the county museum. To the New York intellectuals who had sneered at Disney's mass entertainment, he had been a vocal defender of Disney, whom he believed had a nearly unrivaled imagination and a genuine vision for the future of American society. When Bradbury saw Disney that day, he thought, "Oh my God, it's my hero." He rushed up to Disney and introduced himself, and was pleased to discover that Disney knew his work. Bradbury invited Disney to lunch, and they agreed to meet at Disney's studio the following day.³

At the studio, they dined in Disney's office, where they compared notes and shared ideas about the future of American technological progress and transportation.⁴ Neither was happy with the fact that once the upcoming New York World's Fair closed, all of its buildings, rides, and attractions would be demolished. Just as Bradbury stood up to leave, Disney said, "Wait! I have something to show you." He led Bradbury out onto the studio lot and into a secret workshop, where they met with a dizzying array of robotic parts: mechanical eyeballs that blinked their metal lids and the wired skeletal structure of arms and legs. These, Disney explained, were the underpinnings of a mechanical double of Abraham Lincoln, the world's first "audioanimatron": a robot that could speak as well as move. Bradbury was in science fiction heaven. What would happen, he wondered, if someone tried to assassinate the robot Lincoln? Disney was intrigued. He suggested that Bradbury write a story about it.⁵

³Bradbury gives a detailed account of his meeting with Disney in the foreword to Amy Booth Green and Howard E. Green, eds., *Remembering Walt: Favorite Memories of Walt Disney* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1999), vii-viii.

⁴Bradbury, foreword to *Remembering Walt*, vii.

⁵Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles*, 272.

In the nearly fifty years since Bradbury's trip to the Burbank studio, Disney's robotic Lincoln has become so commonplace in American culture that it seems almost unpatriotic to suggest that there is something a bit uncanny about an amusement park show starring an android facsimile of a dead president. After all, no trip to Disneyland is complete without a visit to Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln. Just inside the Anaheim, California, park's entrance, on Main Street, USA, vacationers can take an air-conditioned time out from the long lines at the Matterhorn or Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and spend half an hour with the sixteenth president of the United States. Disney World, in Orlando, Florida, has its own Mr. Lincoln, of course, where he is accompanied by robots of the other forty-three men to hold the highest office in the land. Walt Disney's Audioanimatronic figure of Lincoln has retained such popularity over the years, despite being a rather boring show about American history sandwiched in between rollercoasters, that when Disneyland officials attempted to replace Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln with Jim Henson's MuppetVision 3D in 1990, outraged fans scuttled the plot and succeeded in preserving the Lincoln robot for future generations.⁶

Disney's Lincoln Audioanimatron, which is just a few years shy of attaining—and thereafter surpassing—the age at which the real Mr. Lincoln departed this earth (fifty-six), has become such an accepted part of the American pop culture landscape that it's easy to forget the essential absurdity of building a robot reincarnation of an assassinated president. Why does a robot play the role of Lincoln in Disney's history show, when an actor could do the job just as well, without any technological mishaps, and for a fraction

⁶See Jon Wiener, "Disney World Imagineers a President," *The Nation*, November 22, 1993, 623; Jim Hill, "The Muppet Makeover of Disneyland That Almost Happened," *The Huffington Post*, December 19, 2001 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-hill/disney-muppets-henson_b_1141087.html>

of the cost?

The origins of Disney's Audioanimatron Lincoln demonstrate yet another facet of cultural haunting. Walt Disney's Lincoln Audioanimatron is perhaps the most recognizable example of a drive to reanimate, and refashion, a living Lincoln with answers to contemporary problems. Like the actors who portrayed Lincoln on the American stage discussed in chapter two, the Disney Lincoln robot attempted to bring Lincoln back to "life" through an animated simulation that affected viewers by giving them the sense that Lincoln himself was present. But Disney's Lincoln went a step farther than the Lincoln actors. At the end of the day, actors like Benjamin Chapin and Frank McGlynn, who played Lincoln on stage and often were mistaken for him offstage, were still themselves—recognizable from roles other than Lincoln and liable to make a mistake in their characterization of Lincoln at any moment. With his Lincoln Audioanimatron, Disney sought to remove all such imperfections from the process of making Lincoln live again, to achieve perfect control over Lincoln's actions. He also attempted to gain control over Lincoln's message at a time when mounting social pressure from Civil Rights activists called for a reinterpretation of Lincoln's legacy.

The early 1960s marked the centennial of the Civil War. The anniversary of the war, as well as the burgeoning Civil Right movement, prompted new efforts to animate Lincoln's ghost and message. Premiering at the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York, Disney's Lincoln arrived at a key moment in the Civil Rights movement, when protesters sought to give meaning and substance to African American citizenship one hundred years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. As the Lincoln robot made its debut at the fair, the Congress of Racial Equality, an organization of non-

violent Civil Rights advocates, staged widespread demonstrations in order to dramatize the enduring racial inequality in the United States in front of an international audience. Walt Disney, a former populist champion whose values had grown increasingly conservative in the years after the Second World War under the dual threat of studio strikes and the Red Scare, used his Lincoln robot as a tool to quell this protest.⁷ Despite Disney's claims that his Audioanimatron was a perfect facsimile of the historical Lincoln, which spoke only Lincoln's historical words, it was instead a highly-mediated version of what Disney *wished* Lincoln had been, both physically and ideologically.

The Quest for Artificial Life

Disney's project to create an Audioanimatron had started nearly two decades before the New York World's Fair. While traveling in France in the 1940s, he encountered a mechanical bird which moved and sang in its cage, and he was fascinated by the clockwork system of levers and cams that operated it. He brought the bird back to California and asked his studio engineers to disassemble it and discover how it worked, envisioning that they could build a miniature attraction featuring tiny entertainers singing and dancing on a miniscule stage.⁸

Disney probably did not realize that the mechanical bird—and consequently the robotic figures that it inspired, from the Audioanimatronic Lincoln to the bevy of mechanical creatures that populate his theme parks—was but the most recent addition in a centuries-old quest to simulate life through technological means. For centuries,

⁷See Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 221-226.

⁸Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 412.

inventors and engineers built automata in order to amuse and edify audiences, using these devices to investigate what constitutes “life” and how consciousness or spirit inheres in the system of flesh and organic mechanisms that compose the human body.

Scholars have dated anthropomorphic automata back to the third century BCE, perhaps even earlier; Aristotle made reference to a silver doll that moved as if alive in *Physics*, and ancient Chinese toys and mechanical animals have been dated as far back as 380 BCE.⁹ Clockwork automata emerged in Europe in the fourteenth century; from this time period forward, European cathedrals frequently featured clocks with animals and human figures, which performed at the striking of the hour.¹⁰

Yet these early modern automata did more than just entertain passersby; they also served spiritual needs. Artist and historian Elizabeth King has explored the devotional purposes of a sixteen-inch-tall mechanical monk, which was built in southern Germany or Spain around the year 1560 (see fig. 4.1). This polychromed miniature of a Franciscan monk, which was among the first automata to contain its driving mechanism within its body (as opposed to hidden in an attached box or within the clock tower structure), performed an elaborate prayer ritual, beating its chest, moving its lips as if making an incantation, kissing its rosary, and provoking a sense of wonder, fear, and uncanny fascination in its viewers. The figure, which is still in working order today in its home at

⁹See Max von Boehn, *Puppets and Automata*, trans. Josephine Nicoll (New York: Dover, 1929), 8, and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), quoted in Steve Dixon, “Metal Performance: Humanizing Robots, Returning to Nature, and Camping About,” in Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, eds., *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 450.

¹⁰See Dixon, “Metal Performance,” 451.

the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology, was said to have been produced as a votive offering in gratitude to God for sparing the life of Don Carlos, crown prince of Spain, after he suffered a traumatic brain injury in 1562.¹¹ At the end of the patient's lengthy ordeal, which likely was exacerbated by a failed attempt at trepanning and a good deal of poking about with unsterile instruments, the Franciscan friars of the town of Alcala led a procession to the palace carrying the remains of Diego de Alcala, a fifteenth-century member of their order for whom they hoped to win sainthood. They nestled the corpse of the long-deceased friar next to the prince on his sickbed, covering his forehead with the saint's shroud, and on the following day Don Carlos made a miraculous recovery.¹² Upon waking, Don Carlos himself reported having met and spoken with an apparition of a man in Franciscan robes carrying a cross during the very same feverish night that the monks had applied the sacred remains to his body. Thus convinced that Diego de Alcala had worked a miracle, Don Carlos and his father, King Phillip II, spent the following twenty-six years petitioning successive popes to canonize the saint, finally succeeding in 1588. In 1769, Franciscan monks in Spanish California christened a mission after Don Carlos's miracle worker, which later grew into the city of San Diego.¹³

¹¹Elizabeth King, "Perpetual Devotion: A Sixteenth-Century Machine That Prays," in Jessica Riskin, ed., *Genesis Redux: Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 263-292.

¹²Don Carlos's injury was the result of a fall down a flight of stairs, at the end of which a closed door fractured his skull. L.J. Andrew Villalon recounts the story of the friars and their bid for Diego de Alcala's sainthood in "Putting Don Carlos Together Again: Treatment of a Head Injury in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 2 (1995): 347-65, quoted in King, "Perpetual Devotion," 268-269.

¹³See King, "Perpetual Devotion," 269.



Figure 4.1. Juanelo Turriano, Automaton monk, c. 1560. Collection of the Smithsonian Institution. <<http://history-computer.com/Dreamers/Torriano.html>>.

The Smithsonian's automaton monk figure is a working replica of this sixteenth-century saint, which Spanish court engineer Juanelo Turriano built on behalf of King Philip, who wished to thank the saint for his miracle by presenting him with a miraculous object. The mechanical monk, still moving and praying over five hundred years after the death of the saint himself, gives Diego de Alcalá a kind of lifelike immortality that his immobile corpse could never achieve. David Freedberg, in *The Power of Images*, suggests that devotional images, like a painting of the Virgin Mary, a relic, or the automaton, collapse the distinction between sign and signified, turning these objects into metonyms for the real saint, the real Virgin, the real Christ. Like an ambulatory icon, the automaton representation of the saint has the ability to give the faithful the impression that his spirit actually inheres in its moving form.¹⁴

During the Enlightenment, the creators of automata used their curious machines as philosophical experiments into the complex machinery connecting mind and body. In 1738, French engineer Jacques Vaucanson rented an exhibition hall in Paris in order to display three automata that he had built: two android musicians and one duck. The duck, at center stage, astounded audiences by gobbling corn, drinking water, fluttering its wings and tail, and—in a spectacular, if not altogether tasteful, finale—defecating a little pellet, which seemed the natural result of all that corn. Vaucanson assured his audiences that his automaton duck was the product of extensive study of the movement, behaviors, and physiognomy of real ducks; each of its wings, for example, contained more than four hundred individually articulated pieces, which copied real duck wings down to the bone

¹⁴See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 431, quoted in King, "Perpetual Devotion, 275-276.

structure (see fig. 4.2).¹⁵

Similarly, in the late eighteenth century, a family of Swiss clockmakers named Jaquet-Droz attempted to make exceptionally realistic human figures by mimicking the materials of the human body as closely as possible. Their music-playing automata had internal structures modeled on real human skeletons, which they probably made with the help of the village surgeon. In addition to lifelike interiors, the Jaquet-Droz automata had lifelike exteriors: they were the first to use materials such as cork, leather and papier-mache to approximate the look and texture of human skin.¹⁶ In creating artificial creatures that claimed to mirror real life both inside and out, Vaucanson and the Jaquet-Droz family were engaging in ongoing debates about Cartesian dualism—whether or not human consciousness was separate from the flesh and blood systems of the body that directed processes like respiration and digestion. In other words, automata built on the principle of simulation rather than merely representation posed the question: if it were possible to perfectly mimic the engineering of the human body, would such an exact reproduction actually be alive? Or is the spirit, the *anima*, that drives life and thought something completely divorced from the material dimension of the body?¹⁷ One of the automata exhibited by Pierre and Henri Jaquet-Droz in Neuchatel, Switzerland, in 1774, is in the shape of a small boy who laboriously writes “I think, therefore I am” with a tiny quill pen—over and over again, as well today as it did in 1774. Mary Shelley passed

¹⁵See Jessica Riskin, “The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003), 599-609.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 606.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 602.

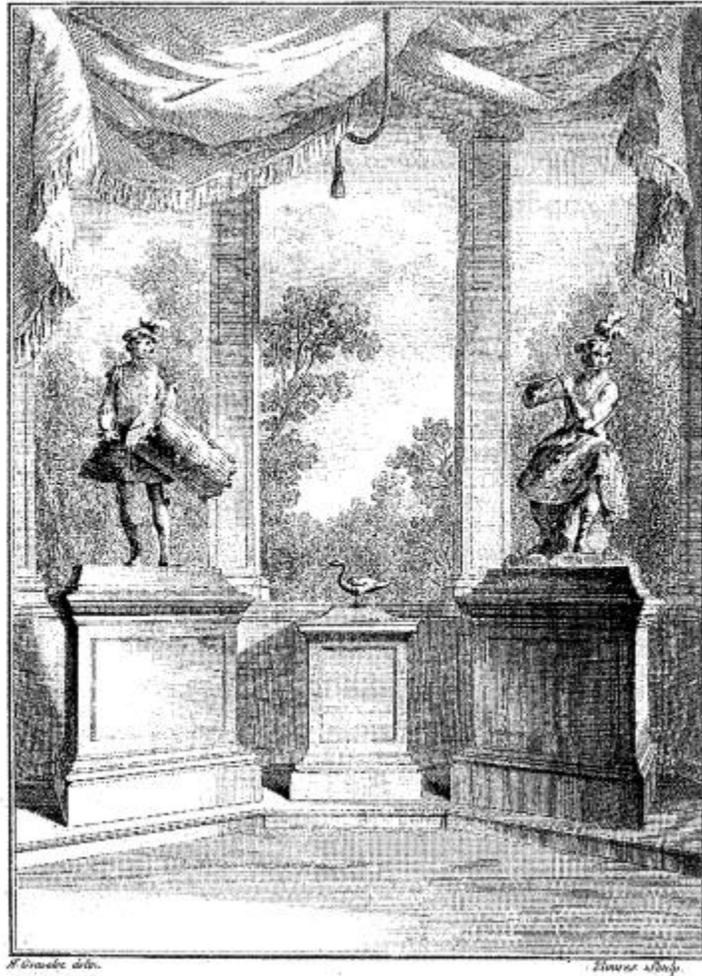


Fig. 4.2. Vaucanson's duck, in situ. The Flute-player, the Duck, and the Pipe-and-Tabor player. From the prospectus of the 1738 exhibition of Vaucanson's automata, Vaucanson, *Le Mécanisme du fluteur automate*. William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

through Neuchatel on her tour of Europe, where she is believed to have seen the Jaquet-Droz automata about two years before she wrote *Frankenstein*.¹⁸

Vaucanson seemed to argue for the materialist interpretation, but even his painstakingly-simulated duck had its limits. Unlike the automaton monk, the duck's mechanisms were not entirely self-contained; it sat atop a case within which a pegged cylinder—as in a music box—turned to stimulate the performance of each of its actions. The pellet that the duck expelled so triumphantly at the end of its performance was, of course, not the result of any ingenious mechanical digestive process but rather a preformed bit of simulated excrement that emerged from a secret compartment hidden in the rear of the duck.¹⁹ In the end, Vaucanson's duck was part experiment, part hoax.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Vaucanson's duck was followed by what was perhaps the most famous automaton of all time, a chess player built by Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen in Bratislava in 1769 (see fig. 4.3). Kempelen, eager to wow Empress Maria Theresa, brought his mechanism to her court at Vienna, where it displayed frankly astonishing abilities. The chess player consisted of a life-sized mannequin, dressed as a "Turk" with a turban, fur-trimmed jacket, and gloves, which sat atop a cabinet filled with gears and levers. Kempelen, in his exhibitions, would wheel the cabinet into the room, wind up a clockwork mechanism, and allow one viewer to challenge the Turk with a few "end-games" (where each player had only a few pieces remaining). Then, human and automaton would compete, the Turk's long arm reaching out to move pieces, making an almighty rattle of clockwork springs with each turn. The

¹⁸See Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), xiii-xv.

¹⁹See Riskin, "The Defecating Duck," 609.

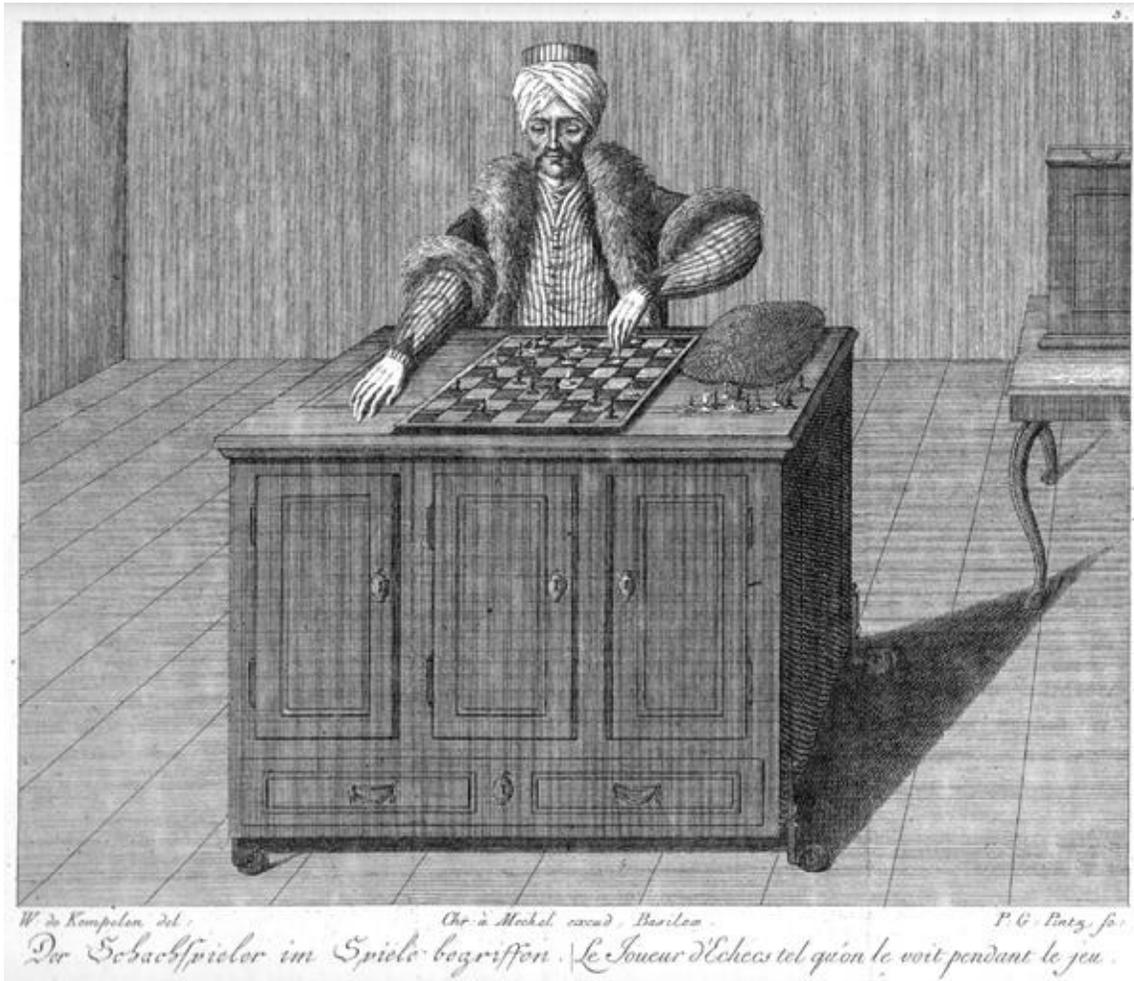


Figure 4.3. An engraving of the Turk from Karl Gottlieb von Windisch's book *Inanimate Reason*, 1783.

Turk nearly always won, and when he did, he gave two decisive nods to signal his victory.²⁰ Here was a curiosity to send Vaucanson back to the drawing board: where the automaton duck merely reproduced motion and mannerism, the Turk actually appeared to reason—to reason so well, in fact, that only the most accomplished chess players in Europe had a hope of beating him. Audiences were baffled, and would-be debunkers published speculative explanations of the mechanism, though no one definitively disproved it.²¹ Had Kempelen truly succeeded in creating a conscious machine?

Kempelen toured Europe with his miraculous chess player for nearly ten years. After Kempelen's death, his family sold the Turk to Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, another inventor of automaton musicians in the grand tradition of the Jaquet-Droz family. Maelzel tweaked the chess player's performance, adding a nice catchphrase (*echec et mat*, “checkmate”) to the victory nods. In the early nineteenth century, Maelzel toured Europe with the Turk, renting exhibition space in London and becoming a full-fledged middle-class attraction. By 1826, the Turk had made it to New York City, where local newspapers gleefully took part in the grand fun of speculating on its authenticity. Even Edgar Allen Poe felt the need to weigh in, noting that—ironically—it was the sheer clumsiness of the chess player's mechanism that made it seem real: “Were the Automaton life-like in its motions,” Poe wrote, “the spectator would be more apt to attribute its operations to their true cause (that is, to human agency within), than he is now, when the awkward and rectangular maneuvers convey the idea of pure and unaided

²⁰See James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 34-38. For a lengthier treatment of Kempelen's automaton, see Tom Standage, *The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine* (New York: Walker & Company, 2002).

²¹See Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 39-48.

mechanism.”²²

Poe was right, of course: the automaton chess player was no great wonder after all, but an elaborate hoax that Kempelen and then Maelzel perpetuated over the decades, hiring highly-skilled chess players to crawl into the cabinet below the mannequin and operate the machine. One of these, William Schlumberger, became so overheated during a summer performance in Baltimore in 1827 that he burst out of the cabinet in a state of near suffocation, revealing the automaton’s secret to a startled audience. Two teenage boys who witnessed the unmasking rushed home to tell their parents, who promptly notified the press. But even though an article about Schlumberger’s unfortunate error appeared in the *Baltimore Gazette*, the Turk went on with its American tour, reputation intact. George Allen, a chess enthusiast who wrote the first history of the Turk, suggested that audiences deliberately chose to suspend their disbelief about the Turk: “The world had set its heart upon believing that the secret, which had puzzled mechanics, mathematicians, and monarchs, for more than half a century, was something quite too deep to be penetrated by a couple of boys.”²³

In 1838, Maelzel attempted to expand the Turk’s fame with an ill-fated trip to Havana. The evidently star-crossed Schlumberger perished of yellow fever in Cuba, and Maelzel himself succumbed soon after on the return voyage.²⁴ The chess player fell into disrepair, only to be rescued by Poe’s personal physician, John Kearsley Mitchell, who

²²See Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 55.

²³George Allen, “History of the Automaton Chess-Player in American,” in Daniel Willard Fiske, ed., *Book of the First American Chess Conference* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 452, quoted in Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 65.

