4.4 The Resilient Medium in Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's "A Most American Terrorist" (2017)

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's "A Most American Terrorist" was published in *GQ* in August 2017 and addresses a very specific kind of American mass shooting. Ghansah spent three months in South Carolina working on a profile of Dylann Roof, who shot and killed nine African Americans in a church in Charleston in June 2015, in order to write the text, for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 2018.[1] Drawing on a very diverse set of research methods, Ghansah's text is the least typical reportage analyzed in this work. Ghansah interweaves instances of personal experience with the results of historical research or quotes from newspapers. In the story, Ghansah presents herself explicitly as being aware of her role as a female black writer, determined to hold Dylann Roof and White America morally accountable. As she paints a picture of Roof, as a product of unethical and incomplete human mediation, Ghansah also marks out her text as the product of a personally affected Black medium, reflecting on experience, interpretation, and communication from a decidedly Black-American perspective. She describes how her Black body affects her, very intentionally produced, experience. She also details how the production and interpretation of her experience are intertwined with her desire to fill the gap in Roof's identity, while she engages in the communal processing of grief in the Black community. Due to its subject matter, however, the text's display of authorial self-awareness does not manifest itself in playful reflections, but in a morally urgent production of experiential evidence and hence responsibility.

Ghansah, a freelance writer, had previously published profiles of African American writers, musicians, and artists, as well as excerpts from memoirs

1 The Pulitzer Prizes, "Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Freelance Reporter, GQ."

and cultural criticism in different US magazines.[2] As mentioned previously, Ghansah's work, which has not been published in book form and evades generic ascriptions more specific than 'essay', has been largely ignored by critical scholarship. There exists only a brief mention of her prized text on Dylann Roof in a recent book-long takedown of traditional journalistic objectivity. "She's not 'objective'", Lewis Raven Wallace has argued. "But 'objectivity' asks that we accept our current structures of dominance as inevitable."[3]

However, Ghansah has talked about her work in a few instances and elaborated upon her approach to writing reportage in general and her story on Dylann Roof in specific. In at least one of these instances, Ghansah has revealed an acute awareness of mediation. For instance, she explained how the assignment's economic frame can influence her ultimate product and that she had travelled to Charleston prior to the trial and reported a story about the victims before she contacted an editor at *GQ Magazine* because she wanted to interpret the event independently:

> I like the autonomy – that's my favourite word – I like the autonomy of figuring out the story for myself before I go to someone. And then, you know, maybe they start to conceive of it the way they want to. It was very important for me to conceive of it the way I thought it should be told. From my work and from what I saw.[4]

Furthermore, she repeatedly connected the emotional aspects of human mediation and symbolic sensemaking to the ethics of concrete deeds that have material consequences. Ghansah said that she felt a certain moral obligation toward the families of Dylann Roof's victims that was influenced by their shared skin color. She felt that she could fulfill this obligation by holding Dylann Roof's family accountable on a symbolic level:

> The ability to talk to them as Black people was different. And it made it different. It made me feel an obligation to them to do something… I felt like I want Dylann Roof to know that if you walk in a church and you kill Black people, someone will come to your parents' door and ask them to be responsible for your behaviour. And ask them: What did you do to raise a child with this little sensitivity and this much rage. I want these guys to know that they

2 The Pulitzer Prizes.

3 Wallace, *The View From Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, 175.

4 Linsky, "Longform Podcast 260: Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah."

> will be implicated and indicted. And they won't have the right to control the narrative.

In the same interview, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah also explicitly tied Dylann Roof's story to how the history of slavery in the U.S. has not been properly addressed, thereby revealing the story's larger, interpretive frame. Importantly, this framework itself is a story of insufficient or faulty (historical) mediation. For instance, Ghansah has stated: "I think until America grapples with the legacy of chattel slavery we're going to be in a bad place." As her main interpretative influence, she mentions William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932) the first line of which she cites in her own text. "*Light in August*… is a perfect book because it does discuss, right, we don't have a clear understanding of how race works in America."[5] Fittingly, the evidence she deems to be the most convincing shows her that Dylann Roof "was a kid who couldn't make sense of things well… Dylann Roof and his dad did not go to school. They did not do their work. They're not invested in this country. Their only sense of belonging, the only right they should have to feel the way they do is because they believe their Whiteness means something."[6] We might say more generally, then, that the violence Ghansah writes both about and against results from a lack of self-reflection.

