4.2 The Fractured Medium in George Saunders's "Tent City, U.S.A." (2009)

George Saunders's reportage "Tent City U.S.A." explores the precarious conditions in a homeless encampment in Fresno, California. It was published in *GQ* in September 2009. Saunders briefly lived in the area himself for his research. In the actual text, Saunders analyzes how the area's inhabitants communicate and, consequently, how their linguistic expressions mirror their material and social circumstances. Faced with the occasionally shocking experience, Saunders extensively reflects upon his own role as a human medium on various levels. For instance, he makes his role as an external intruder clear, only temporarily living in the area in order to conduct research for a text. He qualifies his experience as decisively mediated by the utterances and narratives of his sources, namely the camp's inhabitants. He makes transparent his own process of trying to make sense of disconcerting experiences and mirrors the camp's fractured social relations and psychologies in his own narrative construct. Ultimately, his self-reflection contributes to an understanding of a similar reflexivity connected to mental health at the core of homelessness; namely, the ways in which the structural violence is evident in the homeless camp decisively shapes the sensemaking process of the very experience of homelessness.

Importantly, Saunders's approach has a long history. His method of participatory observation—championed by ethnographers and anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski in the 19th century—has become the core of a journalistic genre that has been called stunt journalism or, more recently, immersion journalism. The point is to become the subject itself and thus experience the reality to be described firsthand as a simple, fellow human being. As repeatedly hinted at by Saunders, the entry barriers for this activity are very low. As James P. Spradley has noted in his landmark student handbook on participant observation in ethnography, anyone can easily engage in this kind of qualitative research. "Ethnography offers all of us the chance to step outside our nar-

row cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, … and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems."[1] Recently, journalistic products that lean heavily on ethnography as method of research have attained the scholarly label "immersion journalism". Due to the centrality of the research method for the story told, immersion journalists actively make the story by becoming someone else. Chris Wilson has noted that, therefore, such texts typically reflexively point to their own making and "propose themselves as both accounts of *being* immersed and *how* such immersion was enacted."[2]

In particular poverty and its accompanying conditions of human life have repeatedly been journalistically documented by way of this intentionally experiential method of research. Early examples are, for instance, James Greenwood's "A Night in a Workhouse" (1866),[3] or Nellie Bly's "Ten Days in a Mad-House" (1887).[4] With his occasionally ironical self-parody, however, Saunders's text shows similiarities with Crane's "An Experiment in Misery" (1894).[5] For one thing, Crane also narrates his "experiment" in the distancing voice of a third-person narrator—a "youth"—that can appear ironic given the obvious fact that Crane refers to himself. Holly E. Schreiber has therefore considered the text as journalistic self-critique in the form of "a creative repurposing of an established genre with the goal of both celebrating the genre's strengths and exposing its weaknesses".[6]

The Structural Violence of Homelessness

The contemporary misery that Saunders immerses himself in temporarily is only slightly different from the housing of homeless in late 19th century New York described by Crane. Like then, today's homelessness is a typical example of structural violence in Johan Galtung's sense. As the ethnographer Vincent Lyon-Callo has pointed out, the increase in homelessness in the U.S. around

1 Spradley, James P. *Participant Observation*, vii–viii.
2 Wilson, "Immersion Journalism and the Second-Order Narrative," 347.
3 Greenwood, "A Night in a Workhouse."
4 Bly, "Ten Days in a Mad-House."
5 Crane, "Experiment in Misery."
6 Schreiber, "Journalistic Critique through Parody in Stephen Crane's 'An Experiment in Misery'," 31.

the millennium shift concurred with the widening gap between rich and poor.[7] It is the result of a concrete worsening of the historical and material conditions that determine income and housing costs for a wide section of people living in the U.S.A. In turn, these conditions were altered by a political and economic restructuring that prioritized free market forces and individual action.[8] In addition to contributing to homelessness, this neoliberal complex of policies and ideas also affected responses to and the public perception of homelessness as result of deviance or pathology. "A wide range of disorders is understood as contributing to making a person homeless", Lyon-Callo has argued, "but these are all understood as being within the bodies or minds of individual people."[9]