²⁴Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 62.

refurbished it and eventually donated it to Charles Wilson Peale's Chinese Museum in Philadelphia. In 1857, the Chinese Museum burned to the ground, taking its long-lived chess master with it. Mitchell penned an imaginative obituary for the Turk, envisioning it still nodding in victory and declaring "*echee!*" as the flames consumed it.²⁵ After nearly one hundred years of mystifying the public, the strange career of the automaton chess player had come to an end.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, makers of automata turned their attention to toys rather than grand experiments or public entertainments. Thomas Edison began to adjust his phonograph for use in talking dolls only a month after he invented it in 1877.²⁶ In this period, French clockmakers became renowned for their intricate clockwork toys, especially singing birds. It was one of these mechanical confections that Walt Disney encountered in the 1940s, starting him down the path toward the robotic figure of Lincoln.

Although Disney probably did not realize it, his project to create a Lincoln robot was heir to several centuries of mechanical philosophy, experiment, and hoax. Not just toys or entertainment, automata were serious business. Like Kempelen's Turk and Vaucanson's duck, the Lincoln Audioanimatron invited viewers to marvel at its maker as a worker of scientific miracles, as well as to wonder about humankind's ability to take on the role of God and bring forth life from inanimate material. Even though audiences knew that it was not really possible for Disney to have recreated Lincoln, they—like the denizens of Baltimore in the 1820s who chose to ignore the big reveal about the Turk—

²⁵Mitchell, *The Chess Monthly*, 1, February 1857, 4, quoted in Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 72.

²⁶See Wood, *Edison's Eve*, 118.

willingly suspended their disbelief and strove for the imaginative experience of being in the same room with the Great Emancipator. Like Juanelo Turriano's praying monk automaton, Disney's Lincoln aimed to give its viewers the sensation of being in the spiritual presence of the figure it represented.

But perhaps the most compelling thing that these automata seemed to offer was immortality. The Turk lived to be nearly one hundred years old, as sharp on the day he succumbed to the conflagration in Philadelphia as on the day he first greeted Empress Maria Theresa in Schoenbrunn palace. Pierre Jaquet-Droz's automaton boy in Neuchâtel still insists on the veracity of the phrase *cogito ergo sum* more than two hundred years after his creation, looking not a day older (and not an ounce less uncanny). And both of these distinguished gentlemen are mere babes compared to Turriano's monk, which is four hundred and fifty years old and still praying. In building a robotic figure of Lincoln Disney was not only trying to give his audiences the thrill of having a "moment" with Mr. Lincoln, he was creating a Lincoln that would and has endured, far beyond Disney's own lifetime. A Lincoln that—unlike the historical Lincoln—could not die. After all, humans come and go, but androids are forever.

From Cardboard Hats to Solenoid Coils

Disney's journey toward the Lincoln Automaton started with the mechanical bird, but gradually grew to encompass larger and larger ideas—and larger and larger figures. After decades of work on cartoons and motion pictures, in 1952 Disney's growing interest in developing immersive, three-dimensional forms of entertainment, including robotics and theme parks, led him to consolidate a staff of artists, engineers and designers

in a new outlet named WED.²⁷ The WED staff, creative jacks-of-all-trades who often found themselves working on everything from painting backdrops to designing miniature cars, became known as Imagineers: the engineers of imagination.

Disney's daughter Diane recalled the bemusement with which her family beheld her father's new passion. "When we went to Paris, Dad went off on his own and came back with boxes and boxes of these little windup toys. He wound them all up and put them on the floor of the room and just sat and watched them," she remembered. "He said, 'Look at that movement with just a simple mechanism.' He was studying; he could see Audio-Animatronics. We thought he was crazy."²⁸ When Disney brought his toys back to California, he set his Imagineers to the problem of creating these mechanisms. Wathel Rogers, an animator at Disney studios who was pulled into WED for his sculpting skills, remembered that Audioanimatronics "kind of started with Walt, and this little mechanical bird in a cage that he had. One of those that you could wind up and it would whistle. It was a collector's item and I don't know how much it was worth. Walt gave it to me and asked me to look inside it." When he did, "it was like taking apart a piece of jewelry. When I laid everything out, I found a little bellows made of canvas, and some little cams and other parts."²⁹

With these rudimentary elements of mechanics, Disney tasked the Imagineers with a new initiative, known as "Project Little Man," which he envisioned as part of a miniature Americana project, featuring scenes from the past, including an opera scene

²⁷WED was named for Disney's initials. See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 385.

²⁸Diane Disney Miller, quoted in Green and Green, eds., *Remembering Walt*, 165.

²⁹See Jeff Kurti, *Walt Disney's Imagineering Legends and the Genesis of the Disney Theme Park* (New York: Disney Editions, 2008), 88-89.

featuring a tiny man singing and dancing on stage. Disney went so far as to hire Buddy Ebsen to tap dance in front of a grid pattern so that the Imagineers could model his movements to the scale of a nine-inch figure controlled by cams and cables.³⁰

Although Project Little Man never made it out of the WED production phase, its descendants became the backbone of Disneyland's unique brand of three-dimensional entertainment. Robotic animals soon became star attractions at the theme park, including the hippopotami and crocodiles in the Jungle Cruise ride, and the speaking birds and flowers of the Enchanted Tiki Room.³¹ The first animated human that the Imagineers attempted was a giant talking head of Confucius, which they hoped would spout wisdom to patrons at a Chinese-themed restaurant in Disneyland. They installed electromagnetic coils powered by a sound track into the character's head so that the movements of its mouth would sync with the sound. "That was our first talking head," according to Rogers: "We miked it for sound, and we learned how to create an 'interactive' character."³²

After these early trials, Disney set his sights on the figure he had most hoped to reproduce with Audio-Animatronics: Abraham Lincoln. Disney's love of Lincoln extended back to his childhood. Disney was born in 1901 in Chicago, the metropolis of Lincoln's chosen state. His father was a rambling carpenter, who uprooted the family in search of new job prospects on a regular basis, and the 1893 Columbian Exposition had seemed an excellent opportunity to find construction work. But Disney was only four

³⁰See Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 412.

³¹See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 412.

³²Kurti, *Walt Disney's Imagineering Legends*, 89.

when his religious father decided to quit the sinful city and take his young sons to the greener pastures of Marceline, Missouri. Though these were but two of many places that Disney would call home during the forced march of his youth, they made the biggest impression on him as an adult, filling him with admiration for the Great Emancipator and Midwestern small-town life.³³ As the man behind the Disney entertainment empire, these two loves would manifest themselves as Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., and the Lincoln Audio-Animatron.

Disney displayed his interest in Lincoln early, and although he first garnered attention for his cheerfully subversive cartoons of the 1920s and 1930s, he returned to his hero after World War II when patriotism replaced social critique as the cultural norm. In the fifth grade Disney made a stovepipe hat out of cardboard blackened with shoe polish, bought himself a beard from a theatrical supply store, memorized the Gettysburg Address, and came to school dressed as Lincoln for Lincoln's birthday. His teacher was delighted, and the principal took him around to every classroom to perform his act.³⁴ During the first years of his business enterprise, Lincoln took a back seat to Mickey Mouse, who catapulted Disney into the spotlight when *Steamboat Willie* became the first widely-distributed cartoon to integrate sound with visual action.³⁵ Over the following two decades, dozens of cartoons and films followed, including the Depression-era hit *The Three Little Pigs*, which made the song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" nearly

³³See Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 7-11.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 26-27. Disney's school friend Walter Pfeiffer recalls this incident in detail in Green and Green, eds., *Remembering Walt*, 5.

³⁵See Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 117, 127.

synonymous with “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”³⁶ For the war effort, Disney produced a number of propaganda films and cartoons, sending Donald Duck to fight at the front and producing documentary films that extolled the virtues of air power.³⁷ But wartime took its toll on Disney, who discovered that in all its success, his little studio that could had grown into something he barely recognized. He had prided himself on the intimacy and personal relationships he had developed with his animators and studio staff, but his haphazard approach to management had bred discontent with employees who had noticed significant discrepancies in their pay range and job descriptions. During the summer of 1941, the Screen Cartoonists Guild staged a strike at Walt Disney Productions, accusing the company of unfair labor practices. About one third of Disney’s employees walked out and picketed. The strike lasted for over three months and was only settled with the intervention of the federal government. The benevolent monarch of the Disney kingdom was shocked to find his populace in revolt, so much so that he maintained for the rest of his life that the strike had been engineered by Communist elements in the labor union. In the midst of the strike, the pro-Disney faction in the studio released a pamphlet headlined “How Do Communists gain control of Labor” and inviting strikers to ask themselves “Am I a loyal American or a dupe?”³⁸ Disney also ran a full page statement in *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* appealing to his picketing workers to accept his terms of reinstatement, which closed with “I am positively

³⁶See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 77-82.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 230-237.

³⁸Committee of Twenty-One, “Exposé No. 1,” Disney strike file, Disney Archive, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 221.

convinced that Communistic agitation, leadership, and activities have brought about this strike, and have persuaded you to reject this fair and equitable settlement.”³⁹

The strike left Disney a changed man. During the Depression, he had been a populist hero, whose cartoons often treated audiences to various slapstick interpretations of the story of David and Goliath. The 1936 cartoon *Moving Day*, for instance, features the sheriff arriving at Mickey, Donald, and Goofy’s door to repossess their house and sell their belongings when they are six months behind on their rent. The three characters scramble to pack all of their comically recalcitrant belongings into a truck in order to make a run for it, managing to outwit the law through luck and pluck at the last second.⁴⁰

“The public likes little fellows in comedy,” Walt said in the early years of the Depression. “Everyone picks on them and sympathy is aroused. So when they finally triumph over the bigger characters, the public rejoices with them.”⁴¹ Somehow, without quite meaning to, Disney had become one of the bigger characters, and he did not take well to being the new Big Bad Wolf. As the strike dragged on in August 1941, Walt wrote that “I was shocked into the realization that the Democracy which, as a kid in 1918, I went to fight for in France, was gone. To me, the real fight for Democracy is right here at home. . . . I have a case of the D.D.s – disillusionment and discouragement.”⁴²

Disney would attempt to cure his case of the D.D.s by becoming a major

³⁹Walt Disney, “To My Employees on Strike,” July 2, 1941, Disney strike file, Disney Archive, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 225.

⁴⁰Walt Disney, *Moving Day*, Walt Disney Productions, 1936.

⁴¹See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 72.

⁴²Walt Disney to Westbrook Pegler, August 11, 1941, 1-3, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 226.

contributor to the American popular culture of the 1950s, combatting his fears that communism was slowly seeping into the United States by helping to define the American way in contradistinction to the Soviets. Where the Communists were atheists, Americans were god-fearing, where Communists lost all identity amid a collective hive mind, Americans were rugged individuals, and where the Soviets pursued a radical break with the Russian past, Americans cherished and protected their history.⁴³ To help build the American cultural identity after World War II, Disney increasingly turned toward the past to find heroes for young audiences to idolize. During the 1950s, he released several films bringing episodes from American history to life, including an adaptation of *Johnny Tremain*, Esther Forbes' young adult novel about the American Revolution, and a miniseries about South Carolina Revolutionary War guerrilla Francis Marion, called *The Swamp Fox*. Meanwhile, Disney's most popular television characters in this era were the frontiersmen and vigilantes of the American West, including Davy Crockett and Zorro.⁴⁴

Disneyland emerged from this same nostalgic principle. On the theme park's opening day in Anaheim, California in 1955, Disney read a speech proclaiming: "To all who come to this happy place . . . Welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here, age relives fond memories of the past, and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and hard facts that have created America . . . with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the

⁴³See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 657.

⁴⁴See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 290-295, 313-322.

world.”⁴⁵ The entrance to the park, Main Street, U.S.A. was a paean to the small-town America Disney had witnessed in his Midwestern childhood, a completely unspoiled turn-of-the-century gem that allowed visitors to the park to walk around in a (largely fictitious) chapter of the past.⁴⁶ Inside the park, visitors could explore “Adventureland,” “Frontierland,” and “Liberty Street,” all of which offered visitors immersive environments based on American history.

What the park lacked, of course, were three-dimensional, simulated characters to populate its three-dimensional, simulated world. Enter the Imagineers, who were hard at work constructing talking animals, flowers, and even tiki gods for Disneyland. Building a life-sized human, however, was an altogether more complex task. But Disney had one man in particular that he wished could emerge from the pages of history and come to life at Disneyland.

Mr. Disney’s Winkin’ Blinkin’ Lincoln

Disney would later say that “I have always felt that too few people realize that Lincoln’s concepts and philosophies are as useful, as necessary, as applicable today as they were when he pronounced them a century ago.”⁴⁷ To Disney, Lincoln was the

⁴⁵Walt Disney, quoted in Karal Ann Marling, “Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream,” *American Art*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter-Spring, 1991), 170.

⁴⁶See Richard Francaviglia, “Main Street U.S.A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes in Disneyland/Walt Disney World.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (June 1981), 143.

⁴⁷Paul Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” in *Persistence of Vision*, vol. 6/7, (2001), 95.

ultimate example of the kind of American folk hero he hoped American youngsters would emulate, a paragon of achievement through hard work. He was determined that his theme park would have a patriotic exhibit that included Lincoln in a starring role.

But why did Disneyland need a robotic Lincoln, rather than just a string of actors to play the role in regular stage shows? One reason, Disney explained, was his belief that human actors were unreliable. They might miss work, or make mistakes, or join labor unions, or otherwise endanger the integrity of the illusion of the American past that Disney planned. What's more, Lincoln actors, like Raymond Massey and Henry Fonda, had made human representations of the sixteenth president somewhat trite, and Disney built his empire on offering audiences something that they couldn't get anywhere else. "We've got to figure out a way to have automated shows," he told his Imagineers.⁴⁸ He set some of them to work on an attraction tentatively titled "One Nation Under God," which would become "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln."⁴⁹

One of these Imagineers was Blaine Gibson, who had been an animator at Disney Studios for nearly fifteen years until Disney discovered his talent for sculpting and recruited him in 1954 to work on attractions for Disneyland. With the other engineers at the WED workshop at Burbank, Gibson puzzled over how to make a life-sized robot figure that would do justice to the historical Lincoln. Gibson was a bit skeptical about his new job working on an Audio-Animatronic Lincoln. "My feeling was that we shouldn't be fooling with something that Americans considered to be historically sacred," he said. "It seemed that we were getting into areas that were competitive with acting, something

⁴⁸Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 579.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

that could be done much better by live performers,” Gibson said. Disney replied that unlike an actor, a robot could look *exactly* like Lincoln.⁵⁰

As the Lincoln project progressed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gibson wasn’t the only one who thought that Disney had overstepped his bounds. A minister to whom Disney showed his prototypes said, “It was all right for you to bring fairy tales to life and for you to create a humanlike mouse, but to create a man—that’s usurping the powers of a higher authority.”⁵¹ Like the automaton inventors of the past who had inspired, at least in part, Mary Shelley’s *Dr. Frankenstein*, Disney and the Imagineers faced criticism that they were meddling with the laws of God and man.

Nevertheless, Gibson and the rest of the team continued the process of creating a mechanical man—and not just any man. They discovered that the owner of a nearby wax museum had a copy of Leonard Volk’s life mask of Lincoln. Gibson used it as a model and then exaggerated some of Lincoln’s features, “based on my understanding of characters.”⁵² They got a pair of false teeth from a doctor’s office, and even tried to get glass eyes from an optometrist, but couldn’t make the Lincoln robot’s eyelids fit over them, so they had to have a special set of eyes made.⁵³ When he finished the head (see fig. 4.4) and received Disney’s blessing, Gibson went to work on Lincoln’s body, and

⁵⁰Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 95-96.

⁵¹Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 579.

⁵²Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 84.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 84-85.

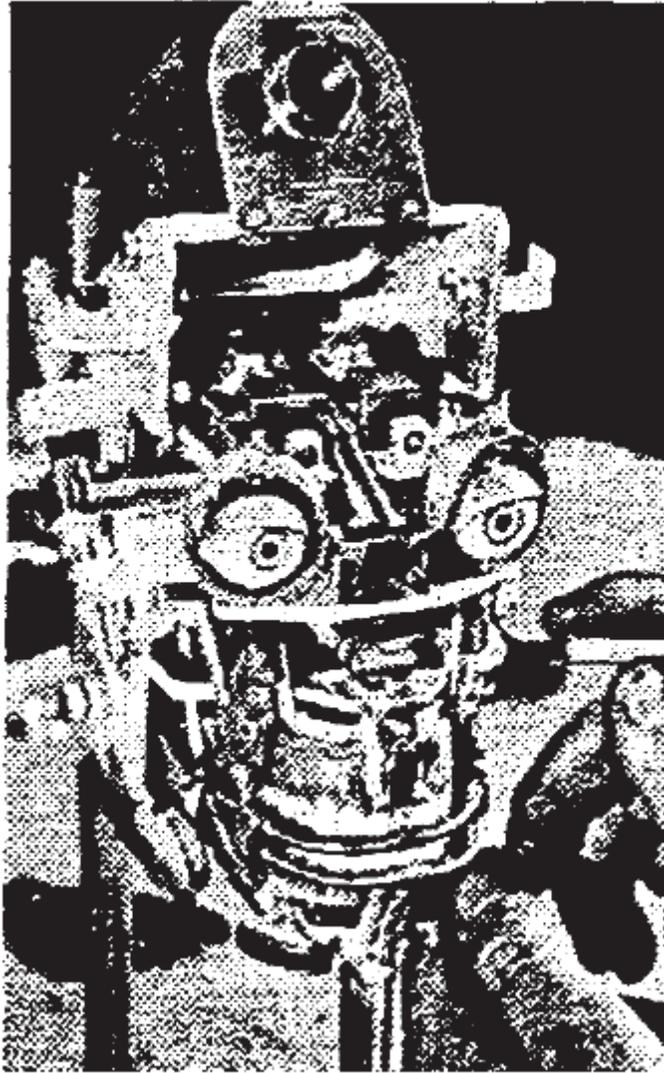


Figure 4.4. Interior view of the Lincoln Audioanimatron's head. "World's Fair Feature to be Animated Abe." *Chicago Tribune*, 8 October 1963, A10.

found that reality wouldn't quite do in that case, either. "I had one book that had all the heights of the Presidents, including Lincoln," Gibson said. "He was 6'4", but I actually made him 6'7"—we had to do that; he just didn't look tall. Matthew Brady always had other people in the photographs, so you could see that Lincoln was a head taller than normal. We didn't have anything to scale him to, so we just made him taller."⁵⁴ With this elongated form, hands made from a cast of Lincoln's real hands suddenly looked comically small. Jack Ferges, another Imagineer who worked on the project, recalled that "The figure was very tall, and when he sat up with these little dinky hanks, everybody dropped dead laughing."⁵⁵ They searched the studio for men whose hands would fit Lincoln's new scale. Ferges, at 6'8", provided the perfect model.⁵⁶

Manipulating scale in this way was on its way to becoming a classic Disney trick for enhancing viewer experience. Main Street, U.S.A., for example, was built at five-eighths size, from its lampposts down to the very bricks that decorated its facades.⁵⁷ It cost significantly more to have bricks custom made at a smaller scale, but Disney had two goals in mind when he shrank the buildings at Disneyland: first, he wanted to give visitors the sensation that they were entering a cozy, manageable world, one that invited them to leave behind messy and intimidating reality and set their imaginations free in a fantasy environment. The small size "made the street a toy," Disney claimed, which gave

⁵⁴Ibid., 84.

⁵⁵Ibid., 85.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 23.

people incentive to play with it.⁵⁸ The second goal was to counter the reputation of being a Big Bad Wolf that Disney urgently wished to shed after the studio strike. “You know, tyrants in the past have built these huge buildings [that said] look how big and powerful I am. And they towered over people just to impress them,” Disney said in defense of his unusual design choice.⁵⁹ With it, he signaled that he was no tyrant, but instead committed to American egalitarianism. Conversely, he chose to modify the height of the Lincoln robot to tower over people, just to impress them.

Once the Imagineers had conquered the issue of Lincoln’s size, there was the problem of making Lincoln move, not to mention talk. No fully-integrated figure like Lincoln had existed before, and the Imagineers tried a number of solutions in their quest to make Lincoln move realistically and speak in time with his mouth movements. The first version of Lincoln’s head relied entirely on the use a solenoid coil system, but the Imagineers struggled to fit all of the necessary component parts to move Lincoln’s eyes, mouth, and eyebrows inside Lincoln’s head.⁶⁰ They couldn’t make Lincoln’s head larger without compromising his painstakingly-achieved human proportions. Instead, Gibson and his team secretly raised a part of Lincoln’s head up half an inch underneath his wig. In the end, the Lincoln robot head was so lifelike that it sometimes fooled studio staff. “We had the Lincoln head on a black box with all the mechanisms underneath it,”

⁵⁸Walt Disney, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 23.

⁵⁹Walt Disney, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 393.

⁶⁰The solenoid coil system worked by sending electrical current through wires tightly coiled around a ferromagnetic core. The core was connected to the parts of Lincoln that needed to move: his eyes, mouth, and brow. When the current was turned on, it created a magnetic field, which would move the core and its component part of Lincoln’s anatomy. See Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 86.

Imagineer Jack Gladish remembered. “It was in this room—and with the glass eyes, the false teeth, and everything it looked like a real head. The cleaning fellow walked in, and the Lincoln head looked him straight in the eye. Well, the guy went off the deep end. He ran down the hallway, screaming that he wasn’t going to clean the room.”⁶¹

As the Imagineers had discovered with Lincoln’s life mask and hand casts, historical documents went only so far in creating a realistic, three-dimensional Lincoln. But making realistic movements and a realistic voice and manner of speaking for Lincoln proved even more difficult. Although they had a few rudimentary bits of information about his personal habits and attributes from the reports of Lincoln’s contemporaries, such as his high voice, they still had to fill in a lot of blanks if they wanted to have a complete behavioral profile for the audioanimatron. For this, they turned to the prominent Lincoln actors of the day. Bob Gurr, an Imagineer who programmed Lincoln’s movements, recalled that after he thought he had finished all of the motions, “My wife and I were watching an old Lincoln movie starring Raymond Massey. As I watched Massey standing on the back of the train leaving for Washington, D.C., it dawned on me. I stood up and said, ‘I forgot the shrug!’ I went back in and spent a couple of days trying to get Lincoln to do his shrug.”⁶²

Getting what Disney felt was the correct voice for Lincoln was particularly trying. Disney told the Imagineers that he wanted “not an actor’s voice, but the *real* voice” for Lincoln.⁶³ Of course, that was impossible—what Disney actually wanted was an actor

⁶¹Quoted in Anderson, “Illinois Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 86.

⁶²Anderson, “Illinois Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 88.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 94.

who sounded like his own idea of Lincoln. Everyone told him that he ought to use Raymond Massey, generally acknowledged as the greatest Lincoln actor of his generation, for Lincoln's voice. But Disney wasn't sold. He thought Massey was too much of an orator, a polished actor who would deliver Lincoln's lines with a panache or a gravitas that, to Disney, would ring false. After all, the whole point of making a Lincoln robot was to do what an actor could not do—*be* Lincoln, alive and utterly real in the present, not an affected theatrical representation of him.