The Communal Violence of Lone Wolves

In the actual text, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah reacts to the medial individualization and marginalization of racist mass shooter Dylann Roof that suggests reduced responsibility on the part of American society and culture. In recent American news media coverage, marginalized white men particularly, who have committed serious acts of mass violence, have repeatedly been labeled as independently acting "lone wolves".[7] This denominator, which has its origins in a militant White nationalist's essay from 1983,[8] has also been applied to

5 Linsky.

6 Linsky.

7 DeFoster, *Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of "Terror,"* 195–196.

8 Kamali, *Homegrown Hate: Why White Nationalists and Militant Islamists Are Waging War Against the United States*, 222.

perpetrators with a Muslim background whose acts were classified as terrorism. At the same time, American mass media has been very reluctant to call shooters, like the white supremacist in Ghansah's text, terrorists.[9] The findings suggest that subsequent mediation of the acts has gained an increasingly critical role, particularly in the cases of seemingly independent actors.

In fact, recent scholarship has argued that the very awareness of this symbolic meaning is central to such assailants' acts. In his analysis of three recent acts of racist mass shootings, similar to the one covered by Ghansah, Mattias Gardell claims that: "performative acts of weaponized whiteness do not only target the individuals they happen to kill, but the communities of racialized others their victims were forced to represent by being killed."[10] Gardell used extensive and multifaceted research to argue that the murders were essentially political, motivated by their expected symbolic meaning. They were "meant to amplify existing tensions in society, to ignite the apocalyptic race war through which the white nation would be born anew."[11]

This kind of violence always occurs against the backdrop of certain symbolically negotiated ideas of collective identity, such as White nationalism or White supremacy on the U.S. far right. While White supremacy refers to the idea that Whites are superior to what they call other races in terms of biology of culture, and they thus have the right to subjugate and control them, White nationalists like Dylann Roof desire to live in a purified state of only White people and, thus, justify the eradication of what they deem to be other races.[12] Related to these ideas is a treatise called "Fourteen Words", which argues that the coming extinction of the White race calls for violence to establish a White ethnostate.[13] Today, much of this symbolic negotiation of collective identities, such as Whiteness, occurs technologically and is mediated on the web. In her extensive study, Sara Kamali has argued that the internet has made it easier for extremists to find ideological and personal encouragement for concrete acts of physical violence to be undertaken. Furthermore, its global reach has given them a sense of both power and belonging.[14] Racist mass shooters such as Dylann

9 DeFoster, *Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of "Terror,"* 199.

10 Gardell, *Lone Wolf Race Warriors and White Genocide*, 3.

11 Gardell, 6.

12 Kamali, *Homegrown Hate: Why White Nationalists and Militant Islamists Are Waging War Against the United States*, 24–25.

13 Kamali, 236–237.

14 Kamali, 228.

Roof, or the ones analyzed by Mattias Gardell, reference each other and their convictions in their online manifestos. "The transnational nature of militant White nationalism", Kamali writes, "emphasizes how not alone these individuals are."[15]

At the same time, even acts of explicitly racist mass violence are also shaped by fantasies of individual identity and its perception within a collective, albeit more narrowly. In many cases, the actual shootings were preceded by active self-presentation on the part of the perpetrators.[16] Prior to his attack on the church in Charleston, for instance, Dylann Roof anticipated future media coverage and disseminated a manifesto with pictures online.[17] Gardell suggests that a mythic hero quest lies at the heart of such fascist lone wolf identities.[18] He refers to a fascist anthology of superhero narratives whose American authors argue in the introduction: "In a world where culture has been replaced by consumerism, where 'God is dead' and reality is experienced on a screen, the closest glimpse most people have on the sublime is a superhero."[19] Gardell's religious study fits psychologists' observations that mass shootings—especially those premediated by the shooter's publications of manifestoes—can be linked to narcissism. In fact, mass shooters have repeatedly referred to themselves as figures with outstanding capabilities in their manifestoes.[20] This has led psychologists in the U.S. to explain the rise of mass shootings in part with the increased observation of narcissistic tendencies among U.S. citizens. Brad Bushman recently argued, for instance, that: "if narcissism continues to flourish as a subclinical but influential personality trait of many members of the population, we may see even more narcissistic mass shooters in the years to come."[21]