In particular, highly individual mental health issues have been tied to homelessness. About a third of the current homeless population in the U.S. suffers from a severe and disabling mental disorder. These people tend to stay homeless longer and are affected by additional health problems.[10] Their mental illnesses can be both cause and effect of homelessness. For instance, how the rising level of homelessness in the U.S. during the second half of the 20th century correlated with different reforms of the mental health care system that resulted in insufficient care for many people with mental health problems has already been carefully documented.[11] On the other hand, studies have suggested that counteracting the social isolation central to the experience of homelessness by way of community housing, for instance, also helps to alleviate the effects of mental illness.[12]

A Researcher Out of Place

In Saunders's text, the author-narrator's self-presentation attains a core function in the analysis of homelessness because it highlights ethical issues that

7 Lyon-Callo, "Homelessness, Employment, and Structural Violence: Exploring Constraints on Collective Mobilizations against Systemic Inequality," 295.

8 Lyon-Callo, 295.

9 Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance: Activist Ethnography in the Homeless Sheltering Industry*, 13.

10 Caton, *The Open Door: Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness in the Era of Community Treatment*, vii.

11 Caton, *The Open Door: Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness in the Era of Community Treatment*.

12 Schutt, *Homelessness, Housing, and Mental Illness*.

are connected to the structural character of the violence at play. Furthermore, it situates the text's main focus on how the meaning of this violence is negotiated, rather than on the violence itself. Saunders styles himself as an outsider, a person who is different from the Fresno homeless. As such, he is present only in order to intentionally produce experience. Saunders fittingly refers to himself in the third person, as a researcher who conducts an "in situ study"[13] of the homeless in Fresno. This self-assigned role is highly ambiguous. On the one hand, it serves as justification for Saunders's presence in an alien space. On the other hand, he repeatedly comes across as uncomfortable with this role, which necessitates his voluntary presence in a place in which others live involuntarily.

Saunders's self-characterization is expressed by both his active selection of the encampment and his use of equipment for professional use. Even as early as in the first paragraph, he states that he intentionally conducted a "study" and that: "the objective of the Study was to explore this unusual community of homeless people and learn something of its inhabitants."[14] He also adds that he chose the camp due to the size of its population and grounds. Furthermore, Saunders writes that he went looking for a different homeless camp, because the one at hand did not correspond to his expectations.[15] He thus presents his choice of location—and hence experience—as being both highly subjective and intentional.

In addition to these disclosures of intention and objective, Saunders describes his author-narrator persona, the principal researcher (PR), as a professional who uses particular tools and devices to do a particular job. This clearly sets him apart from most of the other inhabitants of the encampment who are not there to work. In a general statement regarding his research method, for instance, he mentions that: "when use of a notebook seemed problematic, the PR would switch on a portable tape recorder."[16] Apart from the use of recording devices, which has the potential to be problematic because it marks him as an outsider, Saunders also refers to both his car and his tent as equipment necessary for his work. The mere possession of these goods signifies a certain difference from the area's regular inhabitants. In an early interaction with a woman named Wanda, for instance, she points to his car. "Wanda stated that the PR 'looked rich'. The PR protested that he was not rich. Wanda looked pointedly

13 Saunders, *Tent City, U.S.A.*, pt. 1.

14 Saunders, pt. 1.

15 Saunders, pt. 2.

16 Saunders, pt. 2.

at the project research vehicle, a late-model rental minivan."[17] Saunders's car here is clearly associated with its function of contributing to the study. However, it also signifies a certain wealth and difference. The same goes for Saunders's tent, which is also part of his project's basic and necessary equipment. Saunders writes that the:

> PR's tent was new. He had never assembled it before. All day he'd been worrying about this moment of confused fumbling, and now it was happening. Several more poles than expected tumbled out of the bag. The instructions were observed to be blowing away. The PR felt the eyes of the entire Study Area upon him.[18]

In addition to the car and the tent's mint condition, Saunders's apparent inexperience in setting it up here distinguishes him as an outsider.

