2.3 The Believing Medium in George Saunders's "The New Mecca" (2005)

George Saunders's reportage has received little attention, despite its peculiar and timely morals and aesthetics. Saunders, predominantly a writer of fiction, is best known for his short story collections and for his experimental novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017). However, Saunders has also written numerous essays and accepted reporting assignments from American magazines such as *GQ* or *The New Yorker* in which he actively explores different social and cultural phenomena associated with contemporary reality. A collection of his essays, entitled *The Braindead Megaphone*, was published in 2007.

In one of these texts, "The New Mecca,"[1] Saunders travels to Dubai after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and experiences the emerging megacity as an ambivalent utopia of consumer culture. As such, Mike Featherstone has argued: "it offers a world beyond scarcity and hardship, the dream of abundance, yet its modus operandi is through the commodity form, the calculus of monetary value."[2] Saunders mirrors this ambivalence in the self-reflection of his identity as human medium. Unlike Foster Wallace, he is not very interested in inauthenticity. Rather, his reportage focuses on the ways in which authenticity is subjectively produced and imagined by way of the collective fantasies that touristic experience begets. Saunders emphasizes the very will to believe in the possibilities of global consumerism as a countermeasure to its fracturing aspects. Dubai's fantastic material reality as a transnational social space featuring iconic architecture[3] is, thus, reflected in the symbolic reality of fantastic possibility. If it matters at all then, authenticity in Saunders's touristic experience matters as fantasy that illustrates a very general human desire.

1 Saunders, "The New Mecca."

2 Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, xxiii.

3 Sklair, "Iconic Architecture and the Culture-Ideology of Consumerism."

Most importantly, Saunders interprets the uncertainties that are thus exposed in human interaction as potential material for coordination and cooperation.

The few critical comments that have been made about Saunders's reportage have mainly appeared in reviews. In a short discussion of Saunders's nonfiction, Joshuah Bearman ascribes to Saunders a: "chameleon-like ability to tell [his character's] stories in their voices while also inserting his own, which manages to humanize his subjects, and himself, together."[4] Bearman further argues that Saunders seems to trust his own power to grasp the world around him and that he "seems to do very little reporting, eschewing most external detail for his own internal conflicts and empathetically observational experience."[5] In a review of *The Braindead Megaphone*, Josh Rosenblatt argues that Saunders exhibits an: "optimistic belief in the value of human understanding and generosity. As far as he's concerned, the only answer to our current geopolitical predicament is sympathy, understanding, and an open-armed acceptance of our undeniable sameness."[6] Like Foster Wallace, then, Saunders's reportage can be described as a humanist endeavor that emphasizes the similarities between humans and that argues for the particular urgency of human communication; this is no coincidence. George Saunders and David Foster Wallace were contemporaries who were aware of one another, while Foster Wallace was still alive. They even met occasionally to discuss their writing. For Saunders, they were: "like two teams of miners, digging at the same spot but from different directions."[7] For instance, Adam Kelly's conceptualization of "new sincerity" discussed in the previous chapter on Foster Wallace brackets certain similarities between the two writers in greater detail.[8]

More traditional scholarly attention to George Saunders's work, like Kelly's, has almost exclusively been directed at Saunders's fiction. What is most relevant for my analysis of Saunders's reportage is how his short stories have been read against the backdrop of neoliberalism and the all-encompassing individualization and social atomization that it gives rise to. In his

4 Bearman, *Journeys with George (Saunders), or Why Magazines Should Hire More Fiction Writers, Part 2*, para. 9.

5 Bearman, para. 3.

6 Rosenblatt, *Elements of Style*, para. 12.

7 Lovell, "George Saunders Has Written The Best Book You'll Read This Year," 24.

8 Kelly, "The New Sincerity"; Kelly, "Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders's New Sincerity."

narrative explorations of neoliberalism, Saunders's focus lay on the representation of the American working class and of how its experience of precarity and immobility overwhelms its subjects.[9] In these representations, scholars have argued, Saunders has sought to evade the trap of neoliberalism's all-encompassing power by reconfiguring the possibilities of being human and affectively making contact with readers.[10]

In the analyzed text then, Saunders allegorically mirrors the rather general human potential for peaceful coexistence he identifies in Dubai in the ways in which he carries himself as a medium engaging in human interaction. Featuring the integrating aspects of his role as a medium, Saunders in particular reflects upon the general power of human cognition to make connections and to interpret specific experiences. First, Saunders's self-reflection is manifested in his self-characterization as an ordinary human being subjected to the laws of global capitalism. Second, it is apparent in his accepting acknowledgment of the mediated character of his experience, and in an emphasis on the consequences of the experience, rather than its quality. Third, Saunders reflects deeply on his own acts of interpretation on various occasions. Fourth, he is keen to keep a close connection to his readers via the playful use of textual devices, direct addresses to the reader, and personal voice. Hence, his self-awareness of his status as a merely human medium does not beget a sense of desperation. Rather, in Saunders's case, it reinforces a basic belief in human sameness and the possibility of bridging the temporal and spatial gaps that are inherent in mediated human experience.