Disney eventually found a top candidate in the actor Royal Dano, who had played the title role in a made-for-TV biopic of Lincoln. In October 1963, Dano came to the studio to audition. After hearing him speak, Disney jumped to his feet and castigated Dano for his poor interpretation: "No! No! No! You don't understand!" he shouted. The Imagineers present were baffled: "I thought it was fine," remembered Bob Gurr. Disney had Dano do the speech a second time, with the same results. "This is not Abraham Lincoln!" said Disney. He requested that Dano, now weary and upset, try it one more time. When he finished, Disney led the Imagineers in a celebratory singing of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. He had been recording Dano, and finally gotten what he wanted on the third attempt: a Lincoln who sounded weary and upset. That third version became the soundtrack to the Lincoln exhibit.⁶⁴

Lincoln was on track to become a sterling attraction at Disneyland, but when Robert Moses, president of the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair, came to visit Disney in early 1962 to discuss the two exhibits Disney was designing for the Fair at that time—

⁶⁴Bob Gurr describes this scene in Green and Green, eds., *Remembering Walt*, 171. See also Anderson, "Illinois Land of Lincoln Pavilion," 94.

It's a Small World for the Pepsi-Cola/UNICEF exhibit, and the *Carousel of Progress* for GE—Disney couldn't resist showing off his special project. He also had an ulterior motive: Disney realized that many major American corporations hoped to use the World's Fair as an advertising opportunity, and would be desperate to find someone who could create and direct their exhibits. He hoped that the Fair would give him the opportunity to build some new attractions for Disneyland on another company's dime.⁶⁵ He took Moses into the secret workshop where his Imagineers were assembling Lincoln and introduced him to "Abraham Lincoln." Lincoln, with his characteristic good manners, stood up and shook Moses' hand. Moses was thrilled and flabbergasted. Disney's gamble had paid off: Moses told Disney that the Audio-Animatronic Lincoln absolutely had to be an exhibit at the World's Fair.⁶⁶

There were three major obstacles to Moses' wish: finding a sponsor to underwrite the astronomical costs of getting Lincoln to the fair, fending off the growing criticism that creating a robotic Lincoln was tantamount to sacrilege, and, of course, making the Audioanimatron actually work, none of which was easily achieved.

After Robert Moses' eye-opening trip to the Disney workshop, he immediately began trying to find a sponsor for a Lincoln exhibit at the World's Fair. His first target was the U.S. government. Moses went directly to President John F. Kennedy to ask for his support, but the Department of Commerce was in charge of U.S. involvement in the Fair and its representatives were unhappy with the cost of the exhibit and worried that Disney's "talking doll" would be an assault on appropriate presidential dignity. They

⁶⁵See Green and Green, eds., *Remembering Walt*, 170.

⁶⁶Anderson, "Illinois Land of Lincoln Pavilion," 89.

turned him down.⁶⁷

Undaunted, Moses turned his attentions to another potential sponsor: Coca-Cola. Coke was still searching for an exhibit at the show, so Moses flew to Atlanta to meet with its chairman. But Coke, a Southern company, was not particularly pleased with the idea of supporting a talking Lincoln robot. Its chairman, William E. Robinson, complained about the behavior of African Americans in the country and said he “wasn’t much sold on Lincoln, anyway.”⁶⁸

With just over a year until the opening of the Fair, the situation was beginning to seem hopeless. But the state of Illinois suddenly threw Disney a Hail Mary pass. The commission for the Illinois Pavilion at the Fair voted that their theme would be “Land of Lincoln,” and Robert Moses lost no time in suggesting to them a suitable centerpiece for their exhibit.⁶⁹ The commission’s temporary chairman, Fairfax Cone, flew to the Disney workshop in April 1963 to meet Lincoln himself. In a letter to Disney, Cone wrote that he was “overwhelmed by the realism of the Lincoln figure” and that “The possibility of our using the Lincoln figure and the effect of this upon visitors to the New York World’s Fair have not left my mind during any of my waking hours since I saw it.”⁷⁰ The Illinois governor, Otto Kerner, decided to go ahead with funding the Lincoln audioanimatron for the Illinois Pavilion.

The only problem was that Illinois didn’t have the money. The Illinois

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸See Robert Moses, *Public Works: A Dangerous Trade* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 576.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Fairfax Cone, quoted in Anderson, “Illinois Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 90.

Legislature had only appropriated one million dollars for the state's participation in the World's Fair, and just the cost of renting Lincoln from Disney would amount to \$600,000 over the two-year course of the show—leaving only \$400,000 for building the pavilion and everything else in it, compensating workers, and paying operating costs. Despite repeated pleas from the Illinois Fair commission as well as Moses to bring down the cost of Lincoln, Disney held firm. In the end, Moses, who was desperate to have the Lincoln figure at the Fair, snuck Illinois a special loan of \$250,000 under the table to finance the exhibit. No other state or exhibit had received any such financial help, and when Moses' (unpaid) loan was discovered near the end of the Fair's run, critics were outraged at this misappropriation of funds.⁷¹

Criticism of Lincoln's cost, however, paled in comparison to the criticism that would issue once the public learned about the Lincoln Audio-Animatron. When some Illinoisans got wind of their state's involvement in supporting a Lincoln robot, they were furious. Columnist David Felts wrote that "The very idea of a life-size figure of Lincoln fashioned from fiberglass and plastic, animated and given a tape-recorded voice, is revolting. . . . That such a macabre effigy is to be the central attraction of the Illinois exhibit should stir vigorous protest here in Lincoln country."⁷² Other editorials in Illinois papers joined Felts in a chorus of indignant protest. In their view, the Lincoln audioanimatron was a "cheap carnival trick that would demean the memory of Lincoln

⁷¹In theory, the Illinois Pavilion was supposed to repay the loan with the revenue generated from concessions, but in reality, there was no way that concessions ever could have amounted to enough money to cover that cost. See Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 581.

⁷²Anderson, "Illinois' Land of Lincoln Pavilion," 98.

and degrade the Illinois exhibit.”⁷³

Disney, sensing the tide of public opinion turning against him, marshaled his most potent weapon—spin—and headed off to Springfield, the capital of Illinois. On November 19, 1963, the one hundredth anniversary of the Gettysburg Address and just three days before the assassination of President Kennedy, he joined Governor Kerner at the Illinois State House (where Lincoln had served as state representative and where, more than forty years later, Barack Obama would announce his intention to run for president) to present the plans for the Lincoln exhibit to the people of Illinois.⁷⁴ Disney told the packed house that he was just as invested as they were in presenting a decorous and stately homage to Lincoln: “I’m staking my reputation on this,” he assured the six hundred people who had assembled to hear his presentation, “I’m not a carnival operator; this will be a dignified presentation.”⁷⁵ He showed them slides of the exhibit and played a specially-recorded clip of Dano delivering the Gettysburg Address.⁷⁶ He argued that his Audio-Animatron would allow them the unique and incredible experience of being in the presence of Lincoln. “[Lincoln] is going to speak to you,” Disney said. “His voice is as close as we could get from actual descriptions of this great man While seated in a chair, before speaking he will drop his head in thought, a characteristic Lincoln action. When he is introduced he will stand—putting his hands behind his back—as though deep

⁷³The *Herald & Review*, quoted in *ibid*, 96.

⁷⁴Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 96.

⁷⁵“‘I’m Staking My Reputation’ On Lincoln Exhibit: Disney,” *Illinois State Register*, November 19, 1963, final edition, 4.

⁷⁶“‘Lincoln’ Delivers Gettysburg Address,” *Illinois State Register*, November 19, 1963, final edition, 1.

in thought.” Disney concluded by assuring them that Lincoln would be “as life-like as I am standing before you—perhaps more so.”⁷⁷

And the crowd went wild. Once again, Disney had done what he did best: sell his vision. Bitter critique transformed into eager anticipation. The Springfield Elks Club presented Disney and Moses with plaques bearing the inscription of the Gettysburg Address.⁷⁸ Ralph Newman, a Lincoln scholar who succeeded Fairfax Cone as the permanent president of the Illinois World’s Fair Commission, told the *Chicago Tribune* that “I think that if we chose the Lincoln story as the theme for our exhibit, which we have, that it would have to be done in his words. And you could carve them on marble, project them on a screen, put them on vellum, and people wouldn’t stand still for two minutes looking at them.”⁷⁹ Disney’s Lincoln, however, would compel people to listen to his words. Newman quipped that “If I thought a three-headed green monster spewing smoke could get people to listen to the words of Abraham Lincoln, I’d be tempted to use it.”⁸⁰ Disney’s Lincoln proceeded to the World’s Fair with the public’s blessing.

A World’s Fair, or a Fair World?

While the Lincoln robot had the public’s blessing, the same could not be said of the Fair itself. The 1964-1965 New York World’s Fair first had been conceived in 1958 by a New York lawyer, Robert Kopple. Concerned that his young daughters were not

⁷⁷Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 96.

⁷⁸“Lincoln’ Delivers Gettysburg Address,” 4.

⁷⁹“World’s Fair Feature to be Animated Abe.” *Chicago Tribune*, 8 October 1963, A10.

⁸⁰“The Man Who’s Taking Lincoln to the Fair.” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 March 1964.

receiving adequate education about the world outside of the United States, Kopple pitched the idea of another world's fair, like the one that had been held in New York in 1939-1940, to mayor Robert F. Wagner. The idea quickly ballooned into something considerably larger than an education opportunity for the city's children. 1964 marked the three hundredth anniversary of the city's transition from Dutch hands to English ones, when New Amsterdam turned into New York. Another world's fair, City Hall reasoned, would be just the thing to commemorate the event. Robert Moses, the city's commissioner of parks, offered Flushing Meadows Park as the potential fair site for the price of just one dollar per year. When the newly-incorporated World's Fair Corporation selected a permanent president, Moses—who was also head of the New York State Power Authority, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, and the Slum Clearance Committee—seemed like just the man for the job (see fig.4.5). His first order of business was paying Kopple, with whom he had clashed previously on city issues, to disappear.⁸¹

Once Moses had the bit in his teeth, nothing was going to stop him from getting his New York World's Fair—not even the fact that Seattle had already secured permission from the Bureau of International Expositions for a World's Fair to be held in 1962. BIE regulations prevented any country from hosting more than one major international exposition in a ten-year period, and they refused to bend to Moses's will. Moses went forward with the New York World's Fair anyway, dismissing the BIE as “three people living obscurely in a dumpy apartment in Paris.”⁸² Moses had Eisenhower's approval to hold a Fair, and that was quite enough for him.

⁸¹Lawrence R. Samuel, *The End of the Innocence: The 1964-1965 New York World's Fair* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 3-8.

⁸²Robert Moses, quoted in Samuel, *The End of the Innocence*, 10.



Fig. 4.5. Robert Moses standing in front of the Unisphere, the symbol of the Fair.
Associated Press, 1 January 1964.

Moses was seventy years old when he became the chairman of the Fair and seventy-five when it opened; consequently, in many ways the Fair seemed to reflect an earlier era than the increasingly turbulent mid-sixties. Guy Lombardo, one of Moses's favorite singers, headed the house band at the Fair, and the giant corporate pavilions featuring the many wonders of General Motors and General Electric suggested a utopian vision of American progress and consumerism that was sharply at odds with the social protest that was consuming the country outside of the Fair's carefully manicured interior. Robert Stone, one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, wrote that "Curved, finned, corporate Tomorrowland, as presented at the 1964 World's Fair, was over before it began."⁸³ Like Disneyland, the World's Fair was supposed to be an idyllic place, free from the strife of the outside world, with its controversial Vietnam War and its strident African American voices demanding equality. Morris Dickstein, in an essay on the Fair, noted that "The whole enterprise was a throwback to a more homogeneous era in which blacks, like slums and other 'social problems,' were kept out of sight and out of mind. Any hint of inequality, conflict, or injustice was excluded from the social purview of the Fair."⁸⁴ Although the Fair's motto was "Peace through Understanding," it might have been described more accurately as "Peace through Omission."⁸⁵

Try as he might, however, Moses could not keep the growing discontent of the 1960s from spilling into the Fair, nor did he deserve to be spared from it. In 1961,

⁸³Robert Stone, "The Prince of Possibility," *The New Yorker*, June 14 and 21, 2004, 88.

⁸⁴Morris Dickstein, "From the Thirties to the Sixties: The New York World's Fair in its Own Time," in *Remembering the Future: The New York World's Fair from 1939 to 1964*, exhibition catalogue, the Queens Museum (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 34.

⁸⁵See Samuel, *The End of the Innocence*, xvi.

Edward Lewis, the director of the Urban League of Greater New York, reported that the World's Fair Corporation resisted guaranteeing fair employment opportunities for African Americans.⁸⁶ Further investigation revealed that out of sixty-eight employees at the New York State Pavilion, only two were black. Consequently, the Joint Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity protested at the United Nations, carrying signs reading "End Apartheid at the Fair" and "African Pavilions Built with Lily White Labor," and inviting countries outside the United States to join them in their campaign to ensure that the Fair's employment would be fair.⁸⁷

As the Fair approached, James Farmer, the president of the Congress of Racial Equality, spearheaded the movement to protest discrimination in the Fair's hiring practices and representation of African Americans and social equality in the United States. He sent letters to all of the international exhibitors who planned pavilions at the Fair explaining the results of the employment inquiry and enjoining them to "inform the New York World's Fair Commission that you will halt construction on your project until it can be shown that all Americans, despite their color, can be given gainful employment at these sites."⁸⁸ CORE also planned demonstrations for the first day of the Fair, targeting the pavilions representing states or businesses that had resisted Civil Rights. In a broadside titled "How CORE Views The Fair: Symbol of American Hypocrisy," CORE depicted images of southern Civil Rights demonstrations in which white men on horses chased African American protesters with cattle prods. The flyer promised that CORE

⁸⁶"Urban League Lays Bias to '64-'65 Fair," *New York Times*, June 15, 1961, 5.

⁸⁷"U.N. Is Picketed on Jobs at Fair," *New York Times*, August 13, 1963, 5.

⁸⁸James Farmer, form letter to international leaders, August 8, 1963. Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), New York World's Fair File.

protesters at the Fair would

contrast the real world of discrimination and brutality experienced by Negroes, North and South, with the fantasy world of progress and abundance shown in the official pavilions. For every new car we submit a cattle prod, for every chromium-plated decoration we submit the charred remains of an Alabama church and for the great steel Unisphere we submit our bodies—from all over this country—as witnesses to the tragedy of the Northern ghetto, as witnesses to the horror of Southern inhumanity and legalized brutality.⁸⁹

The flyer went on to list demands for each state and business whose pavilion CORE planned to picket at the Fair, from the right to vote in Mississippi to the right to equal employment at the Ford and GM plants in Detroit. Illinois, whose “Land of Lincoln” pavilion would feature Disney’s Lincoln robot, would receive its equal share of picketers protesting the police brutality and “rat-strewn ghetto schools” that plagued African American neighborhoods in Chicago.⁹⁰

Although Farmer’s World’s Fair campaign was highly visible in the early 1960s, it was not until 1964 that CORE began to grab national headlines for its Fair protests, though—much to his displeasure—not for any of Farmer’s initiatives. The Brooklyn local chapter of CORE, a newly-admitted branch of the national organization staffed by young, fiery men and women, was fed up with the slow progress of Civil Rights advances in the north, which proceeded on a case-by-case basis. In the early 1960s, the concerns of African Americans in northern states were less visible than those of the south, where violent white resistance to voting rights and desegregation gave the national media a parade of shocking images of peaceful Civil Rights protesters suffering at the hands of

⁸⁹CORE, “How CORE Views the Fair: Symbol of American Hypocrisy,” CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director’s File, 1942-1966), New York World’s Fair File.

⁹⁰Ibid.

local law enforcement. In the north, African Americans were struggling to secure fair housing, schooling, and employment, but activists faced an uphill battle convincing the public that their pursuit of these objectives did not detract from the crusade to end the injustices of the south, let alone that racism was even a real problem in the north. Northern whites found it easier to condemn the blatant racial discrimination and violence of Alabama and Mississippi than to confront issues closer to home.⁹¹ Consequently, CORE's nonviolent official strategy in the north involved a multi-stage process to address issues of racial inequality, which required its members to conduct extensive research on any entity they suspected of job, education, or housing discrimination, followed by negotiations with in which CORE members formally presented their grievances and allowed for the offending entity to comply with their recommendations. Only when negotiations failed did CORE permit its activists to stage protests, which consisted of nonviolent picket lines and sit-ins. With this strategy, national CORE hoped to pick away at bastions of inequality in the north, removing them one by one.⁹²

Brooklyn CORE's young members were impatient with this gradual process, designing their own symbolic protests with a view to dramatizing the racial discrimination in the north for a broad audience as opposed to targeting individual companies. They believed that targeted protests allowed the vast majority of New York's white citizens to go about their daily business without thinking about the oppression

⁹¹See Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008) xv.

⁹²See CORE's Rules for Action Pamphlet, published April 1963. For an in-depth study of CORE's history and strategies, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973.

faced by the city's minorities, to cast racism as the problem of a few backward businesses instead of a pervasive problem that all levels of society had to address.⁹³

In the early months of 1964, as New York City geared up for the Fair's opening in mid-April, Brooklyn CORE announced its plan for a "stall-in" on all transit routes leading to the Fair on its opening day. The plan was simple: protesters would take their cars on the highways leading to the Fair and deliberately run out of gas, creating such a massive traffic jam that no one would be able to get to Fair. In the process, stranded motorists would be forced to take a close look at the poverty-stricken black neighborhoods that the new highways (built by Robert Moses, of course, as head of city transit and slum clearance) allowed them to fly over, unseen, every day.⁹⁴ Brooklyn CORE distributed flyers advising protesters to "Drive Awhile for Freedom" and to "take only enough to get your car on EXHIBIT" (see fig. 4.6).⁹⁵ Spokesman Oliver Leeds told newspapers that "our objective is to have our own civil rights exhibit at the World's Fair. We do not see why people should enjoy themselves when Negroes are suffering all over the country."⁹⁶

The Brooklyn chapter quickly earned, and just as soon ignored, reprimands from

⁹³Brian Purnell advances this interpretation of the stall-in with his essay "'Drive Awhile for Freedom': Brooklyn CORE's 1964 Stall-In and Public Discourses on Protest Violence," in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 47-48.

⁹⁴See Purnell, "'Drive Awhile for Freedom,'" 49.

⁹⁵Brooklyn CORE, "Coming Attraction at the World's Fair." N.D. CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), Brooklyn CORE file.

⁹⁶Oliver Leeds, quoted in Purnell, "'Drive Awhile for Freedom,'" 49.

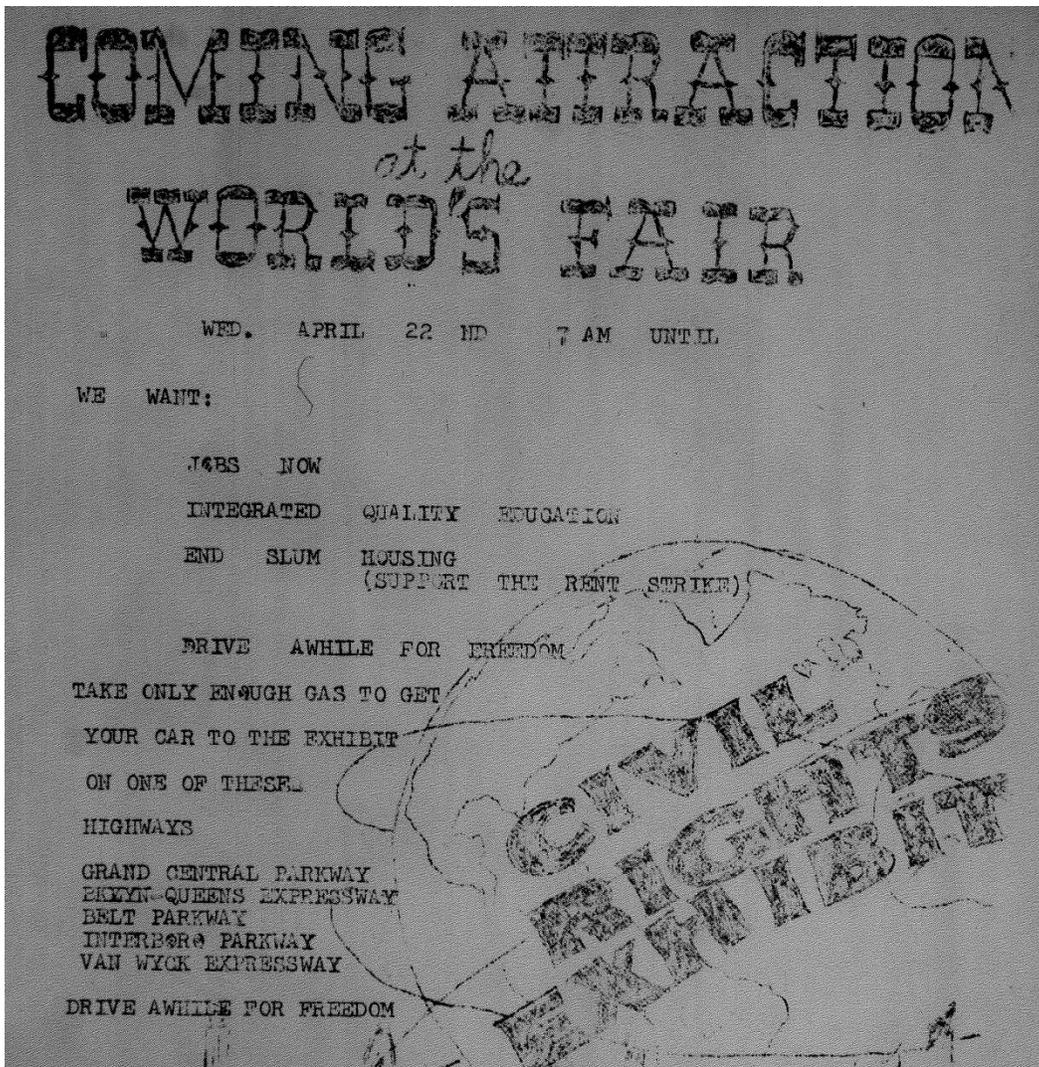


Fig. 4.6. Brooklyn CORE flyer advertising the stall-in. CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), Brooklyn CORE file.

national CORE for refusing to follow the organization's protest guidelines.⁹⁷ Undeterred even by the chapter's suspension from the umbrella organization, Brooklyn CORE promised they would stall hundreds if not thousands of cars on the highways leading to the Fair and even send protesters to lay down on railroad tracks to prevent subway trains from taking visitors to Flushing Meadows unless City Hall addressed racial inequality.⁹⁸ New York and national newspapers debated the protest tactic, which upended the image of quiet, long-suffering Civil Rights activists enduring the slings and arrows of southern racists who deserved the public's censure. Instead, the World's Fair stall-in aimed to inconvenience everyone, whether they played a direct role in racial oppression or not. Brooklyn CORE's overarching goal—that everyone would consider his or her own complicity in allowing oppression to continue—was largely lost on the general populace. The stall-in was nothing like the nonviolent demonstrations of the south, and so many interpreted that it must be the opposite: a violent imposition upon the rights of others to move freely.⁹⁹ The *New York Post* summed up the common reaction by saying

It is axiomatic that any effective civil rights demonstration must have both tangible and symbolic meaning plainly intelligible to the unaware bystander. Otherwise it merely serves to crystallize hostility without mobilizing any body of sympathy. It becomes an exercise in futility, or worse. . . . The projected traffic tie-up can win few converts to the civil rights banner. It will provide new ammunition for the racists—here and in Washington and in many other cities. It

⁹⁷James T. McCain and James Farmer, memorandum to the Steering Committee of the National Action Council, Re: the status of the Brooklyn Chapter of The Congress of Racial Equality, April 11, 1964, CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), Brooklyn CORE file.