A Black Medium's Intentional Presence

Ghansah's text pushes back against such individualizing psychological explanations. It has to be read as an utterly intentional answer to a specific lack

15 Kamali, 240.

16 Gardell, *Lone Wolf Race Warriors and White Genocide*, 6.

17 DeFoster, *Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of "Terror,"* 199.

18 Gardell, *Lone Wolf Race Warriors and White Genocide*, 85–86.

19 Johnson and Hood, *Dark Right: Batman Viewed From the Right*, 1.

20 Bushman, "Narcissism, Fame Seeking, and Mass Shootings."

21 Bushman, 236.

of collective and individual self-care that resulted in a heinous act of racially motivated gun violence with immense material and symbolic consequences. Ghansah explicitly and consequentially performs the split of the witness described in the analysis of Paterniti's text. She pays attention to the grief of others in the present while making sense of a historical event. Most importantly, she reflects on this dynamic and makes it transparent. Early on, framing the examination of Roof's identity that is to follow, Ghansah herself makes clear that she views the sensemaking as a consequence of the sorrow:

> I had come to Charleston intending to write about them, the nine people who were gone. But from gavel to gavel, as I listened to the testimony of the survivors and family members, often the only thing I could focus on, and what would keep me up most nights while I was there, was the magnitude of Dylann Roof's silence, his refusal to even look up, to ever explain why he did what he had done.[22]

In this early passage, Ghansah states that her initial intention to write about the victims was changed by her experience of the right to silence afforded to Dylann Roof by the justice system. Hence, she marks out her text as something produced intentionally by explaining the genesis of this intention. In addition, this change in direction implies that her work carries a heavier moral load than the mere execution of a journalistic assignment. Ghansah interprets Roof's silence as an evasion of responsibility. Hence, by prioritizing the attribution of responsibility for a horrific act of gun violence over the victims' stories, she imbues her project with a certain moral necessity and urgency that extend beyond the symbolic aspects of text.

Apart from being informed by this moral imperative, Ghansah's presence also has a physical aspect, marking her out as a medium with a distinct body and subjectivity. As a black writer covering a racist hate crime, Ghansah is neither an impartial onlooker nor a directly affected survivor. And yet she is, in a sense, both. As she criticizes the media coverage of the shooting, her change of intention appears at least partly affected by the color of her skin:

> Almost every white person I spoke with in Charleston during the trial praised the church's resounding forgiveness of the young white man who shot their members down. The forgiveness was an absolution of everything.

22 Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof," pt. 1.

> No one made mention that this forgiveness was individual, not collective. Some of the victims and their families forgave him, and some of them did not. Not one acknowledged that Dylann Roof had not once apologized, shown any remorse, or *asked* for this forgiveness.[23]

As Ghansah states here, the dominant framing of the shooting in the press reflected white praise of the victims' forgiveness, while leaving out the different manifestations of black anger. This interpretation frames the expression of forgiveness as conforming to white will, pushing the question of white responsibility into the background. As Ghansah describes her change of intention, she is committed to framing racial violence and racial responsibility in a way that, if not specifically black, is certainly non-white.

However, this commitment does not represent the narrow focus of an angry black subject who is out for revenge. Ghansah also pays close attention to how whites themselves suffer from Dylan Roof's racial violence. For instance, sitting behind Dylann Roof's mother, who had a kind of convulsion in the courtroom before a victim's testimony, she imagines the latter's inner turmoil:

> She trembled and shook until her knees buckled and she slid slowly onto the bench, mouth agape, barely moving. She said, over and over again, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She seemed to be speaking to her boyfriend, but maybe it was meant for Felicia Sanders, who was soon to take the stand. A communiqué that was a part of the bond that mothers have, one that was brought up by the radiant shame one must feel when your son has wreaked unforgivable havoc on another mother's child.[24]

Here, Ghansah shows how Roof's mother apologizes for her son's actions, assuming the responsibility that he avoids for herself. Although it is unclear at whom the apology is directed, Ghansah speculates charitably that it might be Felicia Sanders, the mother about to testify. She views Dylann Roof's mother as a human being with a suffering body and tries to imagine the shame that she must be feeling. Hence, her moral stance is more broadly rooted in a belief in essential human sameness.

