4.5 The Reflexivity of Violence

As we have seen, the self-reflection of the writers confronting violence reveals the deep connection between symbolic and material violence in all three cases. Just as violence is closely related to processes of individual and collective identity formation, so too does it have similarly reflexive functions. The writers of the three texts thematize this reflexivity in two main ways. First, concrete acts of violence always carry collectively negotiated symbolic meanings that deeply affect how they are perceived. As social transgressions, their meaning affects the possibility of similar acts of future violence. For instance, as George Saunders observes, homelessness is likely to amplify mental health problems, which make it more likely for a homeless person to remain homeless. As Michael Paterniti claims, previous acts of gun violence have the potential to foster a kind of trauma that leaves them unaddressed. This neglect makes it just as likely for mass shootings to happen again in the future. In similar ways, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah argues that the insufficient cultural accounting for the legacy of racial violence in the U.S. contributes to future acts of violence against Black people.

Second, the production of symbolic meaning itself always resembles an act of violence. In all three cases, the writers explicitly consider the ways in which communication is connected to the physical violence under investigation. George Saunders, for instance, highlights how verbal threats and lies are rampant in the camp. In addition, he reflects upon how his mere presence, which involves the constant freedom for him to leave, resembles a kind of symbolic extraction of value on his part from the people who do not share this same freedom. Michael Paterniti is worried about not being able to muster the kind of attention deserved by the trauma that he aims to confront and to prevent. Furthermore, he thematizes the ways in which technological media's effects of immediacy shape the ways in which traumatic events are collectively addressed. Finally, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah understands her production of symbolic meaning as a forceful kind of accountability that essentially questions

certain ideas of identity. In addition, she points to the internet as media technology that carries the potential to empower evil.

In sum, the authors insist on the universal and integrated character of violence in their examinations. For them, any act of violence always works both physically and symbolically. Hence, the mediation of violence also points to the violence of mediation in their texts. This is to say that, just like violence, one function of mediation includes selective prioritizing and effectively choosing one meaning of combined form and content over other alternatives.

As the writers consider this interrelation, they effectively point to violence's existential aspects, the specifics of human perception and mediation, and indirectly address mediatization's dismantling character. When viewed in this way, the increased human reliance upon technological media resembles an act of self-harm. Consequently, their own proposed alternative ways of mediation are highly subjective and are laden with ethical considerations. They claim that violence is universal, constitutive to human identity and communication, and that confronting it unflinchingly in acts of human self-examination—doing precisely what technical media are unable to—is the human way to handle it.

In addition, against the backdrop of the acts of structural or physical violence described, questions pertaining to meaning more generally appear more urgent. It is apparent that the performed ethical considerations revolve around concerns like: Who gets to assert a certain meaning? How do personal, subjective meanings relate to the ongoing acts of intersubjective negotiations that occur in conversations? How does common meaning shape communities? In any case, the juxtaposition of real, physical violence with its symbolic meaning also casts meaning's material aspects and its relation to the unequal distribution of power and freedom into sharper relief. Thus, writers describe technological mediation with reproducibility as its main functional feature as complicit in acts of violence, because the very reproducibility of meaning potentially contributes to the normalization of mass violence.