⁹⁸See George Merlis, "Negroes Plan 'Stall-In' on Roads to Fair," *New York World-Telegram*, April 9, 1964, in CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), World's Fair file; Junius Griffin, "Tie-Up on Subway Planned to Back Stall-In at Fair," *New York Times*, April 20, 1964, 1.

⁹⁹See Purnell, "Drive Awhile for Freedom," 62.

will create dangers as well as harassment for many innocent citizens who are not adversaries of the Freedom movement. It will leave a residue of rancor and confusion. It will in short be a form of sound and fury, carrying no clear message to most of the populace.¹⁰⁰

CORE's national office, beleaguered by the mounting criticism of its rogue chapter, fielded concerned letters from citizens who both spurned and supported the stall-in. Edna M. Spector of New York City sent Farmer a copy of a letter she wrote to the editor of the *New York Times* asserting that "There is justifiable, symbolic meaning in stall-ins by the disowned CORE chapters. The whites, even the liberal ones, have been stalling legally and morally for a hundred years on the negroes' civil rights. Since we continue to stall we really haven't the right to protest the negroes' imposition of stalling upon us."¹⁰¹

Other writers were not so sympathetic, viewing the stall-in as a wrongheaded departure from the nonviolent movement. John Keating of Yonkers wrote to Brooklyn CORE that: "I am a white man. I was all for the Civil Rights Bill to help the colored people. I don't like the violence that's been used now such as the Stall-in. If I had to vote now, I would vote against it. It shows by the actions of your people they are not ready for us to accept them as equal. P.S. I shall write to Washington hoping to stall the Civil Rights Bill now."¹⁰²

With just days remaining until the Fair's grand opening, both Brooklyn CORE and City Hall refused to budge. The day before the Fair, no settlement was forthcoming, so Brooklyn CORE promised to marshal its drivers and cars, while the city readied tow

¹⁰⁰*New York Post*, April 12, 1964, quoted in Purnell, "Drive Awhile for Freedom," 56.

¹⁰¹Edna M. Spector, Letter to the Editor of the *New York Times*, April 22, 1964, CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), New York World's Fair File.

¹⁰²John Keating, post card to Isaiah Brunson, April 20, 1964, quoted in Purnell, "Drive Awhile for Freedom," 60.

trucks to haul away any vehicles that tried to stop traffic. James Farmer and national CORE put the final touches on their plans to picket the pavilions of states and businesses known for their civil rights abuses. For his part, Robert Moses predictably was furious about these attempts to sully his beloved Fair. He hired a large squad of Pinkerton guards to remove any protesters from the fairgrounds at Flushing Meadows.¹⁰³

It was shaping up to be a very interesting day at the Fair.

Lincoln Goes to the Fair

Meanwhile, in the Illinois Pavilion, the Imagineers were encountering new setbacks in making the Lincoln audioanimatron function. The newly-opened Shea Stadium brought on several headaches. Baseball traffic led to delays in delivering Lincoln to Flushing Meadow, the site of the Fair. The stadium also gobbled up electricity, making the current in the Illinois Pavilion fluctuate erratically. The power surges played havoc with the elaborate tape system, adapted from the Polaris nuclear submarine at a cost of \$20,000, which governed Lincoln's movements through to a system of electromagnetic impulses. When the current fluctuated, the impulses changed and Lincoln went into seizures, thrashing wildly.¹⁰⁴

April twentieth, the Fair's opening day and the appointed day for Lincoln's premiere, arrived with great fanfare in the press and outright panic among the Imagineers.

¹⁰³CORE, minutes of the Steering Committee of the National Action Council meeting, April 11, 1964, CORE Papers 1941-1967, Microfilm Edition, Series 1 (National Director's File, 1942-1966), New York World's Fair File; Samuel, *The End of the Innocence*, xvi.

¹⁰⁴See Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 580; Joseph Egelhof, "Power Fault Stills Abe Lincoln Figure," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 April 1964.

Five hundred dignitaries had braved the CORE picketers outside and were arrayed in the auditorium at the Illinois Pavilion to see the premiere of the exhibit called “Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln.” But the Imagineers had to tell Disney that Lincoln was still not functioning, and Disney had to tell the assembled crowd that there would be no show that day. Backstage, the Imagineers were in tears. Marc Davis, not entirely joking, turned to James Algar and asked, “Do you suppose God is mad at Walt for creating man in his own image?”¹⁰⁵

The press had a field day, as did visitors to the Fair. “What’s the matter?” asked a passerby. “Abe got laryngitis?”¹⁰⁶ Nine days later, the robot worked for seven tantalizing performances, and then quit again. Visitors who had finally gained entrance to the Illinois Pavilion (which had been closed entirely so that the Imagineers could have the run of the place for frantic, round-the-clock tinkering) were still wowed by the Pavilion’s other, less famous exhibit: the original manuscript of the Gettysburg Address.¹⁰⁷

On the tenth day the Imagineers finally prevailed. John Hench, the chief designer at Disneyland described the scene at the Illinois Pavilion as if it were a miracle wrought by Disney himself. “I never thought he’d work,” Hench said of the Lincoln robot. “To me it was just like Walt had willed him to. He must said he was going to. He just said he

¹⁰⁵James Algar, quoted in Green and Green, eds., *Remembering Walt*, 171.

¹⁰⁶Philip Benjamin, “About the Fair: Illinois Pavilion is Still Unfinished, and Disney’s Lincoln is the Cause.” *New York Times*, 27 April 1964, 20.

¹⁰⁷Joseph Egelhof, “Old Abe Wow ‘Em at Fair—Then Quits.” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1964, 1.

was going to, and by God, one morning he did—absolutely perfectly.”¹⁰⁸ Once the Audio-Animatron got underway, the reviews were spectacular. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that many spectators, “including a dignified Negro man,” cried during Lincoln’s speech, and the crowd spontaneously began to sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” after they saw Lincoln’s speech. “It seemed so real at first it almost scared me,” said one early viewer.¹⁰⁹ People came out of the Illinois Pavilion “in stunned silence,” “imbued with the spirit of Abraham Lincoln.”¹¹⁰ Disney’s Lincoln quickly became one of the top attractions at the Fair, even eclipsing the other outstanding exhibit: Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, brought by the Vatican.¹¹¹ By some reports, 24,000 people per day visited the Lincoln show, which seated 500 for each performance at a rate of five performances per hour. Approximately 135,000 people per week saw the Lincoln show, which was free to all Fair entrants.¹¹² Robert T. Lincoln Beckwith, Lincoln’s great-grandson, came to visit the Audioanimatronic Lincoln and pronounced himself enthralled by the almost “religious”

¹⁰⁸John Hench, quoted in Kurtti, *Imagineering Legends*, 140.

¹⁰⁹Joseph Egelhof, “Lincoln Talks, Walks Again for Fairgoers.” *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 1964, A5.

¹¹⁰Hedda Hopper, “Looking At Hollywood: Disney’s Talking Lincoln Stuns Crowd at Fair.” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 May 1964, B3; Fanny Butcher, “‘Land of Lincoln’ at the World’s Fair.” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 May 1964, L8.

¹¹¹Fanny Butcher, “Disney’s Lincoln: Almost Mystical.” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 June 1964, J6; Robert Moses, “Why a Fair? And Why This Fair?” *New York Times*, 19 April 1964, SMA25.

¹¹²Larry Wolters, “Blinkin’ Lincoln a Fair Wonder.” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 September, 1964.

experience of hearing him speak.¹¹³

What did Lincoln say that so captivated his audiences? Oddly enough, it was not the Gettysburg Address—Disney and his Imagineers ruled that out “because everybody would be anticipating that, and that would be kind of anti-climactic,” said Ralph Newman.¹¹⁴ Instead, Disney cannily used the Gettysburg Address as part of his Prologue Show—the scene-setting presentation that audiences would see as they waited in the foyer to enter “Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln.” The Prologue Show included images of historic photographs and illustrations, as well as paintings of Lincoln, which were projected onto a screen. A narrator informed the waiting audience that “You are about to spend a few dramatic moments with Abraham Lincoln . . . but first may we present as a prologue the story of Mr. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.”¹¹⁵ After some commentary from the voices of “Edward Everett” and other important figures related to the speech, Royal Dano’s voice gave the Gettysburg Address. It was a classic Disney technique for helping audiences to suspend their disbelief. “Walt wanted to introduce you to Royal Dano’s voice outside the show,” explained Imagineer Sam McKim. “It was important because when you went in, you had accepted the voice coming from the figure as Lincoln’s.”¹¹⁶

Thus indoctrinated, audiences walked into the theatre and sat down to see and hear the Audioanimatronic Lincoln give a speech not from history, but about the present.

¹¹³Joseph Egelhof, “Kin Views Fair’s Lincoln: He Is Impressed by Replica of Ancestor.” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 September 1964, A2.

¹¹⁴Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln,” 91.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

Disney writer and producer James Algar cobbled together a ten-minute address for the robot from excerpts of five of Lincoln’s historical speeches with the goal of making Lincoln seem to discuss current events, particularly the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement. Ralph Newman said that he remembered suggesting to Algar that “we could stitch together several things that Lincoln had said that would talk about the affairs of the day—the mob rule and violence in the streets, the lack of obedience to the law, the worries about international affairs, and worries about Russia.”¹¹⁷ He added: “We wanted Lincoln to use words from his day that would sound as if he had just read the *New York Times* that morning and was discussing the situation in the world.”¹¹⁸

In his speech, the Lincoln Audio-Animatron cautioned that the demise of America and its principles would not come from beyond its shores, but from the machinations of subversive elements within the country. “All the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa combined, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years,” the robot said,

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot be from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we ourselves must be its author and finisher. . . . Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges—let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; —let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in the legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.¹¹⁹

Reverence for the laws was exactly what Brooklyn CORE seemed to lack. On

¹¹⁷Ibid., 92.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 93.

opening day of the Fair, the vehicular chaos that Brooklyn CORE had promised failed to materialize—by most counts, only twelve cars stalled, and all were quietly towed away with minimal impact on travelers.¹²⁰ Still, Disney’s Lincoln responded to the rhetorical chaos that the stall-in had created across the nation, admonishing its audiences not to attempt such disruptive protests and to wait patiently for the expansion of equal rights. Ironically, national CORE’s picketers, whose protest plans had been drowned out in the cacophony of the stall-in, had a much more successful day at the Fair. Seven hundred protesters arrived on opening day, blocking gates, sitting in doorways, and bonelessly resisting police officers as nearly three hundred of them were dragged away for arrest (fig. 4.7).¹²¹ When President Johnson emerged from the private hall where he had delivered his speech opening the fair to an invitation-only audience because of fears that protesters would get out of hand, the assembled national CORE members heckled him mercilessly. As Johnson attempted some conciliatory words, promising that by the *next* World’s Fair the country would be well past the inequalities that plagued it now, the crowd drowned him out with chants of “Freedom now!” and “Jim Crow must go!”¹²²

Where did the Lincoln Audio-Animatron fit into this struggle? Adlai Stevenson, former governor of Illinois and ambassador to the United Nations, appealed to the CORE protesters after their stall-in threats not to defy the law, claiming that “Civil wrongs do

¹²⁰Edward T. Folliard, “Johnson Opens Fair Amid Rights Din; Stall-In Plans Fair,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, April 23, 1964, A1.

¹²¹Arthur Gelb, the *New York Times*’ lead correspondent on the Fair, describes the scene in his memoir, *City Room* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 382.

¹²²See Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else’s House: America’s Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York, The Free Press, 1998), 15-32.



Figure 4.7. Pinkerton guards dragging CORE protesters away. Eddie Adams, "African American Demonstrations Protests NYC 1964," Associated Press, 22 April 1964.

not make civil rights.”¹²³ However, Stevenson added that “Lincoln’s promise of freedom can no longer be denied fulfillment. Only in redeeming the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation can we redeem the honor and decency that too long have been relegated to the shadows of our national life.”¹²⁴ But Disney’s Lincoln—and the team of Imagineers who created him—did not seem to share that sentiment. When the Lincoln Audioanimatron said that “If destruction be our lot, we ourselves must be its authors and finishers,” he was quoting from Lincoln’s 1838 speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, in which Lincoln condemned a recent lynching of “a mulatto man” in St. Louis—the authors of destruction to which he referred were those who would rend the country apart to protect slavery.¹²⁵ Disney’s “current events” version, of course, made it seem as though the authors of destruction were Communists or Civil Rights activists or both. Imagineer Bob Gurr related that on the first day the Lincoln audioanimatron worked,

The whole front row was filled with all these CORE kids and their leader—an older black guy. They had planned to make quite a ruckus. After the show started, it became dead silent. The older black guy started to cry, and when it was over they just got up and filed out silent. My eyes were wet—I couldn’t speak. I had worked on this thing, and it totally shut up violent protesters. A machine could actually become alive.¹²⁶

But at what cost? Disney’s Lincoln was not—despite the hype—actually Abraham Lincoln come back from the dead. It was, rather, a carefully selected and

¹²³Vincent Butler, “Illinois’ N.Y. Fair Pavilion is Dedicated; Lincoln Figure Held Up by Power Fault.” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 April 1964.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

¹²⁵Jon Wiener, “Disney World Imagineers a President.” *The Nation*, 22 November 1993, 621.

¹²⁶Anderson, “Illinois’ Land of Lincoln Pavilion,” 98.

sanitized version of Lincoln, with all his troublesome legacy of African-American emancipation converted into a plea for the status quo. This was the Lincoln that audiences saw at the New York World's Fair in 1964-1965, which helped to shape the popular perception of the historical Lincoln. The Lincoln Audio-Animatron gave his twelve-minute speech between fifty and fifty-five times each day during the run of the Fair, and approximately three million people visited the Pavilion in the 1964 season alone.¹²⁷ After the Fair closed in 1965, Disney moved the Lincoln Audio-Animatron to its permanent home on Main Street, U.S.A. in Disneyland. Just one year later, Walt Disney died of complications related to lung cancer.¹²⁸

Conclusion

Downwind from Gettysburg appeared in Ray Bradbury's fifteenth collection of short stories, *I Sing the Body Electric!*, in 1969. In it, a team of engineers, derisively termed the "Lincoln Resurrection Brigade," led by a failed filmmaker named Phipps, creates the "Phipps Eveready Salem, Illinois, and Springfield Ghost Machine." The protagonist, Bayes, who manages the theatre where the Lincoln Ghost Machine gives its performances, recalls the mania with which he and Phipps' team went about creating Lincoln:

They were a gang of boys caught up in some furtive but irritably joyous mortuary society. . . . Some toured the Civil War battlefields in hopes that history, borne on some morning wind, might whip their coats like flags.

¹²⁷Illinois Commission – New York World's Fair, "Illinois 'Land of Lincoln' Pavilion: A Report to the Governor, Members of the 74th General Assembly, Members of the Advisory Committee," December 1964.

¹²⁸Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 630-631.

Some prowled the October fields of Salem, starched brown with farewell summer, sniffing airs, pricking ears, alert for some lank lawyer's unrecorded voice, anxious for echoes . . . Phipps called across the old battlefield and beyond, saying the tomb was *not* his place; arise.¹²⁹

Then, of course, the unthinkable—inevitable?—happens. A man named Booth—Norman Llewellyn Booth—sneaks into the theatre and shoots the Lincoln Ghost Machine in the back of the head. A trickle of machinery oil dripped from the hole, from the robot's mouth. When Bayes asked Booth why he shot the robot, Booth responds that he could not bear the thought that a machine such as this would live forever, perfectly, while mortal men died. "Don't you see?" says Booth. "He died a long time ago. He can't be alive. He just can't be. It's not right. A hundred years ago and yet here he is. He was shot once, buried once, yet here he is going on and on. Tomorrow and the day after that and all the days."¹³⁰ Bayes thinks seriously about killing Booth on the spot, and then stops, planning a better revenge instead. He tells no one what Booth did. The Lincoln Ghost Machine will be quietly repaired and live on, unassailable and perfect.¹³¹

Like Kempelen's Turk and Turriano's automaton monk, the Lincoln Audio-Animatron far outlasted the life of its creator. It continued its performance at Disneyland for nearly thirty years without change, sometimes with humorous malfunctions. Historian Patricia Limerick recalled that as a child, she saw the show at Disneyland, and "in the middle of his speech, Lincoln twitched and fell over backward into his chair. My

¹²⁹Ray Bradbury, "Downwind from Gettysburg," in *I Sing the Body Electric!* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 78.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 85-88.

sister explained to me that this part was where he got shot.”¹³² Despite the unintentional comedy, most of Disneyland’s visitors did not know that the Audio-Animatron’s speech was not the direct transcript of one of Lincoln’s historical speeches. Roy Disney, Disney’s brother, reported that for years people asked him which of Lincoln’s speeches the robot was giving, and he answered, “Well, it’s four speeches—and a piece of a eulogy!”¹³³

The Audio-Animatron has not remained entirely static. When historian Eric Foner, winner of the 1989 Bancroft prize for his book *Reconstruction*, took his daughter to Disney World in 1993, he was disturbed by Lincoln’s speech (delivered by the Lincoln robot’s twin brother, at the East Coast Disney theme park that opened in 1971) and its failure to mention slavery. He expressed his concern in a letter to officials at Disney, who gave Foner a unique response: they asked him to write a better speech for Lincoln. Foner accepted the challenge, and now the Lincoln at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, tells audiences that American freedom is “an unfinished agenda that challenges each generation of Americans, including our own.”¹³⁴

At Disneyland, however, the Abraham Lincoln robot—upgraded from its original hydraulic form with new, electronic controls—still repeats Royal Dano’s speech today, as it will tomorrow, and every day into the foreseeable future.¹³⁵ Through robotics, Disney had found a way not only to create a representation of Abraham Lincoln that brought him

¹³²Jon Weiner, “Disney World Imagineers a President,” 623.

¹³³Roy O. Disney, quoted in Kurtti, *Imagineering Legends*, 129.

¹³⁴Wiener, “Disney World Imagineers a President,” 623.

¹³⁵Robert Niles, “Disneyland’s Mr. Lincoln Debuts Disney’s Next Generation of Animatronic Storytelling,” *Theme Park Insider*, December 17, 2009.
<<http://www.themeparkinsider.com/flume/200912/1593/>>

back to life for audiences, he had found a way to create a representation of Lincoln that would live forever, expounding on Disney's conservative vision of American society.

Chapter 5

The Saint of Springfield, Illinois: Relics, Pilgrimage, and Lincoln Memory

Chicago in summer is like a giant carnival, stretching from the old grounds of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition near Hyde Park to the giant Ferris wheel of Navy Pier. During the cheery month of June, when I lived on State Street, famous singers gave free concerts to thousands of picnickers from the Millennium Park band shell, the lions in the Lincoln Park Zoo paced as if on perpetual parade, tourists admired the architecture from boats on the river, and the sun-starved denizens of the Windy City lined themselves up on the rocky beaches of Lake Michigan to play volleyball and watch the sailboats glide across the water. Even though I had spent the bulk of my time there in a chilly reading room at the University of Chicago, I was sad to leave.

I boarded a bus at Union Station early in the morning of July third. The train service to Springfield was temporarily interrupted for repairs to the rails, and so my suitcase and I were traveling by coach to the Illinois state capital. As the dawn light crept slowly around the edges of the skyscrapers and the bus wended its way south, I watched regretfully as the buildings grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared in favor of rolling cornfields, dotted here and there with red barns. It looked like Middle America as imagined in a Hollywood movie. We passed a highway marker and I realized that we were, in fact, on Route 66. I laughed. Of course we were. How else could you take a pilgrimage in America?

Four hours later, full of peanut M&Ms from the rest stop vending machine, I hoisted my bags onto the hot asphalt of downtown Springfield. It was deserted—eerily so, as if the zombie apocalypse had occurred while I was riding the bus. I dragged my wheeled suitcase down the sidewalk in the vague direction of my lodgings and watched the stoplights turn from green to yellow to red and back to green, directing no traffic at all, ensuring the safety of no pedestrians other than myself. It was a relief to see another human face when a flustered clerk emerged from the depths of the Mansion View Inn to greet me. He gave me my choice of rooms. Back out on the town, I soon learned the reason for the spooky silence in Springfield: when the state General Assembly is not in session, many of the city’s shops, cafes and restaurants close their doors, especially on a holiday weekend. In essence, Springfield becomes a ghost town—which, in my case, was not necessarily a problem. After all, I was there in search of a ghost.

Like many thousands before me, I came to Springfield to look for Lincoln, and it didn’t take me long to find the trail. My first destination was the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, a sprawling complex completed in 2005. The most visited presidential library in the United States, the Lincoln Museum was well on the way toward its three millionth visitor when I stepped through its doors.¹ I was surprised to find that its interior more closely resembled Madame Tussauds than the Smithsonian. In the airy central atrium, tourists were snapping photos of their children standing among wax replicas of the Lincoln family. Visitors toured through a series of painstakingly-

¹The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum & Library, “Museum History,” Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, <<http://www.illinois.gov/alplm/museum/About/Pages/Museum-History.aspx>>, last accessed 29 April 2013.

reconstructed vignettes of Lincoln's life featuring the waxen president as a child in a ramshackle log cabin, a concerned father on the evening when his son Willie succumbed to typhoid fever, and a strategist among his cabinet members in the White House war room. At another station, museum-goers could "Ask Mr. Lincoln" any of a number of pre-formed questions by selecting one on a touch screen. Questions as diverse as "What is your family background?" and "Do you believe in the equality of the races?" elicit a response in an adjoining small theater, where pictures from his life accompany quotes from Lincoln on the subject at hand.

The most popular area of the Lincoln Museum is its "Treasures Gallery," where visitors can gaze upon a myriad of objects associated with the Lincolns. Among them is the fan that Mary Lincoln carried on the evening of her husband's assassination, still bearing a few visible drops of his dried blood, and several pieces of wood removed from the Lincoln home—which, according to the accompanying text, Americans citizens prized after Lincoln's death "like medieval holy relics."² An entire case is dedicated to "Funeral Relics," such as a black tassel from the catafalque that bore Lincoln's body through its many grim processions and a mourning ribbon bearing Lincoln's visage that a bereaved citizen wore in his memory.³ I began to have the feeling that in the eyes of the museum's curators, Lincoln had moved through the world like the King Midas of American history, transferring some of his mystical energy into every object he touched. Through their association with Lincoln, ordinary bits of wood and metal that otherwise

²"Mary Lincoln's Fan," and "Piece of Wood From the Lincoln Birthplace," object labels at the Museum Treasures Exhibit, Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library, Springfield, IL. Viewed 3 July 2011.