Yet, despite depicting the humanity of Dylann Roof's mother, Ghansah also indicates that, to her, racial difference makes for a more compelling story than

23 Ghansah, pt. 1.

24 Ghansah, pt. 1.

human sameness. Reacting once again to Dylann Roof's mother, she characterizes her own concern for her as misplaced:

> When Dylann Roof's mother fainted in the courtroom, a reporter from ABC and I called for a medic, and not knowing what else to do, I used my tissues to put a cold compress on her forehead and started dabbing it – before I felt out of place, or realized that I was too much in place, inside of a history of caretaking and comforting for fainting white women when the real victims were seated across the aisle still crying.[25]

Here, just like in the passage referring to the victims' families' expressions of forgiveness, Ghansah argues that the victims' pain cannot be compared to the pain of Dylann Roof's mother. This conclusion suggests the existence of a racial and moral framework that governs her experience. Ghansah bases her argument on her own feeling of being "out of place" or "too much in place," without explicitly referring to her own blackness. This interpretation is presented as the conclusion of both a logical argument and a moral choice, rather than a reactionary feeling. Still, in detailing how Ghansah feels about her own physical presence, she nevertheless acknowledges her argument's subjectives dimension, which is, after all, put forth by a black medium.

If Ghansah's intention is not explicitly described as being influenced by her own black body, her research nevertheless appears to be complicated by her own blackness. Ghansah first mentions her own skin color when she visits Dylann Roof's father late one evening:

> Wrapped in that moonless night, I knocked on the door of the yellow house, and in the confusion of having an unknown black woman at his door a few hours before midnight, wanting to talk about his son, Bennett Roof let me come in and handed me an ice-cold beer that tasted like relief in my paper-dry mouth, parched from my nerves.[26]

Here, Ghansah associates her blackness with the darkness of the night and imagines herself from the perspective of Dylann Roof's father. Her blackness consequently serves to explain both his confusion and her ultimate relief, when he welcomes her in. As such, Ghansah describes her own black skin as a potentially divisive force operating between herself and a white-skinned man in this

25 Ghansah, pt. 1.

26 Ghansah, pt. 2.

passage. She initially imagines it as merely complicating matters and not, as their conversation ultimately shows, as making them impossible.

Later, she gives a more detailed account of the complex feelings that she experiences in exchanges with white Americans. As she visits the church of Dylann Roof's father and grandparents, for instance, she states:

> This black body of mine cannot be furtive. It prevents me from blending in. I cannot observe without being observed. At Dylann Roof's church, I was greeted warmly at the door by a young white woman and a middle-aged white man. But when I entered the chapel and was seated in a rear row, many eyes turned on me, making me feel like I was a shoplifter trying to steal from their God. Was it because I didn't know the hymns, because I didn't take Communion, or was it because I was black? I do not know.[27]

As a researcher, there is no chance for Ghansah to appear distanced and objective because—depending on the place she is in—her skin color designates her as an outsider and calls attention back to herself. As a black woman assuming a physical presence in white America, she necessarily appears as a subject, openly provoking interaction, rather than quietly observing. Consequently, the doubt that she admits to having about the possible reasons for the white churchgoers' paying so much attention to her indicates this interaction's complexity. Even if race does not divide, it certainly points to the bare possibility of separation, thereby sowing doubt and complicating social interactions.

Generally, even if she repeatedly refers to this possibility, Ghansah does not assume that she is treated differently due to the color of her skin. At least once, however, she imagines that her blackness makes an interaction with a white American impossible. When she tries to meet with white supremacist Kyle Rogers, his neighbor is the only person that she finds with whom to talk. When she asks him whether Rogers lives next door:

> he stopped smirking, and I started to suspect that I was being had and that we both understood what the deal was. It began to dawn on me that chances were he knew Rogers, he probably liked Rogers, and he probably did not want anyone, especially someone who looked like me, to bother his neighbor.[28]

27 Ghansah, pt. 5.

28 Ghansah, pt. 9.

Here, Ghansah infers from their interaction that Rogers' neighbor would not let someone who looked like a black woman make contact with Rogers. In contrast to her attitude in the passages above, here she only infers a slight sense of doubt and does not give any alternative reasons for his behavior. Here, then, it is the neighbor's racial prejudice, not Ghansah's, that prevents her from meeting with Rogers. While the black woman seeks to make an interaction possible, the white man is evasive, most likely due to her very blackness.