Elsewhere, Saunders communicates such concerns more explicitly with his own appearance, in connection with his role as an outsider. Saunders is uncomfortable when he first enters the encampment, writing that he had to overcome "some initial fear-related resistance to exiting the vehicle."[19] Despite all of the professional goal-orientation at play in Saunders's role as a researcher, conducting a study of a previously selected area, he also notes the human elements, such as fear, have the potential to affect both the experience and his results.

This tension between the professional and the human in Saunders's researcher persona is negotiated through Saunders's own human body. This is particularly evident in a passage where Saunders observes a drug deal taking place right outside his tent. "Observing the illicit transaction," Saunders writes, "gave the PR a giddy, powerful feeling. The dealers didn't even know he was there, taking notes."[20] In this passage, Saunders connects the joy he feels with a certain sense of power he derives from being invisible to others, while simultaneously being able to observe them. However, Saunders is not too different from the people outside his tent, as he soon becomes "aware of an urge to urinate." [21] It is his basic human physicality, then, that forces him to leave his tent and take the risk of interacting socially, which might, of course, lead

17 Saunders, pt. 3.
18 Saunders, pt. 4.
19 Saunders, pt. 2.
20 Saunders, pt. 10.
21 Saunders, pt. 10.

to his identity being revealed. Tellingly, and in order to resolve this impasse, Saunders modifies his signifying body. "As the PR crossed the empty zone, he observed himself to be walking in a deliberately shuffling gait, with a slight fake limp, in an attempt to appear more homeless."[22] In order to be able to do his job as researcher, and to assume his presence in the encampment, Saunders suggests here that he needs at a minimum to project the appearance of having physical—not just professional—reasons to be present.

The deceptive resolution of this key tension between Saunders's appearance and his professional function paves the way for the narrative's conclusion. Although the revelation of his true reasons for being in the camp did not immediately foster resentment,[23] Saunders anticipates negative consequences:

> Enough was enough. He had a wife, he had kids. He had to get out of here before something bad happened. He was lying about who he was as much as anybody else in here, and it now seemed clear that the uncovering of this lie must lead to resentment, and resentment, in turn, to some retributive cost.[24]

As he makes clear in this passage, the resolution, for Saunders, lies in abandoning his role as a researcher and embracing his true self, as a man with a family, living and working elsewhere. Thus, the role of researcher is marked out not only as artificial, but even as an explicit lie, whose revelation could provoke physical harm. Notably, Saunders never justifies his becoming a researcher with any reason other than the mere production of knowledge about the homeless camp. However, this ending also suggests that this pre-condition of Saunders's presence in the camp could not only be seen as problematic, because the homeless are thereby dehumanized and reduced to mere objects of inquiry, but also because he himself is being objectified, as a mere means to a scientific end at odds with his more basic human identity. The temporarily experienced structural violence has a damaging effect even upon him: it makes him compromise his sincerity.

22 Saunders, pt. 10.

23 Saunders, pt. 29.

24 Saunders, pt. 29.

Aural Experience and the Discontents of Mediation

As a researcher, Saunders's task is to immerse himself in the life of the homeless in Fresno, to temporarily live like them, and to derive knowledge from this experience. One of the main characteristics of experience in the tent city is its aural quality, its condition as mediated sound. His perception of sound mediated in different ways serves Saunders as a particular illustration of both the connecting and separating potential of mediation in general. In terms of communication, Walter Ong has shown that the speaking medium typically remains a unified actor in oral cultures because actor and act typically inhabit the same space. In literacy however, actor (writer) and act (text) are typically separated and the medium split.[25] Consequently, in areas of predominantly oral communication, such as homeless camps, the separation of speaker and speech resembles a violent fragmentation.

This is most evident in passages in which Saunders either only perceives a sound, without seeing its source—for instance, from within his tent—or when he is confronted with gossip directed at him by the voices of the camp's other inhabitants. In these instances, Saunders points to the precarious status of sound as an indexical sign and the weakness of the link between sign and potential referent. He connects his experience of aural mediation with the overall fracturing of social life and to a sense of violence and strangeness in the homeless camp. Nevertheless, he also describes how sound, transmitted from one human being to another in the form of speech, carries the potential to connect the inhabitants.