³"Lincoln Home Wood," and "Funeral Relics," object labels at the Museum Treasures Exhibit, Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library, Springfield, IL. Viewed 3 July 2011.

would have ended their days in a scrap heap had transformed into precious jewels, forever cherished for their perceived ability to encapsulate the essence of the martyred president. Nearly one hundred and fifty years after his death, visitors to the Lincoln Museum are willing to pay twelve dollars per adult to file past these relics.⁴

Part of the museum's mission is to remind its visitors that the spirit of Lincoln is present in the objects and documents in its collections. To this end, a theater in the museum runs a fifteen-minute show called "Ghosts of the Library" on a continuous loop, pausing only so that audiences can filter in and out between screenings. The show, which is entirely automated, explains the rather dull purposes of a presidential library with the rather flashy use of its patented "Holavision" – projected holograms that give audiences the impression that (spoiler alert: the audience does not learn his true identity until the end of the show) the ghost of a Civil War soldier is acting as their host to the highlights of the permanent collection. According to the advertisements for the show, its goal is to answer the questions "Why does history matter?" and "Why do we save all this old stuff?" for museum visitors, and it does so by suggesting that the ghost of Lincoln himself—and of anyone else whose proximity to Lincoln merited the retention of his or her material goods at the museum—is actually contained in his letters, clothing, and household objects.⁵ When the hologram host reads from a document written by Lincoln, a hazy greenish-blue hologram of the sixteenth president appears (fig. 5.1) and his quill

⁴The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library, "The Official Website of the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library and Museum," Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. <<http://www.alplm.org/>>, last accessed 30 April 2013.

⁵Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum website, "Ghosts of the Library," Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, <<http://www.alplm.org/museum/ghosts.html>>, last access 1 May 2013.



Figure 5.1. The Lincoln ghost hologram and spectral writing in the “Ghosts of the Library” show at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

pen rises from the table as if held by an unseen hand. As it moves, glowing words in Lincoln's familiar handwriting snake across the air. The overall effect is eerie and thrilling, a history museum turned into a spooky movie by dint of a few well-placed special effects.

The Lincoln Museum is not the only place in town claiming the ability to put tourists in touch with Lincoln's ghost. After I completed my circuit through the museum with a stop at the enormous gift shop—where I tried on some comically large stove-pipe hats and bought myself a Lincoln t-shirt and a pair of earrings shaped like pennies—I emerged into the warm July dusk to find that the ghost hunters had arrived.

Across the street from the museum, a young man clad all in black stood shilling Springfield ghost tours, as well as a thin self-published paperback book entitled *Lincoln's Ghost: Legends and Lore*.⁶ As the light dwindled, one of his compatriots led me, along with a large group of tourists, on a walk through downtown Springfield. Most of its stops were the historical sites where Lincoln had lived, worked, and worshipped, coupled with a few macabre details about deaths on the premises and vague rumors about supernatural sightings thereafter. If I had held out any hope of encountering Honest Abe in spirit form at the old Lincoln homestead, I would have been doomed to disappointment. The only ghosts on the ghost tour were conjured up in our imaginations, as we walked the same streets and stood on the same floors that the Great Emancipator once had trod, long ago.

Back at my hotel, I gathered visitor information pamphlets in the lobby and perused them in my room. It seemed as if everywhere Lincoln had ever gone had turned into a museum, lovingly restored to whatever moment in time he had graced its halls. In

⁶Garret Moffett, *Lincoln's Ghosts: Legends & Lore*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009.

addition to the Lincoln home, the Lincoln family pew at the First Presbyterian Church, the law offices of Lincoln and his partner William Herndon, and the Lincoln office at the Illinois Old State Capitol building, tourists can drive twenty miles outside of Springfield to visit the village of New Salem, a complete reproduction of the pioneer outpost where Lincoln lived as a young man and tried his hand at a number of trades before settling on the law.⁷ If they don't mind driving across state lines, tourists can also head to Indiana to view the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, which "preserves the place where he learned to laugh with his father, cried over the death of his mother, read the books that opened his mind, and triumphed over the adversities of life on the frontier," from ages eight until twenty-two.⁸ And if they can't rest until they have gazed upon the exact spot whereupon Lincoln the newborn emerged from his mother's womb, evidently already intent on fulfilling his destiny as Savior of the Union, Lincoln-lovers can make a pilgrimage to the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Park in Hodgenville, Kentucky (fig. 5.2). On the park grounds, tourists can see the Lincoln family Bible, as well as the spring "where Abraham got his first drinks of water," then walk up the fifty-six granite steps—one for each year of Lincoln's life—to view a replica of the log cabin where Lincoln was born (the original did not survive as long as Lincoln himself did),

⁷Poet Carl Sandburg did much to popularize stories from Lincoln's young adulthood in New Salem. See Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926. For a more scholarly account of Lincoln in New Salem, see David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 38-60.

⁸Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial website, "History & Culture." National Park Service, <<http://www.nps.gov/libo/historyculture/index.htm>>, last accessed 2 May 2013.



Figure 5.2. The neoclassical shrine at the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Park. Photo courtesy National Park Service, <<http://www.nps.gov/abli/index.htm>>.

housed within an enormous, neoclassical monument.⁹

After a full day walking in the footsteps of Lincoln, I slept the sleep of the righteous in my moldy hotel room, awakened only by the ghostly whistle of a train passing by my window in the night. Halfway between waking and dreaming, my mind conjured up an image of the Lincoln funeral train coasting down those tracks nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier. Little wonder that people have claimed that a phantom train retraces the route that the funeral train took on its anniversary every year.¹⁰

The Fourth of July dawned sunny and warm. I put on my sneakers, my Lincoln t-shirt, and my penny earrings and set off for the final stop on my pilgrimage: Lincoln's tomb. Without a car, and with no public transportation running on the national holiday, I had to make the two-mile trek to the outskirts of town on foot. I didn't mind. It seemed fitting, somehow, to take my time getting there. Jumping out of a car, racing through the tomb, and taking off for the next tourist trap would not have been giving the last resting place of Lincoln the solemn intention it deserved.

Walking through Springfield on my little "pilgrimage" trail, I suddenly remembered a group of pilgrims I had encountered once in my previous travels. As a college student, I lived and studied in Rome for a few months, and during that time had

⁹National Park Service, "Plan Your Visit," Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Park website, < <http://www.nps.gov/abli/planyourvisit/index.htm>>, last accessed 7 May 2013.

¹⁰Several books about presidential ghost lore make claims about a spectral Lincoln funeral train. Joel Martin and William J. Birnes, in *The Haunting of the Presidents: A Paranormal History of the U.S. Presidency*, recounted a tale from Albany, New York, about clocks and watches stopping as the phantom train passed by with Lincoln's coffin in plain sight, accompanied by vast numbers of blue-coated men. See Martin and Birnes, *The Haunting of the Presidents* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 2003), 263-264.

the great privilege of visiting the Sancta Sanctorum chapel at St. John Lateran, which had been the private chapel of the popes until the construction of the modern-day Vatican in the sixteenth century. It is the home of several highly-prized relics, including the supposed remains of Christ's foreskin and navel.¹¹ Inside the chapel, studying the reliquaries and mosaics with an art history class, I could not help but marvel at the pilgrims arrayed on the Scala Sancta, or sacred steps, outside. Believers knelt and prayed on each of twenty-eight marble stairs that led up to the Sancta Santorum, finally reaching a small window covered with a grille from which they could gaze at the relics within. As I stood in the chapel, casually discussing the merits of eighth-century mosaic styles with my professor and classmates, men and women who would have given anything to trade places with me thrust their hands through the grille toward the relics and silently cried. Even though I had been raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, it had never occurred to me until that day that pilgrimage at a medieval level of intensity was still happening in the modern world. I could not imagine what would drive pilgrims to put themselves through such a ritual, nor could I fathom the emotional impact it evidently had upon them. Six years later, trudging toward Lincoln's tomb under the baking sun on the Fourth of July, I began to understand pilgrimage as a ritual process a bit better. Today, you can hop on a plane to any destination, sacred and secular alike, at the drop of a hat. But if having a spiritual and transformative experience is your goal, the slower you go, the faster you get there.

¹¹Erik Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 18.

As soon as I arrived at the gates of the Oak Ridge Cemetery, which houses the Lincoln Tomb State Historic Site, I caught sight of the 117-foot tall obelisk which rises above the grave (fig. 5.3). At its base stand four bronze military sculptures representing the infantry, artillery, cavalry, and navy servicemen who contributed to the Union victory in the Civil War.¹² Walking closer, I saw that at the entrance to the memorial at the base of the obelisk was a large bronze reproduction of Gutzon Borglum's bust of Lincoln, dull and oxidized except for its curiously shiny nose (fig. 5.4).¹³ As I stood contemplating the statues, I quickly discovered why Lincoln's nose remained bright as a new copper penny: visitors to the tomb rubbed the nose "for luck," one after another, taking pictures of each other with one hand applied to Lincoln's bronze proboscis. Approximately 375,000 visitors come to Lincoln's tomb every year, and—if its polished sheen is any indication—most of them stop to give the lucky nose a superstitious touch.¹⁴

Inside the cool marble interior of the tomb, the first thing I encountered was a bronze replica of the famous Daniel Chester French statue of Lincoln, the marble original of which sits enthroned in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was far from the only Lincoln statue in the building; in fact, it seemed as if every corner, niche, and recess of the little rotunda had a depiction of Lincoln in each major stage of his life—Lincoln the soldier, Lincoln the circuit rider, Lincoln the debater, Lincoln the liberator—like a

¹²See Lincoln Monument Association, "History of the Tomb," Lincoln Tomb State Historic Site, <<http://www.lincolntomb.org>>, last accessed May 8, 2013.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Blair Kamin, "Lincoln's Tomb is going green; state to install geothermal heating and cooling system." *Chicago Tribune* features blog, 8 October 2010, <<http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/theskyline/2010/10/lincolns-tomb-is-going-green-state-to-install-geothermal-heating-and-cooling-system.html>>



Figure 5.3. The Lincoln Tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, IL. Photo courtesy Lincoln Monument Association.

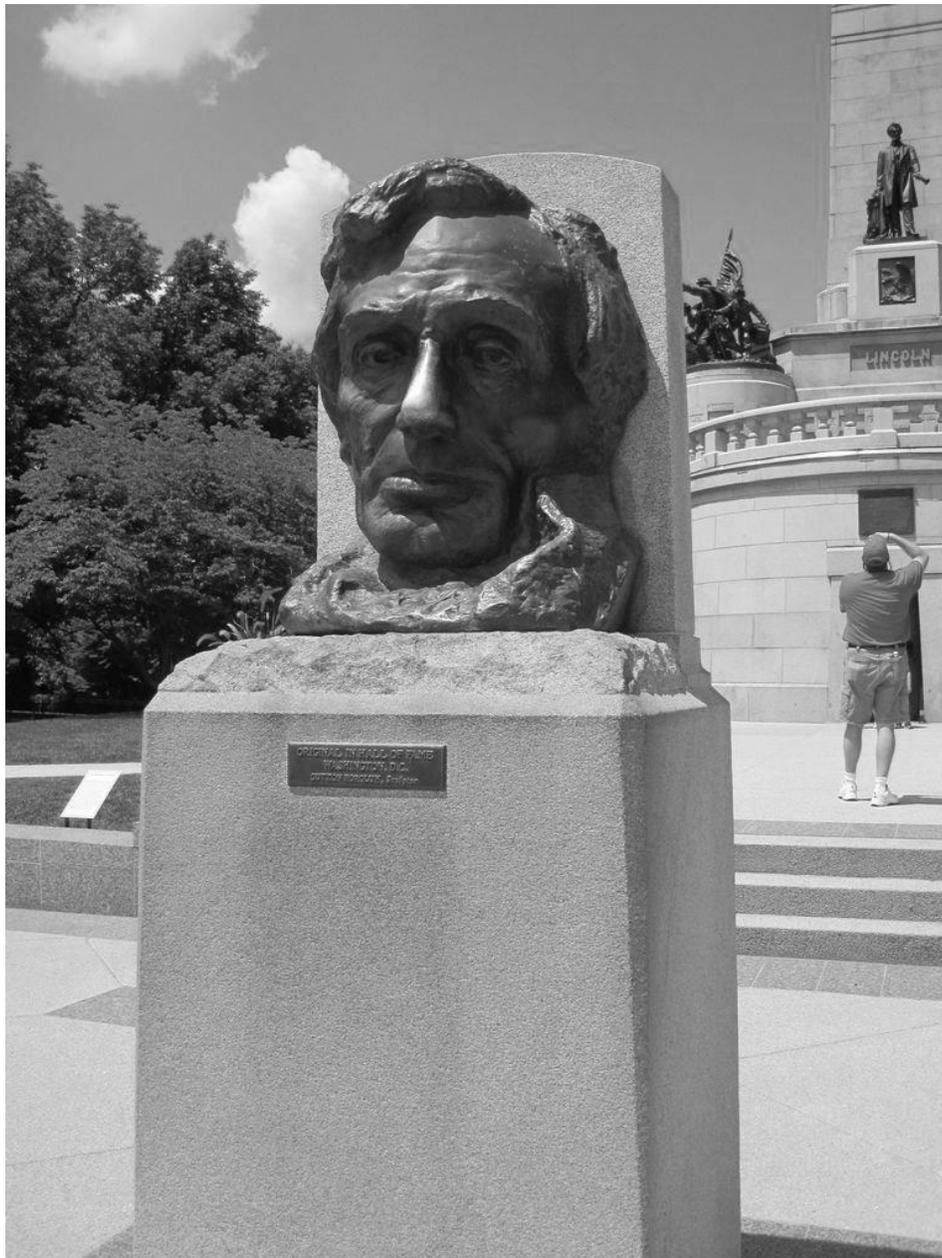


Figure 5.4. A bronze reproduction of Gutzon Borglum's bust of Lincoln. Visitors to the Lincoln tomb rub its nose for good luck.

saint or god in his various aspects. Walking in procession past them toward Lincoln's tomb was like going through the Stations of the Cross, observing a march through triumph and suffering that ultimately ended in death. When I finally reached the burial chamber, I stood surrounded by the many families who had brought their children to see Lincoln's tomb on Independence Day. At the center of the room, an enormous red granite cenotaph emblazoned with ABRAHAM LINCOLN – 1809-1865 played host to a few flowers and a number of miniature American flags that previous pilgrims had left by way of tribute. Although the remains of Mary Todd Lincoln and three of the Lincoln children were interred in the crypt behind the walls of the room, Lincoln's own remains were not actually within the coffin-shaped cenotaph, but (as a helpful plaque explained) buried in a vault ten feet below the floor.¹⁵ What the plaque did not say was that in addition to being hidden underneath the floor, Lincoln's coffin is encased in an enormous block of concrete, a precautionary measure taken after vandals made an attempt to steal the deceased president's body in 1876.¹⁶

I felt as though I ought to say something to Lincoln, but amidst the curious questions of children, the endless flashes of cameras snapping away, and the watchful eyes of the security guard seated next to the tomb, I would have felt very foolish indeed. Instead, I contented myself with a long walk around the grounds, enjoying the pleasant shade beneath the oak trees, inspecting the little wrought-iron gate that marked the spot

¹⁵Eddie, Willie, and Tad Lincoln are buried in the Lincoln tomb in Springfield with their mother and father. Robert Todd Lincoln, the only one of the Lincoln children to survive to adulthood, is buried in Arlington National Cemetery with his wife. See Lincoln Monument Association, "History of the Tomb."

¹⁶See Thomas J. Craughwell, *Stealing Lincoln's Body*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

of the tomb before the construction of the obelisk, and watching the tourists bedecked in their Fourth of July red, white, and blue come and go.

Finally, the day began to grow late. My pilgrimage complete, I walked the two miles back to downtown Springfield to find that it had come to life as if by magic during my absence. The city was in the midst of frenzied preparations for its Fourth of July celebration and fireworks display. I entered the fray, procured a hotdog and a Coke from one of the many street vendors, and found an empty patch of grass on the lawn near the Capitol building from which to admire the fireworks. Surrounded by families of every color, small children playing with patriotic-themed toys, teenagers feigning boredom, and a poorly-organized but well-meaning marching band, I felt more American than perhaps ever before in my life. As the sky darkened to black and the fireworks shot a rainbow of sparks into the air, we oohed and ahed with genuine delight. Though I was a stranger in Springfield, I felt a sense of community with the townspeople around me—an affection for our shared past and a pride in our common culture—even if that feeling was an illusion. For a few hours, at least, we seemed united through our merrymaking in the ritual of nation-making, tracing an unbroken line from the America of Lincoln to the America of the present.

Image and Pilgrimage in American Culture

Was my journey to Springfield really a “pilgrimage,” and did I really encounter “relics” in the Lincoln museum? While it would be a gross oversimplification unreservedly to equate Mary Todd Lincoln’s blood-stained fan with a medieval relic such as the Vail of Veronica or a hunk of wood supposedly from the Lincoln cabin with a

piece of the True Cross, similarities exist between how these objects attain, and maintain, sacred status. Likewise, although specialists in early modern Europe might balk to see the Lincoln Heritage Trail compared to a great medieval pilgrimage route such as Santiago de Compostela, the processional ritual of following in the footsteps of a person who lived an ideal life culminating in an actual or imagined personal transformation describes religious pilgrimage and Lincoln pilgrimage in equal measure. Even the ritual of rubbing the nose of the Lincoln bust outside the tomb has a parallel in pilgrimage rites, as pilgrims to saints' tombs often would touch sacred objects to transfer some of the saint's essence onto themselves.¹⁷

Others before me have noted that a quasi-religious cult surrounds Lincoln, or that Lincoln occupies a central role in a "civil religion" of patriotic feeling and display toward the American nation. In 1968 Robert Bellah famously argued that Lincoln was the Jesus figure in a religiously-imagined national myth, whose emancipation of the slaves and noble death at the hands of a detractor echoed Jesus's sacrifice as recorded in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.¹⁸ More recently, Erika Schneider has characterized Ford's Theatre, site of Lincoln's assassination in Washington, D.C., as a "reliquary" for objects related to Lincoln.¹⁹ These scholars have pointed out, correctly, that the language and rituals associated with "paying homage" to Lincoln *seem* religious—that, while not

¹⁷According to Edith Turner, "Pilgrims almost invariably *touch* the sacred object and then touch themselves." See Edith Turner, preface to the paperback edition, in Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), xv.

¹⁸See Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Tradition World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 168-179.

¹⁹See Erika Schneider, "Blood-Stained Linen and Shattered Skull: Ford's Theatre as Reliquary to Abraham Lincoln." *American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer, 1995), 99-127.

technically part of the traditional religious sects to which some Americans claim membership, in practice, the “cult of Lincoln” closely mimics religion.

Yet the cult of Lincoln does not just *look* religious, it *is* religious, insofar as its adherents expect to achieve communion with a “holy” spirit through pilgrimage and contact with sacred objects. The history of Lincoln pilgrimage and relic-seeking is another aspect of the broader cultural effort to make contact with Lincoln’s ghost after his assassination in 1865. The value ascribed to “relics” of Lincoln’s life, and to the places where he dwelled, derives from a desire to make contact with, absorb, and profit spiritually through engaging with these material objects and practices. Furthermore, these objects and sites function to create and solidify American national identity, promoting the values that characterize “ideal” American citizenship and identifying a point of common national heritage around which a community can unite—whether in support, opposition, or by suggesting new alternatives to the definition of American citizenship.

For years, scholars have debated what constitutes “religion,” and how religious ideas and practices shape society. Sociologist Émile Durkheim’s seminal 1912 study, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, argued that “religion” extended beyond the bounds of established churches, found anywhere that a community developed around agreed-upon sacred objects and taboos.²⁰ In 1978, anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner wrote *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, which posited that the result of pilgrimage was an outburst of “*communitas*,” or commonness of feeling that visitors to

²⁰Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

shrines achieved together.²¹ The Turners celebrated pilgrimage as a way for ordinary people to interact with the sacred on their own terms, bypassing the gatekeepers of religious experience in the forms of priests, bishops, or other church elites. In addition, they emphasized that pilgrims sought direct contact with a sacred presence. In their words, pilgrims did not “search for a fusty, dead past, or nostalgia: in pilgrimage it is the journey to the actual place containing the actual objects of the past, whose very stones seem to emit the never-obliterated power of the first event—a certain shadowy aura.”²² In short, pilgrims went in search of the real, tangible presence of the sacred and came away with a new and stronger sense of identity in a community of believers.

More recently, scholars have extended the idea of religious pilgrimage to encompass a range of devotional exercises not traditionally characterized as “religious.” In 1993, Ian Reader and Tony Walter edited a collection of essays called *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, which demonstrated that many people make trips to non-religious locations that, by their intent and effect, rightfully might be termed pilgrimages: visitors to war graves, sites of national tragedy such as Kent State, or even Elvis Presley’s mansion Graceland seek these spots out of a desire to have a transformative experience through connecting with the sacred dead.²³ Gary Laderman has argued that religious

²¹Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 13.

²²Edith Turner, preface to the paperback edition, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, xv.

²³See Tony Walter, “War Grave Pilgrimage,” 63-91; Christine King, “His Truth Goes Marching On: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland,” 92-104; and Richard West Sellars and Tony Walter, “From Custer to Kent State: Heroes, Martyrs and the Evolution of Popular Shrines in the USA,” 179-200, in Ian Reader and Tony Walter, eds., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (London: MacMillian, 1993).

experience in the modern United States extends to many communities of fervent devotion to aspects of popular culture that cannot be categorized as strictly religious in the traditional sense.²⁴

A skeptic might argue that visitors to these secular holy sites are not pilgrims but simply tourists, and therefore any pretense to the sacred is destroyed by the drive for the almighty dollar. But even medieval pilgrimage did not make such a distinction between God and Mammon. Just as downtown Springfield is littered with a dozen stores selling Lincoln memorabilia, markets for provisions and souvenirs sprang up around pilgrimage routes in medieval Europe. Tourism has always been part of the pilgrimage experience, as pilgrims have sought to expand their spiritual and social standing by traveling to a faraway place to see holy shrines and relics. Meanwhile, nothing could be better for a local economy than becoming the focus of pilgrimage, whether through the acquisition of an important relic in one of its churches or through reports of a nearby saintly apparition.²⁵

Still, these opportunities for profit depend on whether or not the pilgrims come. It is first and foremost the desire to see and touch objects imbued by a spirit that draws pilgrims from their homes to a holy site. The history of Lincoln relic collecting and pilgrimage demonstrates one of the ways that American citizens, both white and black, attempted to bring Lincoln back to life.