Paid—or Not—to Have Fun—or Not

In 2005, Saunders went on assignment to Dubai for the men's magazine *GQ*, which covered all of his expenses. When Saunders checks into his luxury hotel, the Burj Al Arab, Saunders notes that the fact that *GQ* is covering his expenses is key to the production of the experience he has in Dubai:

9 Rando, "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class"; Schoene, "Contemporary American Literature as World Literature: Cruel Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopoetics, and the Search for a Worldlier American Novel"; Boddy, "'A Job to Do': George Saunders on, and at, Work."

10 Schoene, "Contemporary American Literature as World Literature: Cruel Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopoetics, and the Search for a Worldlier American Novel"; Millen, "Affective Fictions: George Saunders and the Wonderful-Sounding Words of Neoliberalism."

> I am so thrilled to be checking in! What a life! Where a kid from Chicago gets to fly halfway around the world and stay at the world's only seven-star hotel, and *GQ* pays for it![11]

Here, Saunders not only declares it to be a privilege to be paid to visit Dubai and the Burj Al Arab, but also characterizes himself as an ordinary and inexperienced American from Chicago. Saunders gets to be an ordinary consumer of an exclusive experience only because a magazine is footing the bill. This context of global consumerism frames Saunders's reportage and marks the experience that he writes about as having been produced.

More specifically, the framework of the experience's production is more broadly human than it is professional. For instance, the way Saunders refers to his assignment might suggest that he is primarily being paid to consume, not to ultimately deliver a product. The consequence of this more universal framework is economic dependency. Upon arrival at the Burj Al Arab, for instance, Saunders finds out that *GQ* is unable to pay the hotel bill directly and that he himself cannot cover it:

> Because, for complicated reasons, *GQ* couldn't pay from afar, and because my wife and I share a common hobby of maxing out all credit cards in sight, I had rather naively embarked on a trip halfway around the world without an operative credit card: the contemporary version of setting sail with no water in the casks.[12]

Due to his bank's withdrawal limit, Saunders is only able to pay part of the amount for one night's stay, at the hotel, and is repeatedly asked to pay the rest. His inability to pay changes the character of the experience that Saunders had so enthusiastically anticipated. Instead of joy, he begins to feel envy and anxiety. Saunders writes that he "couldn't enjoy any of it, because I was too cowed to leave my room. I resisted the urge to crawl under the bed."[13] Hence, the assignment itself is presented as decisively shaping Saunders's experience. It is the very fact that he is on assignment that puts him in the position of experiencing the feeling of being unable to pay the bill in a luxury hotel. Thus, *GQ* puts Saunders in a situation that he would not even have been able to afford to

11 Rosenblatt, *Elements of Style*, para. 12.

12 Saunders, 38.

13 Saunders, 40.

be in under normal circumstances. In a way then, the magazine places him *out of place*.

At the same time, Saunders behaves as if he is—if not necessarily out of place—certainly out of his comfort zone with regard to his disregard for professional standards. On at least one occasion, Saunders explicitly refers to the fact that he is not a professional journalist. When he explores the more political questions of Dubai's wealth and safety against the backdrop of 9/11 and potential terrorist threats, Saunders talks to different anonymous sources. However, in noting that their explanations contradict each other, Saunders comments that he is grateful to not have a professional journalist's obligations: "Good point, I say, thanking God in my heart that I am not a real Investigative Journalist."[14] The assignment consequently also involves Saunders being placed in professional situations that, under normal circumstances, he would never find himself in.

For Saunders, however, this sense of feeling *out of place* does not result in alienation. Rather, it continually presents possibilities for human connections. While trying to pay for the first night's stay, Saunders meets visitors to the Burj Al Arab who had paid fifty dollars just to see the place. Angered by the behavior of hotel staff, he decides to invite them up to his room:

> I snuck them up to my room, past the Personal Butler, and gave them my complimentary box of dates and the three-hundred-dollar bottle of wine. Fight the power! Then we all stood around, feeling that odd sense of shame/solidarity that people of limited means feel when their limitedness has somehow been underscored.[15]

As Saunders details here, the framework of global consumerism serves to emphasize the sameness of the conditions people from all backgrounds face under global capitalism—namely, the fact that capital rules. Here, being denied a joyful experience because of a lack of funds has the psychological consequence of producing solidarity, rather than separation or alienation.