The connection between violence and sound is established in Saunders's first mentions of aural experiences. For instance, Saunders links the fear that he felt in Fresno with the PR's perception that "[w]ild shouts could be heard."[26] And while Wanda—the first inhabitant that he meets—"exuded a wry joviality,"[27] on the visual level, what she expresses vocally is an unambiguous threat: "I'm a rape you."[28] The strangeness of this type of threat is also manifest in instances in which sound itself is dominant—and hence appears strange and potentially violent. Typically, these episodes occur at night in the absence of

25 Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*; van Loon, *Media Technology: Critical Perspectives*, 8–9.

26 Saunders, *Tent City, U.S.A.*, pt. 2.

27 Saunders, pt. 3.

28 Saunders, pt. 3.

visual perception, when, due to his particular situation, Saunders was limited to hearing the sounds emitted by other inhabitants of the camp. For instance, Saunders devotes an entire section of his text titled "LISTEN TO THE MUSIC OF THE NIGHT" to the experience of sound at night:

> The night was full of sounds. These included: the whoosh of traffic from Highway 41, sirens; the metal-on-metal sound of freight trains coupling and uncoupling, hammering sounds as several Study Area residents made nighttime improvements to their dwellings; a bullfrog in the junk pile next to the PRs tent.[29]

This list of fairly ordinary sounds is followed by a list of perceived utterances Saunders attributes to different voices. Although only a minority of the sounds he lists could be perceived as relating directly to violence—a male voice, angrily shouting into a cell phone "I don't like that! I don't know you! I don't like that!" for instance[30]—their mere existence at a time usually reserved for rest and quiet proves uncomfortable for Saunders. "It occurred to the PR," Saunders concludes the section, "that he was not the only person in the Study Area anxious for the night to end."[31]

This uncomfortable character of nightly sounds, perceived from inside a tent, is heightened when Saunders is unable to attribute a clear referent to the aural sign, and the sound consequently potentially represents a threat. The night after the revelation of his true identity, for instance, ends with Saunders waking up to an unsettling sound:

> The PR woke to the sound of a woman being fucked or hit, he couldn't tell which. Her cries were rhythmic and laden with sorrow. Woman, he thought, you really are the nigger of the world. Unless that is a pleasure sound. And even then, you still are. Because look where you are, and who you're getting that pleasure from, and at what cost.[32]

Here, Saunders is unable to tell whether the woman is being violently beaten or taking part in sexual intercourse. As Saunders has grown increasingly cynical at the time of this experience, however, not even the latter option could provide

29 Saunders, pt. 11.
30 Saunders, pt. 11.
31 Saunders, pt. 11.
32 Saunders, pt. 29.

any kind of reassurance. The mere perception of sound leads Saunders to assert that the encampment in general is a bad place for women. Ultimately, then, it is uncertainty concerning the origin of the sound that leads him to draw this sweeping, sad conclusion.

In a similar scene, described only a few lines later, Saunders hears the sound of fighting dogs "left on their own, to rend, tear, and kill one another."[33] He dozes off only to wake up again to the sound of a whistle coming from the freight yard:

> Then the whistle left off and there came the most complex exotic birdsong he'd ever heard, a sound made more beautiful by its occurrence in such a godforsaken place, as if the bird did not discriminate but made beauty wherever it went, just because it could, a song that then resolved itself into what it actually was: the yelp of a dog in pain – kicked, maybe, or wounded in a fight, or just tied too long to a fence by its absent, wasted master.[34]

Here again, the sound that Saunders hears has an uncertain, and hence ambiguous, source. This initially even leads Saunders to wrongly perceive it as the song of a bird, before soberly declaring that it comes from a wounded dog. In these instances, then, the perception of mediated sound without its emittent is described as fostering an uncanny feeling, whether because of its untimeliness, because of the uncertain relationship between sign and referent, or because of its role as a conveyor of indications about the encampment's precarious state of affairs.