²⁴Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*. New York: The New Press, 2009.

²⁵See Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 240-241.

The Relic Fiends

The hunt for Lincoln's relics began almost as soon as Edward Stanton declared that he belonged to the ages. When Lincoln's funeral procession left Washington on its circuitous journey to Springfield in early May 1865, beginning the train tour of many stops that would take his corpse to its final resting place in Springfield, newspapers reported on the mania among many observers to capture a memento of the sad occasion. Women picked up the petals of flowers that had been strewn on Lincoln's coffin and preserved them in paper, and many people carried scissors in order to snip pieces from the black drapes and bunting in the funeral decorations. So great was the desire to seize a bit of history that "it was necessary to set a strong guard around the car, arch, and catafalque" that carried Lincoln's body, "in order to prevent them from being torn to pieces."²⁶ According to the *Chicago Tribune*, members of the guard had to use physical force "to prevent the complete demolition of everything which had been used in the funeral obsequies."²⁷

Nor was the theft of presidential relics confined to Washington, D.C. At Lincoln's former home in Springfield, caretakers had to erect a new fence around the property because relic seekers had carried away the original, post by post. The house's tenant during the Lincolns' sojourn in the White House, one Colonel Harlowe, reported that he had to exercise constant vigilance in order to prevent the home itself from being chipped away to nothing by those who wished to make family heirlooms out of articles

²⁶"The Presidential Funeral," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 May 1865, 4.

²⁷*Ibid.*

related to Lincoln.²⁸ *The Washington Post* reported that the caretaker of the Lincoln tomb planned to erect an iron fence around the monument to keep “relic fiends” from breaking pieces off of the statuary or, in one case, using a crowbar to chip off a piece of the sarcophagus.²⁹

Perhaps Lincoln’s sudden, shocking death led stricken mourners to attempt to grasp onto something solid to maintain a sense of his presence. Though the elaborate Victorian traditions of mourning certainly account for some of the lush splendor of the Lincoln funeral pomp, contemporaries felt the need to participate in the lamentation in decidedly material ways. In addition to grabbing bits of funeral flotsam and jetsam as souvenirs, Lincoln’s mourners also draped their own houses in black bunting and wore black buttons and ribbons on their clothing (fig. 5.5). These mourning ribbons, which often bore a likeness of the president or a statement asserting his righteous martyrdom, were largely the handiwork of enterprising souls who quickly knocked out a great many such tokens for sale among a citizenry eager for a tangible display of their grief.³⁰

If relic hunters and ribbon purchasers thought they were making off with a bit of history, history has not proved them wrong. Though it is impossible to say how many of these favors were lost to the ages, many museums of American history boast Lincoln funeral souvenirs among their collections today: the Library of Congress has at least half a dozen unique mourning ribbons, and the New-York Historical Society has nearly twice

²⁸“The Monument to Abraham Lincoln,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 June 1871, 2.

²⁹“Relic Fiends at Lincoln’s Tomb,” *The Washington Post*, 23 April 1890, 1.

³⁰See Schneider, “Blood-Stained Linen and Shattered Skull,” 100.

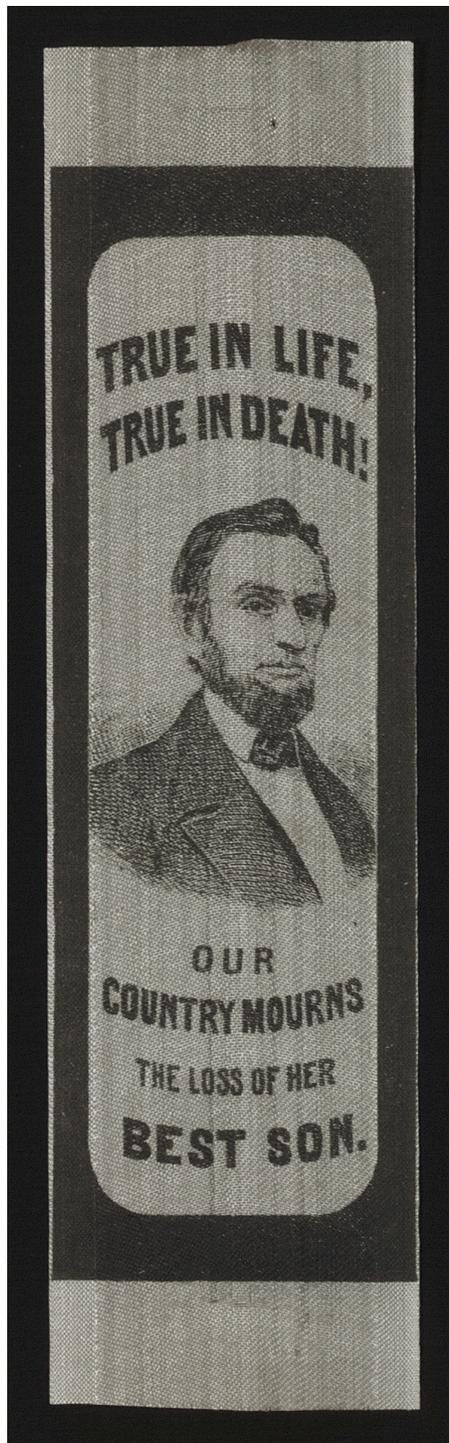


Figure 5.5. A mourning ribbon worn to lament Lincoln's death. Maker unknown. "True in Life, True in Death! Our Country Mourns the Loss of Her Best Son." Fabric, 13 x 9 cm. The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, portfolio 17, no. 3. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

that, not counting mourning medals, or the almost countless printed broadsides and ephemera that proclaimed the national grief from parlor walls, shop windows, and street corners.³¹ Those who dared to cut a swatch of fabric from a black drape or pilfer a bit of fencepost from the Lincoln homestead were correct in predicting that these otherwise unremarkable materials would only rise in value and significance as the years went by.

And rise they did. The market for Lincoln relics began to take off by the 1870s, when stories of Lincoln objects in the possession of ordinary people began to flourish in the media. Of particular interest were those things touched by the morbid fascination of having been present at or somehow marked by Lincoln's death. In 1871, Mrs. William Petersen found herself the object of many curious news articles, by virtue of her astute decision not to launder a set of bedclothes. After John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln in the head at Ford's Theatre, doctors judged that the president's condition was far too unstable to transport him back to the White House for treatment. Mr. Petersen volunteered his boarding house as a substitute, and it was there, in an upstairs bedroom, that surgeons removed the fatal bullet from his skull and Lincoln breathed his last.³² In the years that followed, the Petersens dutifully admitted visitors to the house to gaze upon the pillow and sheets that were stained with Lincoln's holy blood, and—like the relic-hunting termites of Springfield—those pilgrims to the site of Lincoln's death chipped away bits

³¹Most of the Lincoln relics at the Library of Congress are preserved in the Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. The New-York Historical Society's collections are housed in the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture in New York City.

³²For a detailed account of Lincoln's assassination and final hours, see Anthony S. Pitch, *"They Have Killed Papa Dead": The Road to Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln's Murder, and the Rage for Vengeance*. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2008.

of the bureau near the bedstead until it bore “the mark of a thousand penknives.”³³ When both of the Petersens died, their daughter made inquiries as to whether the government might purchase them for exhibition in the Patent Office, then home to a museum of national relics, including George Washington’s clothing and Revolutionary War sword. Soon, this minor museum would seem too pitiful to contain relics of this magnitude, which drew such a crowd that the Commissioner of Patents had to transfer them into the National Museum for safekeeping.³⁴

As Lincoln’s myth grew in stature, his relics grew in value. In 1876, a gang of Chicago counterfeiters made a bid to steal the most treasured Lincoln relic of all: his corpse. Kidnapping dead bodies related to prominent families for ransom was a criminal scheme gaining in popularity during this period; robbers stole the body of John Scott Harrison (son of William Henry Harrison and father of Benjamin Harrison, the central link in a chain of presidents) from its grave in 1878, and thieves successfully negotiated \$20,000 in ransom from the widow of dry goods magnate A.T. Stewart after stealing his corpse.³⁵ A Chicago crime boss named “Big Jim” Kennally decided to expand the scope of his illegal operations from counterfeiting to body snatching after the arrest of his best engraver, hoping that he could exchange Lincoln’s remains for the man’s release—and the sum of \$200,000, for good measure.³⁶ Kennally recruited a handful of thugs to help

³³“President Lincoln’s Death-Bed.” *Chicago Tribune*, 4 November 1871, 2.

³⁴“The Washington Relics,” *The Washington Post*, 21 April 1883, 1.

³⁵See Craughwell, *Stealing Lincoln’s Body*, 77; William Bryk, “A.T. Stewart’s Grave Was Robbed, His Body Snatched,” *New York Press* online, 30 October 2001, <www.nypress.com>.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 75-76, 88.

him with the task, and on the seventh of November—election night—they used the dual diversions of darkness and politics to conceal their plot. They sawed through the padlock on the gate at the tomb in Oak Ridge cemetery, and were pondering how to move Lincoln’s impossibly heavy lead coffin when shots rang out in the graveyard. One of Kennally’s “thugs,” as it turned out, was actually an informant, and once the thieves were inside the tomb he gave the signal for the Secret Service agents hidden nearby to spring into action. They exchanged gunfire in the cemetery, scattering the thieves, whom the Secret Service apprehended shortly thereafter. Lincoln’s bones were safe once more.³⁷

Nevertheless, the experience had rattled the tomb’s caretaker, John Carroll Power. A handful of crooks with a wagon and a hacksaw would have succeeded in their harebrained scheme to steal Lincoln’s body had the Secret Service not intervened. Power decided that the only way to prevent a reprise of the attempted theft was to hide Lincoln’s corpse. A week after the Kennally incident, he convened an “honor guard” of five men—not one of whom was under the age of fifty-six—that took as its mission the protection of the late president’s body.³⁸ Together, bones creaking, they secretly moved Lincoln’s coffin from its marble sarcophagus and took it down into the basement of the monument, planning to bury it in an unmarked grave in the soil directly beneath the base of the obelisk. They swore an oath never to reveal the true location of Lincoln’s body to another living soul, save Lincoln’s son Robert. Powers dismissed his co-conspirators, intent on choosing the exact spot of the grave alone in order to enhance security even further. When he began to dig, however, he quickly breached the water table. Out of

³⁷Ibid., 107-114.

³⁸Ibid., 129.

options, Powers ended up hiding Lincoln's coffin underneath a pile of unused lumber. It remained there for two years.³⁹

In 1878, Powers discovered a spot where the water table lay deeper underground and recruited some discreet and able-bodied assistants to dig a shallow grave for the president's coffin. When Mary Todd Lincoln died in 1882, her remains were placed in the wall crypt prepared for them in the monument during the public funeral rites, but that same night, the Lincoln Guard of Honor quietly removed her coffin from the crypt and reburied it in the basement, next to her husband. Robert Lincoln, who had requested the secret relocation, wrote to one of the sacred order of tomb defenders to thank them for "carrying out the wish I had expressed . . . so that there can be no danger of a spoliation."⁴⁰ Not until 1887 did the bodies of the Lincolns return to their rightful places in the Lincoln monument.

Although the parallel is not exact, the adventure of the attempted body-napping and its consequences for Lincoln's corpse echoes another medieval sainthood practice: *furta sacra*, or holy theft. Broadly defined, holy theft occurred when a member of the faithful claimed that a saint's relic was not being properly revered in its home church, and therefore he or she was justified in stealing the relic under cover of darkness and installing it in a new location where the congregants would do justice to its holiness. Frequently, relic thieves claimed that the saint to whom the neglected relic belonged had

³⁹Ibid., 130.

⁴⁰Letter from Robert Todd Lincoln to Clinton L. Conkling, 26 July 1882, quoted in Craughwell, *Stealing Lincoln's Body*, 168.

appeared to them in a dream or vision, beseeching them to make off with the artifact.⁴¹ Often these relics were no larger than bone fragments, teeth, or severed fingers encased in reliquaries, but sometimes enterprising thieves stole entire bodies. Perhaps the most famous instance of a saint's "translation" to a different church occurred in 827 C.E., when the elders of Venice decided to steal the body of Saint Mark. They believed that Mark's evangelism in northern Italy qualified him as the region's preeminent saint, and that his remains were being wasted on the people of Alexandria (where he had also been the first evangelist, but no matter). Two Venetian merchants in Egypt managed to have the saint's body secretly removed from its crypt and replaced with that of Saint Claudia, hoping that no one would be the wiser. The Venetians sailed back home with Saint Mark's body concealed under a shipment of pork. They took the relic to the palace of the Doge, who was much delighted, and there it has resided ever since.⁴²

Although Kennally and his men made no such pretense of virtue about their reasons for stealing Lincoln's body, the formation of the Lincoln Guard of Honor and its covert maneuvers to protect the sacred bones echoes the medieval tug-of-war over the bodies of saints. If Kennally did not intend to reinstall Lincoln into an environment more befitting his rank (his actual plan involved hiding the body in some sand dunes next to Lake Michigan) he was correct in his assessment of the corpse's value to the country as a focal point of national identity.⁴³ Like its more popular cousin kidnapping, body-napping relied on the notion that someone would be willing to pay handsomely for the safe return

⁴¹For the definitive guide to medieval holy theft, see Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

⁴²See Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 107-115.

⁴³Craughwell, *Stealing Lincoln's Body*, 88.

of an irreplaceable person. While kidnappers could use the threat of death to demand ransom, the chief weapon in the body-napper's arsenal was the desecration or destruction of the corpse. It's worth pondering what negotiations might have ensued had Kennally's gang succeeded in their plot. Would the state of Illinois have pardoned the imprisoned engraver and coughed up the \$200,000 ransom for Abraham Lincoln's bones? Would Kennally really have cremated the body of the Great Emancipator if his demanders were not met? On one hand, Lincoln's corpse was exactly that—a corpse, whose rotting bones could never again deliver a humorous anecdote or pen another great speech. But to regard it as no more than the dust to which all mortals must return seems unthinkable. Like the bodies of medieval saints, whose miraculous essence could cling to a relic as small as a fingernail, Lincoln's corpse was perceived to retain some measure of his spirit.

Not all criminals were as cavalier as Kennally when it came to Lincoln relics. At least one thief felt that objects related to Lincoln were too sacred to steal. In 1885, the *Chicago News* reported that a burglar broke into the home of Mr. Claude J. Adams and cleverly emptied his wife's jewelry box of its contents while the couple slept. But, unbeknownst to the thief, he had attained something much more valuable than mere gems among his loot. Mrs. Adams had been a friend of Mary Todd Lincoln, who had given her the pen with which Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation. She had stored the gold pen in her jewelry box, and, according to the *News*, regretted the “loss of the souvenir more than of her jewelry.”⁴⁴

The thief, however, was evidently a literate man, and possessed of an honor not generally ascribed to his class. He read with horror the newspaper account of his own

⁴⁴“The Emancipation Pen Stolen,” *The Chicago News*, 21 October, quoted in the *New York Times*, 23 October 1885, 2.

misdoings and their unintentional consequences. Two weeks later, the editor of the *Chicago News* received a grubby little package containing the stolen pen. Enclosed was a mea culpa from the thief, who asked that the editor “Please forward to Mrs. Claude Adams her highly prized relic—Abraham Lincoln’s pen, taken in mistake. Yours, FELIX.” He added, in postscript, “I am a Republican. If I was a Democrat I would be in jail.”⁴⁵ For Felix, stealing a relic as great as the Emancipation Proclamation pen was no better than stealing from a church.

Although stealing Lincoln relics was beyond the pale, creating them out of whole cloth was another matter entirely. As the interest in—and value of—objects associated with Lincoln grew, so did the sheer number of objects reputed to be associated with him. Soon, there were duplicates of several supposedly unique items, particularly the articles of clothing that Lincoln was wearing on his fateful trip to the theatre on April 14, 1865. Whether a large, unassuming black coat attained a reputation as the one Lincoln was wearing the night of his assassination by mistake or design, disputes began to arise over which party possessed the genuine article. As early as 1886, an editorialist in the *Washington Post* cautioned readers not to be overly credulous toward clothing that purported an intimate relationship with Lincoln; as “numerous parties scattered throughout the country, and several persons residing in Washington, have laid claim to the possession of certain articles, including clothing, belonging at the date of his tragic death to President Lincoln.”⁴⁶ The following year a writer in the *Post* was obliged to note that not only were spurious Lincoln relics afoot, so were fictitious anecdotes about the

⁴⁵“Restoration of the Lincoln Pen,” *The Chicago News*, 6 November 1885, quoted in the *New York Times*, 13 November 1885, 3.

⁴⁶G.P., “Relics of President Lincoln,” letter to *The Washington Post*, 24 January 1886, 4.

late that were giving credence to these false idols. “To supply the extraordinary demand for incidents about poor Mr. Lincoln, the inventors are busily at work,” the author lamented.⁴⁷

In spite of these warnings, fascinating tales of Lincoln relics and their lucky owners poured in from across the country in the late nineteenth century. A correspondent for the *Washington Herald* described his encounter with the pistol and bullet that killed Lincoln in painstaking, reverent detail: the little derringer being of “beautiful workmanship,” the bullet “very much flattened from striking the skull.”⁴⁸ The bedstead upon which Lincoln died was discovered in Syracuse, New York, having been sold several times after its departure from William Petersen’s boardinghouse.⁴⁹ After the clandestine mission of the Lincoln Guard of Honor finally came to light in 1887, Power gave away as a precious relic the key to lock that Kennally’s men had sawed off on their ill-fated body-napping excursion.⁵⁰ Dr. J.B. Mobley, of Fairburn, Georgia, claimed to have in his possession the last money that Lincoln had ever spent: a ten-cent piece that a Union soldier named Charley Lines received in change after purchasing a cigar directly after Mr. Lincoln had purchased a bottle of smelling salts with it at a drug store near Ford’s Theatre.⁵¹ Captain Cobaugh of the Treasury Department kept the flag that tripped Booth during his leap from the presidential box to the stage in a mahogany case in his

⁴⁷“Important Trifles,” *The Washington Post*, 27 February 1887.

⁴⁸“Booth’s Weapons,” *Washington Herald*, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 1886, 2.

⁴⁹“Mementos of Lincoln,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1887, 2.

⁵⁰“The Key to Lincoln’s Tomb,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 September 1887, 16.

⁵¹“The Last Ten Cents,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 4 April 1890, 9.

office, where all could marvel at the small rent in its fabric that Booth's spur tore during his descent.⁵² Mrs. Joseph W. De Lano, of San Francisco, kept a stained three by six piece of moire silk in a gilt frame, supposedly a strip from the dress of Laura Keene, lead actress in the performance on the night that Booth shot Lincoln. Allegedly, Keene rushed to the president's side during the commotion, still wearing her costume, and drops of his blood fell on the dress.⁵³ Rails hewn by Lincoln, walking sticks he favored, and walking sticks made out of rails hewn by Lincoln were in near endless supply.⁵⁴ So numerous were the relics accumulating in Springfield and Washington, D.C. that in 1890 veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic began to agitate for the government to acquire Ford's Theatre and Lincoln's home for the purpose of displaying them and ensuring their safety. They formed the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Hall Association, presenting a petition before Congress stating that the capital city was a center of memory for the Civil War, "where the survivors of the war and their descendants will gather as about a holy shrine."⁵⁵ In Washington, they argued, the "spot most sacred of all others is where Lincoln fell," and therefore Ford Theatre ought to be "known and maintained as the 'Abraham Lincoln Memorial Hall,' wherein shall be gathered and kept memories and

⁵²"Ghastly Relics of the War," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 June 1890, 12.

⁵³"Stained With His Blood," *San Francisco Chronicle*, quoted in *The Washington Post*, 24 August 1892, 4.

⁵⁴See "Pictures at Lincoln's Homestead," *The Chicago News*, 18 October 1887, quoted in the *New York Times*, 25 October 1887, p. 3; "A Cane with a History," *The Washington Post*, 22 June 1890, 9.

⁵⁵John Keogh and M. Emmet Urell, "Lincoln Memorial Hall," *The Washington Post*, 20 July 1890, 5.

mementoes of the martyred President,” as well as a library devoted to books about the war, and a gathering area for veterans.⁵⁶ Congress approved the measure.

Meanwhile, the Lincoln homestead in Springfield was becoming a point of contention between its custodian and the state of Illinois. Captain Osborn H. Oldroyd, who had started a collection of Lincoln memorabilia as early as 1860, found a home for his nascent museum in 1883 when Robert Lincoln consented to rent his parents’ house to him for twenty-five dollars per month. Oldroyd’s love of Lincoln was sincere but his business sense came straight from the handbook of P. T. Barnum; he charged a small entrance fee to those who wished to view the more than two thousand Lincoln objects, pictures, and memorials he had amassed.⁵⁷ He even allowed visitors to purchase little boxes of “Lincoln relics,” which contained fragments of brick, shingles, wood, and trees on the property that Oldroyd claimed he collected during repairs.⁵⁸ He quickly became the bane of Robert Lincoln’s existence. Two years after moving into the Lincoln home Oldroyd stopped paying rent altogether, and to add insult to injury, when Robert Lincoln turned the property over to the state on the condition that it be kept in good repair and free of charge to the public, instead of facing eviction Oldroyd managed to get himself

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Sources differ on how much Oldroyd charged for admission. One article places the amount at ten cents, but others cite it being as much as twenty-five cents. Oldroyd, preferring to cast himself in a less materialistic light, later denied he ever charged a fee at all. See “Lincoln’s Old Home,” *The Washington Post*, 29 August 1887, 1; Tara McClellan McAndrew, “The First Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum,” *The Illinois Times*, 19 November 2008, <<http://www.illinoistimes.com/Springfield/article-5463-the-first-abraham-lincoln-presidential-museum.html>>.

⁵⁸McAndrew, “The First Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.”

installed as the home's official custodian with an annual salary of eighteen hundred dollars.⁵⁹

By 1893, the Lincoln homestead guest book had tallied more than 83,000 signatures, but the newly-installed Democratic government in Illinois decided to expel Oldroyd from his post, intending to offer the custodian position to a party insider. Oldroyd made a counter offer: if the General Assembly kept him on at his current salary, he would will his entire collection to the state at his death. Otherwise, the new custodian would have little to look after besides four walls and a roof. Public opinion swayed decisively in Oldroyd's favor, as the people of Springfield were loath to part with the many Lincoln relics in his collection, but the government held firm. In April 1893 Oldroyd stripped the house of its vast contents—some of which were not his to take—and moved out.⁶⁰ He briefly considered carting his collection to the World's Columbian Exposition, which opened in May of that year, but it was reported that there would already be a substantial Lincoln exhibition in the form of the log cabin where Lincoln lived as a boy, purchased from its Kentucky owner for a thousand dollars and transported to Chicago for the Fair.⁶¹

⁵⁹“Lincoln's Old Home,” *The Washington Post*, 29 August 1887.