Saunders notes this kind of connection between people living under the same general, systemic conditions with regard to his role as a writer. When he enters another luxury hotel, Saunders observes an Indian man who is cleaning a marble staircase by hand and explores the feeling this sight produces in him:

14 Saunders, 47.

15 Saunders, 41–42.

> Part of me wants to offer help. But that would be ridiculous, melodramatic. He washes these stairs every day. It's not my job to hand-wash stairs. It's his job to hand-wash stairs. My job is to observe him hand-washing the stairs, then go inside the air-conditioned lobby and order a cold beer and take notes about his stair-washing so I can go home and write about it, making more for writing about it than he'll make in many, many years of doing it.[16]

Saunders then tries to imagine whether or not this stair-washer would surrender his job to another Indian with no job at all:

> Does this stair-washer have any inclination to return to India, surrender his job to this other guy, give up his hard-won lifestyle to help this fellow human being? Who knows? If he's like me, he probably does. But in the end, his answer, like mine, is: That would be ridiculous, melodramatic. It's not my job to give up my job which I worked so hard these many years to get.
> Am I not me? Is he not him?[17]

In Saunders's view, the capitalist conditions resulting in the basic human need for a job contain the potential to create a sense of global human sameness. Saunders also hints at this possibility when he imagines that the other Indian might, like himself, feel inclined to give up his job in an act of solidarity. Although they are subjected to the same rules, the basis for this potential sameness is, as Saunders seems to suggest in his concluding rhetorical questions, fundamental human difference.

Even though Saunders's experience in Dubai is determined by the assignment and by the economic dependency it entails, he also describes it as fundamentally human because it is—particularly in Dubai—so permeated by the workings of global capitalism. Saunders appears highly aware of the fact that he is both consumer and worker (or producer) at the same time. For him, this is not a cause for depression, but rather an occasion to explore unique possibilities for human understanding. There, opportunities arise for human solidarity which potentially relieve anger and anxiety, even at times of alienation caused by economic distress.

16 Saunders, 54.

17 Saunders, 54.

The Subjective Effect of Objective Experience

This trusting aspect of Saunders's character is on display in how he deals with his primary physical experience. In fact, Saunders never questions his own sensory perceptions. In describing his visit to Dubai, the question of whether or not what he perceives might be real or not is simply of no concern to him. For example, the first luxury hotel Saunders stays at, the Madinat, resembles a theme park version of an Arabian village. Saunders is excited by his surroundings despite their apparent fakeness:

> Wandering around one night, a little lost, I came to the realization that authenticity and pleasure are not causally related. How is this "fake"? This is real flowing water, the date and palm trees are real, the smell of incense and rose water is real. The staggering effect of the immense scale of one particular crosswalk – which joins two hotels together and is, if you can imagine this, a four-story ornate crosswalk that looks like it should have ten thousand cheering Imperial Troops clustered under it and an enigmatic young Princess waving from one of its arabesque windows – that effect is *real*. You feel it in your gut and your legs. It makes you feel happy and heroic and a little breathless, in love anew with the world and its possibilities.[18]

Here, Saunders anchors the potential realness of the experience not in reality—in this case in the authenticity of the ancient Arabian village that has been built—but within himself and in the effect that the experienced reality has on his body. The fact that he feels a positive effect in his gut and in his legs makes reality real enough for him. It is these physical effects that, in turn, also prompt acts of interpreting reality in general, that are not only found in the passage above, but are practically inseparable from the experience.

Saunders similarly foregrounds the importance of his subjective, physical reaction to the experience when he visits an Arabian Ice City, a festival where kids get to experience artificial snow:

> On their faces: looks of bliss, the kind of look a person gets when he realizes he is in the midst of doing something rare, that might never be repeated, and is therefore of great value. They are seeing something from a world far away, where they will probably never go.

18 Saunders, 24–25.

> Women in abbayas video. Families pose shyly, rearranging themselves to get more Snow in the frame. Mothers and fathers stand beaming at their kids, who are beaming at the Snow.
> *This is sweet,* I scribble in my notebook.
> And it is. My eyes well up with tears.[19]

Saunders describes himself here as being emotionally touched by an experience he does not even mark as subjective. Experience and interpretation are intertwined in his assertion that what he sees is simply "sweet." Thus, he infers that only his own reaction to the experience might be subjective. The sweetness of the sight, however, he deems universal. Only a few lines later, this perspective is reinforced when he states that if "everybody in America could see this, our foreign policy would change."[20] In these instances, Saunders's dynamics as a human subject who functions as medium are placed front and center, since they track the complexities of his interpretation of reality, rather than reality itself. It is not primarily the experience, but rather Saunders's reaction to the experience, that is the story.