Furthermore, Saunders describes mediated sound as problematic when he perceives it in the form of talk or gossip by the homeless. In these instances, in a way analogous to the disconnect that he experiences in the tent, he either has no means of verifying the link between sign and referent or there exist multiple, contradictory links. For instance, one inhabitant's story about the origins of the encampment is contradicted by a woman named Large Jo;[35] the conflict between Valerie, her jailed husband Pablo, and Rusty is subject to different interpretations;[36] Saunders relays the false, wild tales of a former soldier,[37] and

33 Saunders, pt. 29.
34 Saunders, pt. 29.
35 Saunders, pts. 6–7.
36 Saunders, pt. 20 + 33.
37 Saunders, pt. 17.

reveals that "even sweet, broken Ernesto"[38] lies. In general, regarding the stories he acquires by way of hearing, Saunders states:

> truth was relative within the Study Area. Truth is relative everywhere but was even more relative within the Study Area. Anything anyone ever claimed during the Study was, at some point, directly contradicted by something someone else claimed. Stories within the Study area… were rife with exaggeration, omission, or fabrication.[39]

Of course, the connection between this relativity of truth and its mediation in sound is one of correlation, rather than causation. Saunders points this out himself when he attributes the prevalence of falsity and contradiction to mental illness and to the camp's dire material conditions.[40]

As Saunders suggests in the text, however, relativity and uncertainty are inherent characteristics of mediation in general, not specifically of sound. This point is illustrated in the final scene when he sits and talks with Rusty, who is dying of bone cancer. Rusty tells him a story about how a little girl was brutally punished for having interacted with him during a CIA mission in El Salvador. The punishment is so brutal that it appears hard to believe, which leads Saunders to ponder the more general value of his talk with Rusty:

> The PR realized he had reached an exquisite level of perfect Study Area immersion: He honestly didn't know if Rusty was lying or not. And he didn't care. It didn't matter. What mattered was the display. It was beautiful to hear Rusty, this dying man, this vanishing soul, say the crazy things he was saying, whether they were true or not.[41]

The inherent indeterminacy regarding the truth of Rusty's speech does not provoke desperation in Saunders. Instead, he acknowledges the value of the fact that the conversation is taking place at all. Thus, he shifts the focus from the separating aspects of mediation to its connecting function, ending on a hopeful note.

38 Saunders, pt. 28.
39 Saunders, pt. 7.
40 Saunders, pt. 7.
41 Saunders, pt. 33.

Disclosing Soliloquy

When faced with this relativity of truth, the encampment's bewildering violence and the fractured social relations, Saunders seeks certainty within himself. Frequently, the interpretation of his experience takes on the form of a soliloquy that attains a stabilizing function, given that it helps him to judge present reality and to find a foundation for future decisions. Thus, he describes his actions as mainly being influenced by his own personal interpretations of reality and takes responsibility for them. In these instances, a large part of the mediation occurs within Saunders as a human medium. In the form of soliloquies, Saunders exhibits this mediation as produced by himself in reaction to his disconcerting experience in the camp. In the section aptly titled "A MORAL INQUIRY," for instance, Saunders questions his own morals in relation to a girl, possibly a prostitute, who is supposedly being held by a man in a tent. The man had offered the girl to Saunders. Later, Saunders reflects on his personal obligation to help the girl and other residents, given the fact that he has personally witnessed their living conditions. On the one hand, he thinks that any action on his part would be like "a single shot from a gun being fired into a massive orbiting planet."[42] On the other hand, he thinks:

> what would happen if he decided to abandon the Study and commit all his resources to the sole purpose of extracting the white girl with red hair from that tent and getting her into whatever treatment program was required? Wasn't it possible – wasn't it, in fact, likely, given his resources – that he could effect a positive change in the life of the white girl with the red hair? And if so, wasn't it, at some level, a moral requirement that he do so? That is: By continuing down G Street, the white girl with the red hair becoming less real with his every step, was he not essentially consenting to her continued presence back there in the tent, waiting to be sold, by the tall man, to anyone who happened by? Wasn't he, in a sense, not only allowing that to happen but *assuring* that it would happen?
> Yes.
> Yes, he was.[43]

In this passage, Saunders reflects not only upon the possible plight of the girl but, more urgently, on his own moral position with regard to the girl's