In sum, Ghansah cautiously details how the framing of her text on the shooting is produced as a story of white racial violence, rather than black victimhood. On the one hand, this production is based on raceless, logical questioning and empathy with the victims and their families. On the other hand, it is also shaped by the fact that Ghansah's own blackness forces her to assume her presence as a subject, because her research experience is affected by the difference in skin color between her and the white Americans with whom she interacts. A context that turns skin color into a matter of life and death necessarily has an effect on its witnesses.

Producing Responsibility

Ghansah considers this aspect in many ways. As noted previously, she states her intentions during the narration of her experience at Dylann Roof's trial, drawing upon her interpretation of his evasion of responsibility. This interweaving of interpretation and intention is one of the main drivers of the text's narrative and it presents Ghansah as a human medium who is producing meaning for others because it is her experience that is supposed to fill the gap in Roof's identity. However, her ongoing willingness to experience, in order to be able to say in a magazine article what Dylann Roof does not say in court, does not yield a definitive assessment of Roof's identity. Moreover, it consistently portrays Dylann Roof as disconnected and incomplete. Still, it also depicts him as human, thereby making a strong claim for white America's collective responsibility.

Although Ghansah begins during the part of the trial at which he was at least physically present, she characterizes Roof throughout the text as a blank or as absent, and thus unable or unwilling to interact. Even in court, she describes him as unwilling to listen to the testimony. "He didn't object often, but when he did it was because he was bothered by the length and the amount of testimony that the families offered. Could they keep their stories about the

dead quick?"[29] Similarly, still at the trial, Dylann Roof appears unwilling to interact on a more fundamental level:

> After Roof was found guilty, they went up to the podium, one by one, when it was time for the victim-impact testimony, and standing near the jury box, they screamed, wept, prayed, cursed. Some demanded that he acknowledge them. "Look at me, boy!" one raged. He did not. Others professed love for him. He did not care. Some said they were working the Devil from his body. *Feel it,* they shouted. He did not appear to feel anything.[30]

In Ghansah's characterization of Roof's fundamental unwillingness to acknowledge any connection between himself and the families of the people he killed, he appears almost inhuman but certainly anesthetized; unable to have feelings. Still, Ghansah does not simply dismiss him as such, but rather interprets his behavior as an exercise in control granted to him by the American justice system:

> Roof was safeguarded by his knowledge that white American terrorism is never waterboarded for answers, it is never twisted out for meaning, we never identify its "handlers," and we could not force him to do a thing. He remained in control, just the way he wanted to be.[31]

Not having to answer for the killing of African Americans then, in Ghansah's interpretation, is the privilege of a white American. After all, and despite the strangeness of his behavior, Dylann Roof is portrayed as a human being.

As a human being, however, he has failed to connect with others. Having contacted some of Roof's former teachers, Ghansah states: "It is as if he floated through people's lives leaving nothing for them to recall. One teacher who spent time with him in her classroom every day says that she typically has a good memory, but she apologizes because she really can't remember anything about him."[32] Ghansah also presents an interpretation of a picture in a yearbook that she is shown by the former principal at Roof's elementary school:

29 Ghansah, pt. 1.
30 Ghansah, pt. 1.
31 Ghansah, pt. 1.
32 Ghansah, pt. 3.

> The students were grouped together, with clear affection, elbows on each other's backs, almost hugging, giggling with ease. And then I found him. Off-center, straining at a smile, with sad eyes, standing to the side, in a natty-looking red jacket, with his bowl-cut blond hair, already looking like a boy apart.[33]

As Ghansah's research shows, Roof's birth was already marked by incompletion: "There was no birth announcement when he arrived. In fact, on his birth certificate, there is no father even listed."[34] She concludes that: "in the classroom and around town: He was an unmemorable ghost, until he wasn't."[35] Seen from the perspective of people who interacted with him, Ghansah concludes that Dylann Roof appears empty, his identity incomplete.

This emptiness is also manifested in Roof's behavior. For instance, Ghansah narrates how Roof fails to see either past or present clearly. She states that Roof denies history by claiming that he never had a black friend.[36] She describes him as carrying "the cognitive dissonance of a man looking for what never was,"[37] and to be a student of "false history."[38] Furthermore, Roof is also depicted as being "spaced or zoned out while working," falling "asleep virtually anytime he was stationary," and being "quiet, uncomfortably quiet, strangely quiet."[39] To conclude, Ghansah's research supports her impression of Roof in court. He is a nobody, unable or unwilling to assume productive agency in American society—but still a human being.