⁶⁰According to Susan Haake, current curator of the Lincoln Home National Historic site, Oldroyd “pretty much cleaned house” when evicted from the home in 1893, pilfering at least twenty-five items that belonged to the state, including the cradle which had rocked Eddie, Willie, and Tad Lincoln as infants. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the Lincoln homestead curators succeeded in retrieving most of these stolen items from Washington. See McAndrew, “The First Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.”

⁶¹The Lincoln cabin was brought to Chicago but never reassembled or displayed at the Fair; the public was outraged that the state of Illinois did not exhibit any Lincoln relics or mementoes in its pavilion. In 1894 a newspaper article commented on the “sad fate of a relic” when it came to light that the former dwelling was now a pile of moldering logs in

Instead, Oldroyd moved his Lincoln museum to—where else?—the now-vacant Petersen boarding house in Washington, D.C., across the street from Ford’s Theatre.⁶² He soon returned to his old tricks, once again managing to convince the government to purchase the house and install him as custodian.⁶³ It didn’t take long for his penchant for permanently “appropriating” Lincoln relics that belonged to other people to land him in hot water. In 1896, a Washington-area couple sued him when he refused to return the famous stovepipe hat that Lincoln wore on the night of his assassination to them after he borrowed it for an exhibition.⁶⁴ Amazingly, a judge in the District courts sided with Oldroyd, citing that the couple had exceeded the statute of limitations for attempting to reclaim stolen property.⁶⁵ Finally, in 1908, Oldroyd won his life-long battle to get the government to purchase his relic collection—and to make a tidy profit from selling them. After J. Pierpont Morgan offered Oldroyd a hefty sum for his Lincoln artifacts, Oldroyd

an alley between Michigan and Wabash Avenues. See “Sad Fate of a Relic,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 February 1894, 1; “In the Historic Relic Business,” *The Washington Post*, 11 October 1890, 1; “No Memento of Abraham Lincoln,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 June 1893, 10; Henry C. Whitney, “The World’s Fair and Lincoln,” *The New York Times*, 10 July 1893, 3.

⁶²See McAndrew, “The First Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.”

⁶³See “Should Be Preserved,” *The New York Times*, 26 April 1896, 28; “The House in Which Lincoln Died,” 11 November 1896, 2.

⁶⁴The couple, Emma H. Adams and James O. Adams, was in charge of the Phineas D. Gurley estate. Gurley was the minister of the church that Lincoln attended, and he presided at Lincoln’s deathbed. Mary Todd Lincoln gave him Lincoln’s hat a few days after the president’s death. See “Abraham Lincoln’s Hat,” *The Washington Post*, 1 March 1896, 14.

⁶⁵Mr. and Mrs. Adams had loaned the hat to the Smithsonian for many years before transferring it to Oldroyd’s care. The judge felt that the couple should have attempted to reclaim the hat from the Smithsonian when they discovered that its object label no longer attributed it to the Gurley estate. See “History of a Lincoln Hat,” *The New York Times*, 17 October 1896, 1.

confided to the press that many such millionaires had approached him for the same reason, but he was holding out hope that Congress would authorize the acquisition of his relics in honor of Lincoln's centenary. "I have no selfish motive in view when I suggest that the government should own the collection," Oldroyd protested, perhaps too much. "I want the government to own the relics and to establish a free museum that the people of the nation may be benefited thereby."⁶⁶ His faith was rewarded. A few days before Lincoln's birthday in 1909, Congress voted to appropriate \$150,000 for the purchase of Oldroyd's relics. The Petersen house, by contrast, had cost only \$30,000.⁶⁷

With Lincoln relics selling for such enormous sums, it's not surprising that Oldroyd's court case over the stovepipe hat was far from the last dispute over the material trappings of Lincoln or the veracity of such items. In June 1908 Charles Taft, the son of one of Lincoln's doctors, sued an associate over the proceeds of a sale of a lock of Lincoln's hair and one of his cufflinks.⁶⁸ In 1924 the Chicago History Society investigated when an auctioneer in Philadelphia sold "the coat worn by Lincoln when he was shot," despite the fact that a garment with an identical claim to fame was already in their collection. Both the Chicago coat and the Philadelphia coat supposedly were given to White House doorkeepers, who then sold the relics on to their respective owners.⁶⁹ Finally, in 1929, the pen with which Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation was back in the news—except this time, it had multiplied. When New York City's Anderson

⁶⁶"Holds Lincoln Relics," *The Washington Post*, 30 June 1908, 2.

⁶⁷"U.S. To Buy Lincoln Relics," *The Sun*, 6 February 1909, 2.

⁶⁸"Suit Over Lincoln Relics," *The Washington Post*, 30 June 1908, 2.

⁶⁹"New Lincoln Coat Starts a Dispute," *The New York Times*, 21 February 1924, 36.

Galleries put an Emancipation Pen that Lincoln supposedly gave to a White House messenger up for auction, Mrs. Stuart Pritchard of Battle Creek, Michigan, protested that *she* was in possession of the genuine Emancipation Proclamation pen, the writing implement having been a gift from Mary Todd Lincoln to her grandmother. A third pen, which claimed antislavery Senator Charles A. Sumner as its provenance, had been auctioned in Philadelphia in 1924 by James Wormley, an African American hotel owner from Washington, D.C. “Still a fourth pen, also called genuine, is said to exist in the West,” reported the *New York Times*.⁷⁰

Why did these faux pens proliferate? Three of them were certainly fakes, and there is no way of telling whether *any* of them were really the genuine Emancipation Proclamation pen. Other than the fact that it was easy to make up an exceptional provenance for an ordinary old-fashioned pen and sell it at a great profit, the Emancipation Proclamation pen’s prominence as a relic, genuine or not, suggests that freeing the slaves still was perceived as Lincoln’s signal achievement, at least among those who counted themselves as Lincoln devotees. Of the many important pens Lincoln used during his lifetime, as he wrote the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural—two of the most famous and celebrated speeches in the English language—the relic important enough to merit forgery was the Emancipation Proclamation pen. In the 1920s, when the second Ku Klux Klan’s membership was soaring in response to white Protestant racial fears brought on by the influx of southern African Americans and

⁷⁰“Lincoln’s Emancipation Pen Disputed; Woman in West Protests Sale of One Here.” *New York Times*, 26 February 1929, 21.

Catholic and Jewish European immigrants to American cities, the value placed on a relic dedicated to Lincoln's role in emancipating slaves strikes a note of hope.⁷¹

African Americans also participated in the Lincoln relic craze, perhaps in an even more directly religious fashion. In 1897, the *New York Times* reported that "the finest church ever erected for the negro race" was to be built in Springfield, at a cost of \$50,000.⁷² The plan for the Lincoln Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church included seating for a thousand congregants, a library, a reading room, a night school, a gymnasium, and a bureau to aid ex-slaves in finding lost relatives. Its narthex would feature a public museum with "a complete collection of slavery relics and books."⁷³ A stained glass triptych window would feature a life-size portrait of Lincoln, with John Brown and Frederick Douglass flanking him. Like a medieval church, which traditionally contained a saint's relic in or near the altar, the pulpit of the A.M.E. church planned for Springfield came from two sites important to the abolition of slavery. The pulpit itself would be made out of material brought from Harper's Ferry, Virginia, where John Brown led a raid on a U.S. arsenal in hopes of starting an armed slave rebellion.⁷⁴ The pulpit chairs would be made out of material from Lincoln's old home in New Salem,

⁷¹For more about the rise of the KKK in the 1920s, see Nancy McLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: the Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁷²"Negro Memorial Church," *New York Times*, 12 March 1897, 2.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴For more on John Brown and his raid, see Robert E. McGlone, *John Brown's War against Slavery*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Illinois.⁷⁵ The stained glass window placed Lincoln in the position usually occupied by Jesus in the church, substituting one martyr's relics for those of another.

African American newspapers also covered stories about the growing traffic in Lincoln relics, noting with special interest items in the possession of members of the black community. The *Washington Bee* reported that Mrs. Savala Vandever, of Montgomery, Missouri, owned the ax with which Lincoln had split rails while working for William Smith, and declined to lend it for exhibition at the World's Fair.⁷⁶ Cassius Irving, a resident of Metamora, Illinois, started collecting relics late in the nineteenth century, including a letter Lincoln wrote, dated 1863, and a four-post bed from a tavern where Lincoln reputedly slept.⁷⁷ In early fall 1915, "hundreds of relics of the martyred president" were shown at an exposition celebrating "fifty years of freedom for the colored race in America."⁷⁸ This "Lincoln Jubilee" showcased a program from the fatal night at Ford's Theatre as well as the bed on which Lincoln died, but more importantly it showcased the many achievements of African Americans in art, science, and education since the end of the Civil War.⁷⁹

Despite this show of reverence toward Lincoln relics, some African American commentators worried that the nationwide mania for Lincoln's stuff was taking the place of real devotion to the principles the Great Emancipator had espoused. The editors of the

⁷⁵"Negro Memorial Church," 2.

⁷⁶"Paragraphic." *The Washington Bee*, 5 May 1915, 5.

⁷⁷"Letter Written By Lincoln." *Rising Son*, 6 February 1903, 6.

⁷⁸"Views of Bishop Fallows," *Oakland Sunshine*, 24 July 1915, 4.

⁷⁹See *Lincoln Jubilee Album: 50th Anniversary of Our Emancipation*. Chicago: John H. Ballard, 1915.

Indianapolis *Freeman* marked the city's exhibition of the Lincoln birth cabin with a note of weary contempt. When the cabin came to town, they remarked that they had no interest in seeing it, not "due to any lack of appreciation of the man whose name is associated with this historic relic," but because they felt that "hauling Lincoln's cabin around and gazing on its remodeled form" would not advance the cause of fairness, honesty, and kindness that characterized the spirit of Lincoln. "To us it seems a half sacrilege to take this cabin from the place where it was erected, and cart it around over the country," they continued:

Does such a performance do honor to him or show that we really admire his character and revere his name? "If you love me keep my commandments." If those who flock to see this cabin would only put as much effort in an attempt to practice the commandments of which his life was the expression it would show that they loved him, and that what they do was prompted by something higher than mere curiosity. The conduct of the American people is sufficient proof that they are not concerned about the virtues of Lincoln. So while they crowd to get a look at the cabin we will sit and think on the sad, calm face of him who loved his fellow man.⁸⁰

To the editors of the *Freeman*, a Lincoln relic was only important so long as it served the purpose of putting people in touch with his true spirit.

In fact, all of these Lincoln relics derived their value and earned the fascination of the masses due to their perceived ability to both contain and confer something of the spirit of Lincoln. Seeing, owning, and even touching an object that had once been in the presence of Lincoln seemingly made it easier to feel Lincoln's presence, to possess a direct conduit to the most famous and revered American in the nation's history. These invisible powers transformed the material trappings of Lincoln's life into more than mere objects: they became true relics.

⁸⁰"Lincoln's Cabin." *The Freeman*, vol. XIX, no. 24 (16 June 1906), 4.

His Mighty Presence

It was a cold, wintery March evening in 1927 when Fred L. Holmes arrived in Springfield, Illinois. Holmes was a newspaperman from Madison, Wisconsin, a journalist with a law degree and an abiding love of Lincoln. He spent the bulk of his free time during the twenties driving his little roadster, which he nicknamed “The Pilgrim,” to various sites associated with Lincoln’s life.⁸¹ For months, he had dreamed of “what a consummation of longing would come from a visit to Springfield,” and he was finally there. It was late night when The Pilgrim entered the city limits, but Holmes could not sleep; he felt he had to go out into the misty night and “walk the damp streets and alleys, survey the buildings, and scan the threatening March sky which, in another March ninety years before, had meant so much in the life of the tall, gaunt young man of twenty-eight,” Lincoln’s age when he first rode into town in 1837.⁸²

What began as a bit of research for a magazine article turned into a full-blown obsession. Holmes’s journalistic instincts did him credit; he recorded his Lincoln pilgrimages in a “log book” that he eventually published in 1931. In its foreword, Glenn Frank—president of the University of Wisconsin and Holmes’s friend—suggested that these trips brought Lincoln to life again, both for Holmes and for his readers. “On repeated pilgrimages to the places Lincoln lived in and loved,” Frank wrote, “Lincoln has come to life for Mr. Holmes, and has become, for him, not a dim figure in a text-book,

⁸¹Fred L. Holmes, *Abraham Lincoln Traveled This Way: The Log Book of a Pilgrim to the Lincoln Country* (Boston: L. C. Page & Co., 1931), vii.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 76.

but a living source of spiritual nutriment. He transfers this quality of aliveness to his book.⁸³

Indeed, Holmes's narrative is full of moments when he feels that he is able to sense Lincoln's spirit when visiting the places where the president lived and worked. In Springfield, Holmes felt as though he saw Lincoln peeking out at him from every corner. He was elated when he managed to convince the artist whose studio had once been Lincoln's law office to allow him to do homage there. She showed him where Lincoln's desk had been located under a skylight, which rendered him speechless with reverence. "Ushered so quickly into such a presence one feels a sense of the sublime; a stillness humbles one as if listening to mighty words," he wrote. "Though the dark office has been transformed by an artist's touch, the spirit of Lincoln pervades . . . these venerable precincts."⁸⁴

The law office was far from the only stop on Holmes's itinerary. In his book of twenty-five chapters, Holmes recorded his visits to the log cabin where Lincoln was born, his mother's grave, the town of New Salem, the battlefield at Gettysburg, among many other sites of Lincoln interest. He went to the White House and to Ford's Theatre, and even met up with an aged Osborn H. Oldroyd to see his collection of relics.⁸⁵

Everywhere Holmes went his imagination did the work of resurrecting Lincoln. Standing in the courtroom in Vandalia, Illinois, where Lincoln had made his first political speeches opposing slavery as a representative to the Illinois legislature, Holmes found himself

⁸³Glenn Frank, foreword to Holmes, *Abraham Lincoln Traveled This Way*, xii.

⁸⁴Holmes, *Abraham Lincoln Traveled This Way*, 233-234.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 310-312.

“straining to catch the warning echo of a voice that has long gone.”⁸⁶ He went to Cooper Union in New York City and watched the students walk by; he mused that they “tread in the footsteps of Lincoln.”⁸⁷ In Washington D.C., he followed the pathway that Lincoln trod daily, from the White House to the telegraph office, before finally visiting the Lincoln Memorial. “If ever you feel as though ushered into divine precincts, it will be when you pass those marble pillars at the entrance to the central hall,” Holmes wrote. “In the silence of the open view the strange influence of Lincoln abounds. There is no longer an escape from the spirit of his mighty presence.”⁸⁸

Holmes’s journey in search of Lincoln’s “mighty presence” was but one of many pilgrimages taken to sites associated with Lincoln. Starting in the early twentieth century, individuals began to visit the locations of Lincoln’s young life, career, and death, retracing his steps to experience firsthand the scenic backdrop of his extraordinary life. Some pilgrims went only to one site, others to each in sequence, the better to follow Lincoln’s long road to the White House. Some went for political reasons, to “get right with Lincoln,” as one Republican Congressman once put it.⁸⁹ Others, like Holmes, went for personal reasons, attempting to capture some trace of the spirit of Lincoln for

⁸⁶Ibid., 74. Before Lincoln helped to lobby to move the state capital to Springfield, the Illinois government met in Vandalia.

⁸⁷Ibid., 168.

⁸⁸Ibid., 275-276.

⁸⁹Everett Dirksen, quoted in David Herbert Donald, “Getting Right With Lincoln,” in *Lincoln Reconsidered, Essays on the Civil War Era*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 3-14.

themselves by following in his footsteps.⁹⁰ American schoolchildren were sent en masse to Lincoln's old haunts to learn the ways of ideal citizenship. And the formerly enslaved and their descendants went to Lincoln shrines to keep the memory of his role in emancipation alive.

All of these motivations share one thing with religious pilgrimage, both medieval and modern: the desire to earn a spiritual boon from what medieval historian Peter Brown calls the "Very Special Dead."⁹¹ Those who went in search of Lincoln's presence at his old haunts went a step farther down the religious pilgrimage route by reproducing the medieval notion that the invisible departed were present at their shrines. "*Praesentia*, the physical presence of the holy . . . was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy," according to Brown. "The devotees who flocked out of Rome to the shrine of Saint Lawrence, to ask for his favor or to place their dead near his grave, were not merely going to a place; they were going to a place to *meet a person*."⁹² Just as a relic or an object associated with Lincoln was valued for its imagined conduit to his spirit, so were the locations he lived and the tomb that held his bones regarded as dwelling places for his ghost. Lincoln's old haunts were literally haunted.

As Lincoln's 100th birthday celebration neared, plans to mark his old stomping grounds crisscrossed the American landscape. Gone was the era of hucksters shilling visits to Lincoln's log cabin for ten cents or charging a quarter for the opportunity to sit

⁹⁰See Holmes, *Lincoln Traveled This Way*.

⁹¹See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 69-85.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 88, italics mine.

in Lincoln's chair.⁹³ The age of the Lincoln Barnums had passed; somber and dignified institutions of American culture and refinement rose in its place.⁹⁴ In 1908, Kentucky announced that it planned to enshrine the log cabin where Lincoln was born (now known to be inauthentic) in the marble neoclassical temple where it resides today. "It is believed that the Lincoln farm memorial will have such a significance and endurance as to make it a Mecca for American citizens so long as the republic lasts," speculated the *Baltimore Sun*.⁹⁵ New Salem, Illinois, the abandoned and dilapidated village where Lincoln had lived as a young man, was rebuilt as a living history museum dedicated to his stay there.⁹⁶ In 1908, Congressman Daniel Lafean, of York, Pennsylvania, planned to present a bill appropriating \$7,000,000 for a roadway between Washington, D.C. and the battlefield at Gettysburg, where Lincoln had made "the greatest speech of any time in any tongue."⁹⁷ Gettysburg was not then easily accessible by road or rail, and Lafean wished to accommodate pilgrims by constructing a 150 foot-wide road "straight as an arrow" from

⁹³A chair said to be Lincoln's upholstered easy chair from his home in Springfield was given to a charitable fair in Chicago, which charged twenty-five cents for the privilege of sitting in the chair. The money was donated "for the benefit of Southern families." See "Relic for Lincoln Club," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6 March 1899, 10.

⁹⁴For more on the rise of "high culture" institutions such as fine art museums and the opera, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁹⁵"A Magnificent Setting for the Lincoln Cabin," *The Sun*, 16 February 1908, 15.

⁹⁶See "Lincoln's Town of New Salem Back On Map," *The Sun*, 3 January 1921, 6; James O'Donnell Bennett, "State Cherishes Village Lincoln Loved in Youth," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 August 1926, 5.

⁹⁷Elbert Hubbard, quoted in "Plans National Road From Washington To Gettysburg As A Memorial To Lincoln," *The Sun*, 26 July 1908, 15.

the White House to the battlefield.⁹⁸ This grand highway plan, however, was eventually defeated by a different proposal to honor Lincoln in the nation's capital: the Lincoln Memorial, completed in 1922.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, pilgrims began taking to highways and byways in search of Lincoln, making a ritual of their treks. The rise in automobile ownership among Americans gave them the opportunity to take sightseeing excursions, and the Midwestern states where Lincoln had lived promoted this type of pilgrimage by assembling highway routes that brought travelers to the locations associated with his life.¹⁰⁰ In 1911, the Illinois General Assembly joined with Kentucky in adopting a joint resolution “that a fitting and permanent memorial to the memory of the great emancipator would be the consecration and dedication of the route that he traveled from the place of his birth in Kentucky, through Indiana, and thence to his tomb at Springfield, to be known forever as the ‘Lincoln Way.’”¹⁰¹ To that end, they commissioned the Board of Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library to determine the exact route that Abraham Lincoln traveled from Kentucky to Illinois. It took three years for its lead investigator, Charles M. Thompson, to research and verify his findings as to which “roads, travels, ferries, fords, rivers and settlements” the Lincoln family used or occupied while making their

⁹⁸“Plans National Road,” 15.

⁹⁹For more on the storied history of the Lincoln Memorial, see Christopher A. Thomas, *The Lincoln Memorial & American Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

¹⁰⁰See Nancy Hill, “The Transformation of the Lincoln Tomb,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Winter, 2006), <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0027.105>>.

¹⁰¹Charles M. Thompson, *The Investigation of the Lincoln Way* (Springfield, IL: The Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1915), viii.

journey across three states when the president was a boy.¹⁰² There was some difference of opinion as to exactly where and how the Lincolns forded the Wabash River into Illinois, as later reports of various members of the traveling party disagreed about their location relative to Vincennes. That minor scuffle paled in comparison with the dispute over which of three possible routes they took north from Lawrenceville.¹⁰³ To come to his final recommendations, Thompson consulted contemporary maps and gazetteers, court records, surveyors' papers, and dozens of affidavits from the friends, family, traveling companions, and the individuals the Lincolns met along the way. After all, marking out the correct Lincoln Way was serious business. Accuracy was not only a matter of doing right by the memory of Lincoln; Kentucky, Illinois, and Indiana expected Thompson's route to become a pilgrimage trail frequented by thousands of tourists per year who would spend their hard-earned cash on food, souvenirs, and lodging. Better to rely on the historians to map the Lincoln Way than to field the complaints of irate town councils and businesses whose local lore about Lincoln's travels demanded they get a bigger piece of the pie.

Between 1907 and 1924, the annual number of visitors to Lincoln's tomb rose from 20,000 to over 100,000, and by 1926 that number had increased to over 150,000 a year.¹⁰⁴ Herbert Wells Fay, the tomb's custodian during the 1920s, estimated that more

¹⁰²Ibid., 1.

¹⁰³Ibid., 3-8.

¹⁰⁴“Visitors to Lincoln Tomb,” *The Sun*, 30 November 1924, p. PF3; James O'Donnell Bennett, “Lincoln Tomb World's Shrine of Common Man,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1926, 3.

than 400 pilgrims visited the monument on an average day, and nearly 2,000 came on national holidays like the Fourth of July.¹⁰⁵

The tomb was far from the only place drawing Lincoln pilgrims. Osborn H. Oldroyd, by this time seventy-one years old, made headlines in 1913 by walking 250 miles from Washington, D.C. to Newark, New Jersey to see Gutzon Borglum's statue of "Old Abe" in that city. He proudly reported that it took him nine days to complete the task, made rather uncomfortable by a great deal of rain and mud. He took the train home.¹⁰⁶ Fred L. Holmes followed suit with his little roadster during the 1920s, treating each Lincoln stop as though it had magical properties. At the Kentucky log cabin shrine, he even stopped to drink of the "crystalline waters" of the spring where Lincoln supposedly dipped water as a boy, as if through sipping the elixir he could taste Lincoln's spirit.¹⁰⁷ In the 1930s, Louis A. Warren, a notable Lincoln scholar and collector, felt that traveling to the sites of Lincoln's life alone did not fully capture the magnitude of the Great Emancipator's sacred destiny. He organized a ten day pilgrimage to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's ancestor, weaver's apprentice Samuel Lincoln, arriving in the New World in 1637. The pilgrimage, which started at Samuel Lincoln's port of entry in Boston, Massachusetts, and wended its way through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, paused "at each home

¹⁰⁵Bennett, "Lincoln's Tomb World's Shrine," 3.