42 Saunders, pt. 15.

43 Saunders, pt. 15.

living situation. What begins as mere self-interrogation concludes with a clear answer: a repeated and thus emphatic "Yes". Saunders traces his thinking here, which ultimately leads him to an unequivocal conclusion that puts him into a quandary. He fails to act immediately and abandon his study to help the girl, instead prioritizing his role as a researcher over his identity as an ordinary human being. By making his motives transparent and acknowledging the dilemma, however, he nevertheless takes responsibility for this failure to act. Thus, he advances a display of awareness of his ethical position as an observing researcher as potential solution, or relief, to the inner tension that his witnessing causes.

In another instance, Saunders similarly engages in a soliloquy in response to a quandary, giving it the form of a dialogue of an inner voice making different contradictory points. Having decided to leave, Saunders intends to give away his belongings, but is faced with another dilemma. Who should he give his tent to?

> First he'd give away all his stuff: his sleeping bag and pad, his little light, the tent itself. Wanda had been asking for the tent. Valerie had advised him against giving the tent to that little crackhead Wanda. He'd also considered giving it to Suzanna, a lost soul just out of jail, stranded here in Fresno with no tent of her own, also a crackhead, but a crackhead more adrift than Wanda, who, though a crackhead, was also well connected and fat and slothful, always begging and playing the angles. Per Wanda, Suzanna had sold her jail-issued train ticket for crack; why give a brand-new tent to someone like that? By rights, Valerie should get the tent. Valerie was his pal. Valerie was no crackhead. Valerie was a grandmother of seven and a half. Then again, Valerie already had like five tents. Why did she need another one? Arguing in Wanda's favor was the fact that she had been hit by a train and could barely walk and was awfully genial and forgiving for someone so down on her luck.
> Jesus, he couldn't wait to get out of here.[44]

Here, Saunders maps his thinking process against the backdrop of his observation that nobody's talk could be trusted, and that truth was highly relative in the camp. Of course, this consideration complicates the entire passage, because the potential grounds for giving the tent to one person or another, which

44 Saunders, pt. 29.

Saunders can appeal to, cannot be trusted. Despite asking himself and weighing different points, he does not come to a clear conclusion. Instead, he merely acknowledges the difficulty of the decision with which he is faced. It is also this difficulty concerning the ethical position that he finds himself in that contributes to his desire to leave the camp. Once again, the soliloquy serves to clarify his interpretation of an experience—in this case, the experience of uncertainty—that complicates his own decisions and actions.

In a third scene, Saunders justifies his own acceptance of being extorted, when he reasons himself out of a quandary by way of a soliloquy. When he observes that Rusty has taken his tent, because Saunders has not paid him to stay in what Rusty claims to be his area, Saunders finds himself at a crossroads again:

> The PR was flustered. Rusty was basically extorting him. Rusty had kidnapped his tent? His poor loyal tent lay there like a bug on its back, a humiliated hostage. This was too much. But what was he supposed to do, fight Rusty? Kick the ass of a guy three inches shorter than him who was dying of bone cancer? Or, conversely, get his ass kicked by a guy three inches shorter than him who was dying of bone cancer?
> His impulse was to pull out his wallet and just pay the five bucks. But if he pulled out his wallet and Rusty saw all the money in there, Rusty might increase the ransom, or grab the wallet.
> Buying himself a little time, the PR claimed his money was in his wallet, which was back in the van.
> …
> Still, shit, was he really going to capitulate to that little asshole Rusty? Rusty had punched Valerie in the face. Jesse hadn't said anything about needing to pay Rusty. And he hadn't even needed Rusty's protection in the first place! He could have just stayed where he was and saved the five–
> Ah, fuck it, the PR thought. It's five dollars.[45]

In this passage, Saunders not only ponders his different options, but also imagines different outcomes based on his potential actions. When he imagines fighting Rusty, or the possibility that Rusty might ask for more money if he sees his wallet, Saunders displays the role of fiction in logical argument. His soliloquy here helps to shine a light on the dilemma that he is facing by simply trying to live in a tent in a potentially lawless area. Furthermore, it also

45 Saunders, pt. 32.

reflects upon the ways in which a human mind deals with such a dilemma and how it draws conclusions by weighing the potential consequences of different actions.