Consequently, Ghansah's research does not paint an accurate picture of Roof's individual responsibility. This is not because he is not also individually responsible, but because this would not be the whole story. She presents the argument for Roof's lack of individual agency even as she shifts the focus from individual to collective responsibility; she analyzes the hateful ideas and behavior with which Roof ended up identifying. She describes him as: "a child both of the white-supremacist Zeitgeist of the Internet and of his larger environment"[40] and according to Ghansah: "Roof is what happens when we prefer vast

33 Ghansah, pt. 3.
34 Ghansah, pt. 4.
35 Ghansah, pt. 4.
36 Ghansah, pt. 3.
37 Ghansah, pt. 4.
38 Ghansah, pt. 9.
39 Ghansah, pt. 6.
40 Ghansah, pt. 8.

historical erasures to real education about race."[41] In order to hold these larger forces accountable, therefore, Ghansah also seeks to experience both the places and the people who represent them by confronting them with their connection to Roof.

This takes conscious effort on her part. Just like Ghansah's research experiences concerning Roof's individual responsibility, such as the visit with his father, these experiences are described as products of acts of will. For example, after recounting the rejection of a request for an official visit to a plantation where Roof posed with stuffed slave dummies, Ghansah tells her readers: "I am a black woman, the descendant of enslaved people, so I went anyway and walked along the same path that Roof did, where the quarters are set on something cheerfully marked as 'slave Street'."[42] The plantation illustrates the racist physical environment in which Roof grew up; by visiting it, Ghansah makes this physical reality at least partly responsible for Roof's deed. In a similar scene, she seeks to confront a representative of the white supremacist ideas circulating online in the person of Kyle Rogers, the head of a local white-nationalist organization. This experience, too, Ghansah writes, is the product of insistence: "because after Kyle Rogers refused to take my call, I went there one day and knocked on his door."[43] Although she does not end up meeting Rogers in person, her visit is an act of making him responsible *ex negativo*. It makes his active evasion of responsibility evident. Consequently, for Ghansah, responsibility is by no means a given component of reality, but rather the product of symbolic and material human action. If Roof's refusal to take responsibility for his heinous crime is manifested in his unwillingness to speak, then her making him and parts of white America responsible is embodied in her very presence and in her asking of questions, which literally force people to respond or to have their evasion of responsibility made public.

41 Ghansah, pt. 9.

42 Ghansah, pt. 8.

43 Ghansah, pt. 9.

Addressing Two Communities

Racist violence, like Dylann Roof's, always carries symbolic meaning tied to collective identity. Its meaning differs depending on the receiving communities. If Roof's violence symbolically addresses at least two different groups, most obviously kept apart by the color of their skin, then Ghansah's answer to his act of violence will have to do likewise. Therefore, as a narrative about the struggle to assign meaning to racial violence, Ghansah's text is addressed to at least two different communities with two different messages. As I have shown above, Ghansah very much assumes her agency as an experiencing black subject, if only because she feels personally threatened by Roof's crime, an act of racist violence. Despite this experience, her concern is not primarily with issues of personal feeling, but rather with collective identities that may be shaped by feeling. As a communicating medium, she addresses collective communities; as a witness, she has to address both general injustice and personal pain. The communities whom Ghansah addresses change over the course of the narrative, depending on these distinctions. Initially, Ghansah imagines her readership as a rather general public that witnesses injustice. When she describes how her intention has changed in the courtroom, she addresses a broad community similar to the American public in Paterniti's text:

> Over and over again, without even bothering to open his mouth, Roof reminded us that he did not have to answer to anyone. He did not have to dignify our questions with a response or explain anything at all to the people whose relatives he had maimed and murdered. Roof was safeguarded by his knowledge that white American terrorism is never waterboarded for answers, it is never twisted out for meaning, we never identify its "handlers," and we could not force him to do a thing.[44]

In this passage, Ghansah speaks of a community that asks questions, reminded by Roof of white America's privilege. Despite the obvious racial tension in this accusation, Ghansah, by referring to the justice system, does not explicitly speak only of a black American community, but rather of a larger society granting this privilege to whites like Roof. Ghansah speaks to this American community as a whole, as a representative and member thereof.