¹⁰⁶"At 71 He Walks 250 Miles To See Statue of Abraham Lincoln," *The Washington Post*, 31 October 1913, 4.

¹⁰⁷Holmes, *Abraham Lincoln Traveled This Way*, 11.

place in the direct male line down to that of President Abraham Lincoln.”¹⁰⁸ This included the homes of Samuel Lincoln, Mordecai Lincoln Sr. and Jr., John Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln the first, Thomas Lincoln, and finally Abraham Lincoln the second, who would become president of the United States. At each stop, Warren planned for a celebration and a pageant depicting “some incident of the life of the family,” at that location to entertain the group of pilgrims.¹⁰⁹

During this period of increased Lincoln pilgrimage, politicians from around the world went to “see Lincoln” to in order to pay their respects. In 1922, Georges Clemenceau, the former prime minister of France, laid a wreath on Lincoln’s tomb in Springfield, explaining that he “came in souvenir of the valiant men who fell on the fields of France in the same cause for which he was murdered,” during the First World War. In return, he was presented with a Lincoln relic, a piece of wood taken from the Lincoln home.¹¹⁰ England’s prime minister during the same conflict, David Lloyd George, visited Springfield in 1923. The *New York Times* reported that Lloyd George “laid aside all of his ordinary occupations today to become a humble and reverend pilgrim to the shrine of Abraham Lincoln” in Oakridge Cemetery.¹¹¹ These European leaders correctly identified Lincoln as the central figure in the American national character, and paid

¹⁰⁸R. C. Ballard Thruston and Thomas C. Fisher, *Pilgrimage Conducted June 20-30, 1937, by Louis A. Warren, D.D., LL.D. On the 300th Anniversary of The Lincolns Landing in America*. Louisville, KY: Press of John P. Morton & Company, Inc., 1937, 3.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

¹¹⁰“Clemenceau at Lincoln’s Tomb,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 1922, I7.

¹¹¹“Lloyd George Pays Homage to Lincoln,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1923, 21.

tribute to his shrine as a synecdoche for the American spirit that contributed to the Allied victory in World War I.

Politicians from within the United States came to visit the spirit of Lincoln at his tomb as well, both to capture a bit of the public esteem for Lincoln through association and to look for guidance from Lincoln's spirit in times of calamity. During the Great Depression, the Republican Party was in crisis, having lost public faith following Herbert Hoover's inadequate approach to the economic disaster, and subsequently the presidency to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1935, a "grass-roots" conference of Republicans from nine Midwestern states met at Lincoln's tomb to "gird for [the presidential election of] 1936."¹¹² They hoped that by reflecting on the spirit of the first Republican president, they could bring "the party back to the people and the people back to the party" through a pilgrimage to the Lincoln shrine.¹¹³ In the declaration made by the conference organizers, they stated that they selected Springfield as their meeting location because "There Republicans may make a pilgrimage to Lincoln's tomb; may consider the principles upon which he ordered his life and action; may visualize his presence and rededicate themselves in the spirit of his broad patriotism and humanitarianism to the service of their fellow-Americans in this critical time."¹¹⁴ Raymond Clapper, a journalist for *The Washington Post*, joked that the Republicans were going to Springfield like Ponce de Leon in search of the fountain of youth. "Skipping back over the achievements of more recent Republican presidents," he wrote, "the Republicans are snuggling under

¹¹²"Republicans to Go to Lincoln Shrine," *New York Times*, 29 April 1935, 4.

¹¹³*Ibid.*

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

the Lincoln monument, visiting Lincoln's home here, using a gavel of walnut made from the house where he was married. . . . It is as if they hoped that by some magic the spirit of the first Republican President would infuse fresh life into his political descendants."¹¹⁵

If the spirit of Lincoln was indeed present in Springfield, he did not bless their endeavors; Roosevelt defeated the Republicans once again in 1936. On his own campaign trail, Roosevelt stopped at the Lincoln birth cabin in Kentucky—perhaps more eager to associate himself with the hope for the future signified by the place where Lincoln started his life than the moribund past of a grave, where the Republicans were digging for the corpse of their party. At the birth shrine, Roosevelt gave a speech affirming that “I have taken from this cabin renewed confidence that the spirit of America is not dead, that men and means will be found to explore and conquer the problems of a new time with no less humanity and no less fortitude than his.”¹¹⁶ Although both the Republicans and the Democrats turned to Lincoln as a symbol in the 1936 election, there was a notable difference in where they went looking for Lincoln's spirit and the message they gleaned from it.

Even if pilgrimage to Lincoln's tomb could not save the Republican Party, it still played a role in helping its visitors envision themselves as belonging to a patriotic American community. There was a widespread belief, made evident by the droves of Boy Scouts who visited Lincoln's tomb every year, that bringing children into contact with Lincoln's grave could help them to understand how an ideal American lived and

¹¹⁵Raymond Clapper, “How Parties Live and Why—Deals Discussed at G.O.P. Shrine in Illinois.” *The Washington Post*, 10 June 1935, 2.

¹¹⁶“Visits Lincoln Cabin: Roosevelt, at Kentucky Shrine, ‘Renews Confidence’ in Future.” *The New York Times*, 15 June 1936, 5.

prompt them to embrace his version of ideal citizenship. Starting in the 1920s, children from across the nation traveled to Oakridge Cemetery to learn about Lincoln and pay their respects. In 1924, the Kiwanis club sponsored a trip for 1,850 children from Missouri and Iowa to make a pilgrimage to the home and tomb of Lincoln, riding on three special trains.¹¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, seventy Boy Scouts from Chicago traveled in a special rail car down to Springfield, watching a film about Lincoln's life during their journey and placing a wreath on the grave's cenotaph.¹¹⁸ The following year, more than 1,000 members of the DeMolay fraternal order of young men from more than fifty cities in the Midwest visited Lincoln's home as part of its citizenship program, after which they heard an address from the governor of Illinois, Len Small, at Lincoln's tomb.¹¹⁹ In 1927, Chicago sent 500 of its high school students on a pilgrimage to Kentucky to "trace the entire early life of the Emancipator," according to the head of the department of civic training of Lane Technical High School. The pilgrimages made by teenagers and especially Boy Scouts continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s, growing in scope until the 1959 Boy Scout Lincoln Pilgrimage, on the sesquicentennial of Lincoln's birth, boasted over 10,000 attendees.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷"Child Pilgrims Visit the Tomb of Lincoln, Coming From Iowa and Missouri by Train." *The New York Times*, 29 November 1924, 15.

¹¹⁸"Chicago Boy Scouts Salute Lincoln's Tomb," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 December 1924, 17.

¹¹⁹"Boys Visit Lincoln's Home: 1,000 Members of De Molay Order Attend Springfield, Ill, Services." *New York Times*, 13 February 1925, 5.

¹²⁰"10,000 Scouts at Abe's Tomb," *The Chicago Defender* (national edition), 9 May 1959, 9.

These ceremonies, which were frequently sponsored by fraternal orders or civic clubs, were largely white affairs; sixteen year old Palmer Jackson, Jr., a black Eagle Scout from San Francisco, made headlines when the San Francisco Youth Association chose him to represent the state of California at the 1959 pilgrimage. There, with his fellow scouts, he visited the courthouse where Lincoln practiced, took a tour of New Salem Village, and attended a special luncheon with Illinois governor William Stratton.¹²¹

Although Jackson's trip was treated as an anomaly, African Americans also went on Lincoln pilgrimages, but often to different Lincoln sites to celebrate different moments in Lincoln's life than white pilgrims. When James O'Donnell Bennett, a white correspondent for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, visited the Lincoln tomb in Springfield, he saw "little grounds of pilgrims on foot, several colored people among them, and I wondered—not so idly—whether this is not the one place in this republic where those people feel thoroughly welcome."¹²² Black writers did not agree with Bennett's assessment. Perhaps the African Americans he met at the Lincoln monument felt welcomed, but black visitors to Springfield were not impressed with its hospitality. Joseph D. Bibb of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the most widely-circulated black newspaper in the United States, wrote that "Colored Americans, who hold the memory of Abraham Lincoln sacred, and treasure the famous annals of his day in Sangamon Country, have

¹²¹"West Coast Scout to see Lincoln tomb," *Afro-American*, 25 April, 1959, 14.

¹²²Bennett, "Lincoln Tomb World's Shrine of Common Man," 3.

found Springfield a city of disillusion.”¹²³ He wrote that restaurants and places of public amusement routinely denied service to African American citizens in Springfield, where hotels even turned away the black representatives to the Illinois legislature. “Springfield mocks the memory of Lincoln,” Bibb declared.¹²⁴

Undeterred, African Americans made pilgrimages to Lincoln sites and statues to do honor to the memory of Lincoln the Emancipator. Frequently, they visited the same places that drew white visitors, but on different anniversaries: instead of Lincoln’s birthday or the Fourth of July, African Americans celebrated on September 22 or January 1, the dates in 1862 and 1863 on which Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and when it went into effect. In 1924, thousands of people participated in ceremonies laying wreaths on Lincoln’s statues and reading the Emancipation Proclamation aloud in New York, Brooklyn, Boston, Newark, and Springfield.¹²⁵

Individuals also made solitary pilgrimages, intent on reflecting on Lincoln’s role in ending slavery. In January 1937, Mrs. Anna Chase went to visit the Soldiers’ Home, the summer house in Washington, D.C. where Lincoln had written the first drafts of the Emancipation Proclamation. She was ninety-two years old, and had been enslaved as a young woman in Virginia before the Civil War. Her visit, on the seventy-fourth anniversary of the day when the Proclamation took effect, surprised the caretaker. “Not

¹²³Joseph D. Bibb, “Springfield, Cradle of Lincoln Traditions, Needs Liberalizing.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 October 1948, 7. For more on the *Courier*, see “Newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier.” PBS, *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*. <http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/courier.html>

¹²⁴Bibb, “Springfield,” 7.

¹²⁵“Many Cities Celebrate Emancipation Day,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 4 October 1924, 3.

many people come out here in winter,” he said.¹²⁶ Mrs. Chase was unlikely to be fazed by the chill; she was made of sterner stuff. During the war, when the enslaved men and women on the Taylor plantation learned that their owner had died in battle, they hitched up an ox cart and headed north to Washington. There, she saw Lincoln almost every day riding out to the Soldiers’ Home during the summer of 1862, and she and her companions shed tears of joy when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Sixty years later, Mrs. Chase came back to the Soldiers’ Home in hopes of keeping the memory of the horrors of slavery alive, in an era when books like *Gone with the Wind* romanticized the “moonlight and magnolias” of the Old South. “They tell me I should not talk so much about the days when I was a slave,” Mrs. Chase said. “But I can truly tell you of those days. I’ve seen my aunts and cousins sold on the block in shackles. I’ve seen my people lashed and shot. I know what slavery was. It was not our fault that we were held down. I’m proud to see my people rising.”¹²⁷ Despite pressure to sugarcoat or even forget about the injustices of slavery, Mrs. Chase used her pilgrimage to keep the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation at the forefront of the narrative of Lincoln’s life.

The story of Lincoln pilgrimage and Civil Rights did not end with Mrs. Chase. The 1963 March on Washington, during which the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, made an explicit appeal to Lincoln’s spirit, as symbolized by the monument, to witness their call for racial justice. Years before the March on Washington, however, there was another gathering at the Lincoln Memorial. Organized in 1957 by Dr. King and Roy

¹²⁶James J. Cullinane, “Former Woman Slave, 92, Pays Tribute to Lincoln,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), 16 January 1937, 18.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

Wilkins, Secretary of the NAACP, to mark the third anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling without southern compliance, this event was dubbed the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. The Department of the Interior attempted to prevent them from holding a demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial, citing the inconvenience it would cause to tourists, but the NAACP held out, arguing that "the symbolic value of the Lincoln Memorial for this meeting was of tremendous importance in overcoming the despair, disillusionment and anger which have been generated by recent acts of racial violence and intimidation in the South."¹²⁸ On May 17, 1957, thirty thousand people gathered in front of the Memorial to pray "in the presence of the memory of Abraham Lincoln and of the God and father of our people" for "deliverance from the cancer of racism."¹²⁹ As befitted the religious ceremony of pilgrimage, the event's program explicitly discouraged applause.¹³⁰

Despite its religious overtones, the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom at the Lincoln Memorial emerged as a symbol that the African American community's patience was growing thin. "The pilgrimage is a warning under the guide of religious fervor that black America is ready for the ultimate test—that is the Negro is a either a full citizen in the

¹²⁸Clarence Mitchell, quoted in Scott A. Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory." *The Journal of American History*. Vol. 80, no. 1 (June, 1993), 154.

¹²⁹"'Prayer Pilgrimage' to Nation's Capital Launched; Rev. L. Sylvester Odom to Chair Northwest Effort,' press release, April 29, 1957, box A245, group III, NAACP Papers; Mordecai Johnson, remarks at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, May 17, 1957, quoted in Sandage, "A Marble House Divided," 154.

¹³⁰"Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., May 17, 1957, 12 Noon, Program:' box 157, NAACP Washington Bureau Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress), quoted in Sandage, "A Marble House Divided," 154.

context of democracy or he is not,” wrote the editor of the *Chicago Daily Defender*.¹³¹

Little wonder that the March on Washington would focus on the same spot as the Prayer Pilgrimage six years later.

All of these trips, from Fred Holmes’s inspirational wanderings around the heartland haunts of Lincoln, to the Republican Party’s frenzied attempt to put the G.O.P. genie back into its bottle, to Mrs. Chase’s visit to the Soldiers’ Home in her delightfully outspoken old age, acted as a pilgrimage for their questing travelers. They went not only in search of a place with a storied history but also in search of an animating spirit at that place, a force that they believed would change their lives and perhaps their fortunes. Like the erstwhile objects from Lincoln’s life that survived as relics, the sites connected with his too-brief existence have taken on more than just the patina of the past. Instead, pilgrims have flocked to them in hopes of coming into contact with the spirit of Lincoln, real or imagined, and to find guidance, hope, and a place in the American community.

Conclusion

I packed my bags and left Springfield on a dreary Sunday morning. After my memorable trips to the Lincoln Museum and the Lincoln Tomb, I spent the rest of my time poking through box after box of relics saved in the basement of the Lincoln Presidential Library with the help of its head curator. There were hundreds of pieces of wood saved from cabins, houses, and felled trees that claimed some association with Lincoln. At some point I stopped taking pictures—I had seen enough relics to last me a lifetime. If any of these objects really did hold onto some part of the essence of Lincoln,

¹³¹“Prayer Pilgrimage: Its Meaning,” *Daily Defender*, 20 May 1957, 11.

I was going to start growing a beard. The library's administrator, who happened to be the den mother of a local Girl Scout troop, presented me with my first ever merit badge (at the age of twenty-seven) after hearing about my walk to the Tomb.

On the plane home, I thought about relics and pilgrims, about the need to touch the intangible and to meet with the missing. Despite my burst of patriotism on the Fourth of July, I had walked around Springfield with my tongue planted firmly in my cheek, enduring the slings and arrows of a thousand Lincoln-themed trinkets. But it is important to remember that behind the kitsch, there remains a serious cultural process. Before anyone had built the Lincoln museum or the gift shop or even the twelve-story tall obelisk that tops the tomb, they had come: the pilgrims and the relic-hunters, searching for a piece of the past they could walk on or hold in their hands, searching for spaces and talismans that could transport a spirit from the past into their lives in the present.

After all, you don't have to wear black to be a ghost hunter. The hunt for Lincoln's ghost in the material objects and spaces associated with his life suggests an alternate dimension to how Americans have interacted with their own history beyond travel and tourism. The pilgrims to Lincoln country demonstrate how the events of the past are inextricably bound with the contemporary landscape, yoking together time and space to form an imagined terrain peopled with ghosts. This is more than going to a battlefield to see geography bathed with the blood of history; it is, as Peter Brown said of pilgrimage, going to a place to meet a person.¹³² The Lincoln pilgrims show how the historical things and sites we treasure are suffused with a sense of presence that exceeds the bounds of memory.

¹³² See Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 69-85.

But what that presence is, and what it means, remains firmly wedged within the possibilities of the imagination. All of those who went looking for Lincoln in his home, tomb, or among his belongings found exactly what they expected to find, no matter how different: Mrs. Chase found the spirit of Emancipation at the Soldiers' Home, and the Republican Party found the spirit of small government at Lincoln's tomb. The Boy Scouts found an exemplar of American citizenship, and Osborn Oldroyd found an opportunity to make a buck. Fred Holmes found inspiration for a great life, and Big Jim Kennally found inspiration for a great crime. For each of them, Lincoln was what they made of him. Whether these trips engendered the kind of *communitas* that Victor and Edith Turner predicted as the natural result of pilgrimage is up for debate: perhaps these hopeful travelers found community with those who agreed with their idea of what Lincoln ought to mean to them, but they also profoundly disagreed across lines of race and class as to what that meaning should be.

As my plane glided east across the Appalachians toward home, I wondered if the experience of pilgrimage had transformed me as promised. It was hard to tell. After years of studying Abraham Lincoln, I had finally walked on the streets where he had walked and held in my hands a few of the things he had touched. Even on the ghost tour of Springfield, ever alert for the slightest tingle indicating the presence of the paranormal, I had never felt the sensation that Lincoln was looking over my shoulder. But in my wanderings among Lincoln's old haunts, I found something else: a comfort in the utterly ordinary places and circumstances that had produced an extraordinary person. If Abraham Lincoln walked this way, so could anyone.

Epilogue

On a frigid February day in 2007, Barack Obama announced his intention to run for president from the steps of the Old State Capitol in Illinois. The yellow limestone Greek Revival building has been a historic site for years, having given over the reins of government to the modern capitol building in 1876, but its significance for Obama's announcement was clear. It was there, in the House chamber in 1858, that Abraham Lincoln made his famous House Divided speech condemning slavery, which would launch him onto the national political stage as a presidential candidate.¹ Obama was eager to draw parallels between himself and Lincoln; fortunately, there were a quite a few. Both were junior Senators from Illinois, both rose to prominence through their vociferous opposition of foreign wars, and both were known for their exceptional skill as orators.

But most importantly, Obama hoped to position his presidential bid as the final link in a chain of African American achievement that stretched back to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In his speech, delivered two days before Lincoln's 199th birthday, Obama called on the legacy of Lincoln to suggest that America was capable of changing for the better. "The life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible," he said. "He tells us that there is power in words. He

¹On the role of House Divided speech and Senate campaign against Stephen Douglas in shaping Lincoln's political career, see David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 206-209.

tells us that there is power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope.”²

Obama was successful in forging his identity as a successor to Lincoln. When Obama won the Democratic nomination and subsequently the 2008 presidential election, political cartoonists were quick to turn to Lincoln’s ghost for his reaction. Mike Luckovich of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* imagined Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. observing Obama’s oration from the clouds of heaven (fig. 6.1). In it, Lincoln turns to a gleefully disbelieving King to say, “You’re not dreaming.”³ Cartoonists also brought the Lincoln Memorial to life to give its opinion on the election. Jeff Darcy, of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, drew the Lincoln statue with a tear in its eye, reaching down to “fist-bump” a smiling Obama (fig. 6.2). “Four score and seven years ago this was unfathomable, Mr. President,” Lincoln says.⁴ Perhaps, at two hundred, Lincoln’s ghost can finally get some rest.

Or perhaps not. Despite this consummation of hopes, the election of an African American president has not slowed down Lincoln’s spirit in the slightest. Since Obama’s election, Lincoln’s ghost has continued its career in American popular culture unabated. He still comments on the hot button issues of the country. When Obama signed the executive order repealing the ban on gays in the military, cartoonist Tony Auth

²Lynn Sweet, “Obama’s Presidential Announcement Speech Text.” *Chicago Sun-Times.com*, 10 February 2013, <http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/02/obamas_presidential_announceme.html>, last accessed 30 July 2013.

³Mike Luckovich, “You’re Not Dreaming.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 29 August 2008.

⁴Jeff Darcy, “Four Score and Seven Years Ago,” *The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, 5 November 2008.



Fig. 6.1. Mike Luckovich, "You're Not Dreaming." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 29 August 2008.



Fig. 6.2. Jeff Darcy, "Four Score and Seven Years Ago," *The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, 5 November 2008.

imagined Lincoln's spirit in the Oval Office, holding the Emancipation Proclamation under one arm and applauding (fig. 6.3).⁵ Lincoln is big at the box office, too; Spielberg's biopic about the Thirteenth Amendment won a nomination for Best Picture of 2012. Norman Rockwell's *Murder in Mississippi* is currently on a nationwide tour along with the rest of the illustrator's major works, including *Lincoln the Railsplitter*.⁶ The Association of Lincoln Presenters is already planning its 2014 convention in Natchez, Mississippi. And the city of Springfield and the Abraham Lincoln Museum is gearing up for the sesquicentennial of his assassination.

Even Disney's Lincoln robot is still marching on. The original robot prototype, powered by pneumatics and solenoid coils, has now been replaced by an entirely electronic figure. Like the original Audioanimatron, today's Lincoln figure is the most advanced robot of its kind. Robert Niles, of the *Theme Park Insider*, has called the Disney Lincoln "the strongest step yet toward the ideal of a full articulated human replica."⁷

What Disney's Lincoln says, however, is still a matter for debate. When historian Eric Foner, winner of the 1989 Bancroft prize for his book *Reconstruction*, took his daughter to Disneyland in 1993, he was disturbed by Lincoln's speech (apparently largely unchanged since the robot was moved there from the World's Fair site in 1965) and its

⁵Tony Auth, "Emancipation Proclamation," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 February 2011.

⁶See Linda Szelsky Pero, *American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell*. Stockbridge, MA: Norman Rockwell Museum, 2007.

⁷Robert Niles, "Disneyland's Mr. Lincoln Debuts Disney's Next Generation of Animatronic Storytelling," *Theme Park Insider*, December 17, 2009. <<http://www.themeparkinsider.com/flume/200912/1593/>>



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Fig. 6.3. Tony Auth, “Emancipation Proclamation,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 February 2011.

failure to mention slavery. He expressed his concern in a letter to officials at Disney, who asked him to write a better speech for Lincoln. Foner accepted the challenge. Today the Lincoln at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, tells its audiences that American freedom is “an unfinished agenda that challenges each generation of Americans, including our own.”⁸ But it is only the Florida Lincoln who has changed with the times. The California Lincoln still warns vacationers—sixteen hours a day, every day, without pause—that subversive elements within the country will lead to our nation’s destruction.

Perhaps Lincoln will always be with us. And perhaps that’s not such a bad thing. Lincoln has haunted the places in American culture where injustice, racial and otherwise, continues to reign. He has been brought back to life for many different ends—not the least of which has been to rewrite the difficult history of race in America. But Lincoln’s ghost also signals that memory can be a living force, bending and reshaping for the needs of each new generation. Let us hope that the better angels of our nature prevail with him.

⁸Jon Wiener, “Disney World Imagineers a President,” *The Nation*, 22 November 1993, 623.

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