However, Saunders also employs the soliloquy in order to question the dichotomy of body and mind. The notion that experience is processed in a body simply working in concert with a mind is displayed in a passage in which Saunders imagines a part of his body—his penis—to be talking to him as a response to the experience in the camp:

> The first three nights of the Study, the PR woke in the night with a hard-on unique in that it felt completely devoid of sexuality. It was more like a fear hard-on. Its function seemed to be to wake the PR up so he could reevaluate his safety. Why are you sleeping? the PR's penis seemed to be saying. Shouldn't you be awake and watchful? His arms and legs would be freezing, but his cock would be hot and ready to flee. Was he horny? Did he want to masturbate? Ha ha. In here? No. He'd go back to sleep, but his penis would stay awake, complaining, at full attention, about the danger in which it had been placed so late in his life, having served so honorably for so long.
> About Day Four, the fear hard-ons ceased. The PR believed this to be related to a general evolving comfort with his surroundings.[46]

Here, Saunders employs a soliloquy in order to imagine how a body part might talk to the mind or how the body as a whole, not necessarily only the mind, might engage in an interior dialogue, in order to interpret experienced reality.

Consequently, the instances in which Saunders prominently employs soliloquies are instances in which the writer exhibits a particularly acute awareness of his reflexive qualities as a human medium. He indicates that his own actions cannot be separated from the experience of reality that he aims to mediate. The human body's interpretative workings in these instances, then, are part and parcel of the reality that is represented and communicated, as well as comments about reality as it is experienced. Through this ambiguity, they illustrate the anchoring of knowledge about reality in the relevant subject; in this case, Saunders and his body. As it carries a universally human meaning, this understanding of interpretative work also seems to apply to the other inhabitants of the encampment—despite the absence of any unequivocal example in the text.

46 Saunders, pt. 22.

The Active Role of the Passive Voice

The text can be read as an assemblage of different voices, talking with, to, or against one another, as Saunders's use of soliloquy, among other things, suggests. There are the voices coming from nearby tents at night,[47] the cynical collective voice of the camp's inhabitants,[48] different dialogues, such as the one between Ernesto, Brenda, Lyle, and Saunders's PR persona,[49] and the voice of Jesse expressed in a poem.[50] However, the voice that speaks most directly to the reader as an expression of Saunders's role as a human medium is the voice that narrates the story. It is in this voice that Saunders conveys his experience and, thus, most prominently fulfills his communicative function as a writer and as a medium. This voice of an omniscient, third-person narrator can be characterized as utterly passive and distanced, mimicking the tone of academic research reports. Notably, it is not attributed to the principal researcher's persona, but to an omniscient narrating entity. Similar to the narrative voice in Mac McClelland's reportage about the birding trip, it is a voice that—although it is styled as distanced—has insight into the deepest parts and workings of the researcher's body and serves to communicate the most concrete details that the researcher observed. It is this striking disconnect between narrative distance and epistemological proximity that serves to raise valid questions about the level of the communicative relationship between Saunders and his readers.

This voice inevitably appears ironic, because it reveals the separation of roles and personas in reportage as fictional. In reality, Saunders is both the producer of the experience in the camp and the text's named author. In the text, however, a zealous and distanced voice akin to that of an academic research report renders the insights of a researcher persona. At first glance, this might mark the out text as fictional. A second glance reveals, however, that it challenges the conventional separation of fiction and nonfiction, because it suggests that any narrative text has an author and a constructed narrative voice and that it is possible for the author to act as a narrative's main character and the producer of the narrative voice, while at the same time relaying a story referring exclusively to a real human being's actions and perceptions. Thus, this separation of roles ironically points to the fact that, in the reality of a reportage

47 Saunders, pt. 11.
48 Saunders, pt. 18.
49 Saunders, pt. 21.
50 Saunders, pt. 25.

text, they are simply different narrative functions employed by the same real person. The irony of this separation becomes apparent, in the first instance, in the clash of different roles. In the text's second section, having outlined the method and scope of the study, the passive narrative voice recounts that: "[i]t is difficult to convey the sobering effect of entering the Study Area for the first time."[51] While still maintaining a passive tone here, the narrative voice nevertheless clearly signals that it has its origins in a human subjectivity that not only actively feels, but that also reflects upon his or her own narrative function. The functions of the narrative voice and of the experiencing researcher persona converge in a singular way, revealing the voice's ironic quality.