44 Ghansah, pt. 1.

Consequently, she implicates herself in granting Roof the privilege of silence and explicitly positions herself as unwilling to accept any opposition between black and white America.

However, toward the end of the text—and certainly by the end of her research narrative—this broad community has been narrowed down and Ghansah speaks to a community to which she relates to more emotionally. In the last section, having located the responsibility for his crime in white American society, and having "learned about what happens when whiteness goes antic and is removed from a sense of history,"[45] Ghansah explicitly addresses a more narrowly defined black American community that praises the example of the victims' families, which, as she writes:

> reminds us that we already know the way out of bondage and into freedom. This is how I will remember those left behind, not just in their grief, their mourning so deep and so profound, but also through their refusal to be vanquished. That even when denied justice for generations, in the face of persistent violence, we insist with a quiet knowing that we will prevail. I thought I needed stories of vengeance and street justice, but I was wrong. I didn't need them for what they told me about Roof. I needed them for what they said about us. That in our rejection of that kind of hatred, we reveal how we are not battling our own obsolescence. How we resist. How we rise.[46]

It is clear that her concluding invocation of African-American endurance is strictly communal, even while she framed the initial uncertainty about Roof's identity as a social concern. The victims' families' refusal of the hatred that Dylann Roof embodies mirrors her own way of identifying hatred and of making it responsible without giving in to its divisive effects. Ultimately, then, Ghansah argues that her concern is not with white America in general, but with white-American hatred in specific in her communicative framing of the narrative and in the address to her readers. As Michael Paterniti revealed in his text about mass shootings, such deadly hatred also attacks the notion of time, since it literally makes human beings into history. In order to counter deadly violence, therefore, Ghansah invokes the power of timeless nonviolent resis-

45 Ghansah, pt. 11.

46 Ghansah, pt. 11.

tance, of staying alive as a community, thereby embodying "the everlasting, the eternal."[47]

Collective Identity, Collective Violence, and Collective Responsibility

Like the other texts analyzed, Ghansah's narrative points to its own distinct quality as a product of a human medium. Unlike the other texts, however, she only rarely reflects upon the act of production itself. Her self-assigned task feels too urgent to spend time on the phenomenal aspects of her experience or too obvious to display the inner workings of her process of interpretation. If society is a product of collective human action, then so too is the violence committed by Dylann Roof that results from real hatred. Emphasizing this assessment appears pointless in the face of his terrible crime, though. Instead, Ghansah highlights that the production of identity cannot be isolated and individualized. Much like Dylann Roof's identity, whom she describes as the product of his parents as well as his social and cultural environment, she acknowledges that her own identity is also affected by the experiences of her community and the meaning assigned to those experiences. For instance, as she fears for her black body or tells her own story of the prevalence of black Americans in the face of racial hatred, she sets an example for the creation of a resilient black collective identity in the face of violent threats by another group of people. Unlike Paterniti, then, her concern as a narrator is not with potential forgetfulness, but with a pre-dominantly white framing of a white racist's hate crime. Consequently, Ghansah repeatedly points to the production of her experience because this experience, wrung from a racist reality and against the backdrop of a heinous crime, already carries with it its own interpretation.

As such, it is also the most convincing evidence against the myth of Dylann Roof as a lone wolf. Her experience, be it in the form of a visit to a former plantation or her rejection by a White Supremacist, supports her claim of Roof's deed as being backed by a reduced and ignorant collective identity of White America. It is precisely its reduction of identity to mere skin color, and its lack of self-awareness thereof and its parenthetical lack of confidence, that makes White America continuously reaffirm itself by way of racist violence. Understanding violence as tied to misguided identity formation implies dismissing any individualization of a crime that has strong symbolic meaning. Ultimately,

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it makes the murderer's criminal prosecution and individual sentencing appear reductive and insufficient. In part, Ghansah addresses this exact insufficiency with the example of her intentionally produced experience that raises the question of collective responsibility. At the same time, the example of her continuous self-reflection as human medium presents a counter-example to the root cause of White America's deluded collective identity and suggests a key measure to prevent future racist mass shootings: a more honest self-examination of America and its racist legacy as a kind of overhaul of its collective identity.