The potential universality that Saunders ascribes to his personal experience is also manifested in his narration of passages mainly about sensory experience. On these occasions, he repeatedly switches both between the authorial "I" and the communal "we", and the reader as subject. When he writes about his experience at the Al Maha Resort, this occurs particularly abruptly:

> For lunch, we have a killer buffet, with a chef's special of veal medallions.
> I go back to my villa for a swim. Birds come down to drink from my private pool. As you lower yourself into the pool, water laps forward and out, into a holding rim, then down into the Lawrencian desert. You see a plane of blue water, then a plane of tan desert. Yellow bees – completely yellow, as if you spray-painted – flit around on the surface of the water.[21]

Although Saunders initially makes it clear that it is he himself who intends to swim, he narrates the scene in the second-person singular. In suggesting that the reader swim, Saunders switches between himself and the reader as the subjects of the scene. Drawn rather hyperbolically, the change in subject in

19 Saunders, 49–50.
20 Saunders, 50.
21 Saunders, 44.

this scene must not be read as an intentional mapping out of a zone of immediacy for Saunders as the medium or a bridging of the medial gap between writer and reader. Rather, it is a comment on Saunders's stance versus the status of experience itself. The subject that experiences can simply be interchanged, but the experience stays the same and is bestowed with a steadfast stability, if not the status of an object.

This interpretation can be further supported by a closer look at the quality of his experience. In fact, a lot of the experiences he reacts to could be categorized as secondhand. Still, Saunders rarely treats the information that he is given with suspicion. Instead, he ponders its potential ethical consequences or the effects it has on him more carefully. When exploring the exploitation of foreign workers in Dubai, for instance, Saunders simply pitches different subjective, singular opinions, as well as a newspaper report against each other. He hears from an American with fifteen years of experience in the local oil business[22] that: "the workers tell you again and again how happy they are to be here,"[23] he reads about an exemplary case in a local newspaper,[24] he recounts that: "a waiter shows me exactly how he likes to hold his two-year-old, or did like to hold her, last time he was home, eight months ago,"[25] and he quotes a Kenyan security guard, who says: "I expect, in your writing, you will try to find the dark side of Dubai? Some positive, some negative? Isn't that the Western way? But I must say: I have found Dubai to be nearly perfect."[26] These secondhand experiences simply lead him to conclude that any evaluation of Dubai is complicated, which indicates that he treats all of these secondhand experiences equally and does not evaluate them based on their merits. As interpretations of experience deriving from other human beings, they appear to have value in themselves.

Due to the fact that experience is bought, manufactured, and thus objectified and potentially reproduced, at least in the case of his trip to Dubai, it loses its economic value on the information market. For Saunders, however, this makes experience interesting in a more general sense, as it serves to connect humans from different backgrounds. If experience is objectified, its effects are nevertheless still subjective. This is precisely what Saunders empha-

22 Saunders, 31.
23 Saunders, 32.
24 Saunders, 32.
25 Saunders, 33.
26 Saunders, 33.

sizes with his examinations of his physical reactions to the experience he has. As a consequence, his ways of interpreting the experience and its effects come to occupy center-stage.

Confusion and Possibility

Saunders employs various modes of thinking to make sense of his experience and of its effects. Occasionally, he bases his judgments on rather general, personal premises that view human nature through an optimistic lens. Elsewhere, he imagines hypothetical alternatives to experienced reality in order to classify his experience. Ultimately, in a circular kind of thinking, the experiences themselves become objects for his reflections. All of these modes of interpretation have, as their premise, a conscious ethical openness and the possibility for human understanding and connection that this openness enables.