This irony is further heightened as the narrative progresses and the voice's distanced tone is contrasted with the intimacy of the details regarding the researcher's experience that it communicates. For instance, following the PR's first exchange with Ernesto, the narrative voice states that the: "PR observed with some interest that his reaction to the clarification that Ernesto's friend had not been murdered, but had only killed himself in despair, was relief."[52] Here, the stylistically distanced voice narrates an observation of the PR that is concerned with the PR's self-awareness—and hence something which only the PR himself could possibly know about. Later in the text, revealing the same disconnect between narrative distance and epistemological proximity, the voice relays the contents of one of the PR's dreams:

> In his sleep, the PR dreamed he was a beautiful blond woman, like Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct, who possessed considerable confidence in her powers of seduction. The PR was naked, in a hot tub, surrounded by male inquisitors. The PR posed and preened in the hot tub, refusing to answer the questions. This approach, it seemed, had worked before. This part of the dream was seen from the point of view of the PR: He could feel his feminine power, sense the mounting frustration of his inquisitors.[53]

Here, the disconnect is even more striking, as the distanced voice passively refers to actions that were multifariously mediated and dreamed up by the PR, even as the PR as the main subject, or rather the only one, is occasionally obscured through the use of passive constructions.

51 Saunders, pt. 2.

52 Saunders, pt. 5.

53 Saunders, pt. 12.

Since this narrative distancing comes across as highly ironic, despite the framing of the text as a report on a sociological study, the voice rhetorically invites readers to question its generally distanced stance. This occurs not only on the level of form and the narratological separations mentioned above, it also happens on the level of the researcher's methods and his own position vis-à-vis the objects of his inquiry. Are the PR's actions, in trying to produce knowledge about the homeless, credible and comprehensible? Does the distance that he maintains in his role as a writer or researcher appear productive for readers? Is he convincing when he fails to keep distance? Most of all, it invites moral questions: Is the distanced voice justified with regard to the human suffering that Saunders witnesses? How do readers personally relate to the homeless' plight? Ultimately, Saunders's ironically heightened self-awareness as author serves to productively reveal important issues about the very processes of experiencing and communicating homelessness as a privileged US citizen.

Storytelling, Materiality, and the Possibilities of Fragmentation

With regard to the entire text, then, Saunders effectively connects the symbolic and material aspects of his experience. The various splits in mediation, which Saunders's self-reflection symbolically discloses, correspond to the material effects of structural violence inflicted upon the homeless community and upon its inhabitants. On one side, the wild and utterly fractured storytelling occasionally associated with mental illness affects social relations within the homeless camp. On the other side, personal tragedies and social isolation correlate with the telling of stories that are "rife with exaggeration, omission, or fabrication,"[54] which the homeless tell about themselves and others. As mentioned previously, Saunders ascribes this to the material conditions themselves that prevail in the camp. By presenting his own narrative about these conditions in an ironically fragmented, multi-voiced way, Saunders ultimately acknowledges that his own storytelling forging relations with readers is carved out of the same wood as the storytelling that takes place in the homeless camp. He explicitly relates a social community's material conditions to the ways in which its members communicate.

He makes the case that homelessness is deeply affected both by the stories told about it and the material circumstances that invite this storytelling

54 Saunders, pt. 7.

in a manner not unlike scientific research on homelessness. This suggests that with the material conditions, the stories might also change and vice versa. As Saunders's own storytelling suggests, he grounds this possibility in the pillars of symbolic, material, and social self-awareness that form the basis for knowledge about the other in a highly mediated society. Ultimately, this suggests that the insincere narrative of homelessness as an individual problem is part and parcel of the structural violence inflicted upon the homeless.