As suggested above, Saunders bases the interpretation of his specific experience on general assertions about human nature. Argumentatively speaking, these general claims are either prompted by specific examples Saunders experiences or they serve to make sense of the reality he encounters. Furthermore, Saunders's use of generalities to interpret experience demonstrates how Saunders uses logic to attribute meaning to reality. In general, they all communicate an idea of basic global human sameness. Saunders explicitly establishes this view early on, while floating in a tube through a water park. Based on his experience floating next to American soldiers, German women, and Arab teenagers, Saunders claims to have an epiphany:

> Given enough time, I realize, statistically, despite what it may look like at any given moment, we *will* all be brothers. All differences will be bred out. There will be no pure Arab, no pure Jew, no pure American. The old dividers – nation, race, religion – will be overpowered by crossbreeding and by our mass media, our world Culture o' Enjoyment.[27]

Saunders's general projection of humanity here takes the form of a biological and teleological narrative of human development. Saunders locates the source of this generally optimistic idea of human nature's development in a general human trait: "We, the New People," he states, "desire Fun and the Good Things

27 Saunders, 29.

of Life, and through Fun, we will be saved."[28] This idea of human sameness based on the prioritization of the desire to have fun then serves Saunders as the basis for other general assertions. For instance, he justifies the hostility of a member of the Taliban towards the United States with a rather general explanation: "What one might be tempted to call simplicity" he argues, "could be more accurately called a limited sphere of experience" which essentially causes a difference in meanings that are ascribed to reality.[29]

He underscores this explanation using a different mode of thinking—specifically, imagination—by means of which he entertains a hypothetical example to help make sense of his experience. In the case of the Taliban, he seeks to make sense of the tears that he shed observing the Arab kids having fun in the snow, by imagining a deportation of a member of the Taliban to the military prison in Guantánamo "where he's treated as if he personally planned 9/11… How must this look to him? How must we look to him?"[30] Here the imagined case of a Taliban member ultimately serves Saunders as a means to ask readers to imagine themselves viewing American behavior through the eyes of a foreigner—just like he viewed the Arab kids. By imagining this case, Saunders seeks to make sense of the actions of others and to foster understanding among seemingly different groups of people. Elsewhere, Saunders describes how imagination also has the power to divide, since it can anticipate hostile action by others. After undergoing an experience of anxiety at the Burj Al Arab, Saunders characterizes the emotional reaction in the same terms as his imagined interpretation of reality:

> I experienced a sudden fear that a group of Disapproving Guest Services People would appear at my remote-controlled door and physically escort me down to the lobby ATM (an ATM about which I expect I'll be having anxiety nightmares the rest of my life), which would once again prominently display the words PROVIDER DECLINES TRANSACTION.[31]

Saunders here marks out anxiety as subjective imagination and, thus, situates imagination as a powerful cognitive tool for influencing his own behavior.

28 Saunders, 29.
29 Saunders, 51.
30 Saunders, 52.
31 Saunders, 40.

Imagination shapes the ways in which he interprets and experiences reality and can be activated and used productively.

However, in Saunders's case, imagination cannot just be read as a mere instrument for producing argumentative support for generalizations that make sense of experience. Saunders also reflects on his own ways of sensemaking. This sensemaking is manifested in a kind of aside that seeks to provide additional context to a general assertion. Before relaying his mini-epiphany about the future sameness of all human beings for instance, Saunders addresses the reader on a meta-level, framing what is about to come:

> A disclaimer: it may be that, when you're forty-six and pearl white and wearing a new bathing suit at a theme park on your first full day in Arabia, you're especially prone to Big Naïve Philosophical Realizations.[32]

There might be, Saunders suggests here, at least one more level of reflection above the bare interpretation of an experience of reality. Furthermore, by addressing the reader directly, he suggests once again that this might be true for the reader as well, were the reader in Saunders's position.

Ultimately, however, these reflections on Saunders's own ways of interpreting result in a kind of meta-moral writer's code. This becomes apparent when Saunders is faced with contradictory inputs and complexity. In the passage quoted above, in which he is faced with contradictory statements by credible yet anonymous "People Who Know,"[33] Saunders not only indicates that he is happy not to be an investigative journalist, but he also admits to feeling a sort of relief. The header of the passage reads: "THE TRUTH IS, I CAN'T DECIDE WHAT'S TRUE, HONESTLY."[34] Truth, for Saunders, becomes not a search, or the result of a search, but a decision under these circumstances of contradiction and complexity. Not having to make this decision, which he associates with professional journalism, is a relief. This relief then turns into a general ethical guideline. In the text's final lines, after having concluded that: "what one finds in oneself will most certainly be found in The Other,"[35] Saunders describes how he counsels himself on the flight back home: "Fuck concepts. Don't

32 Saunders, 28.
33 Saunders, 46–47.
34 Saunders, 46.
35 Saunders, 55.

be afraid to be confused. Try to remain permanently confused. Anything is possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen."[36] In this passage, Saunders paints conscious confusion as a virtue, as a necessary way of being in the world, precisely because it contains the potential for human understanding.

Potentially Bonding Text

Saunders assumes this very potential on the level of the communicative relationship he has with his readers. Here, he communicates an awareness of how the text, as a vehicle of transmission, shapes his message. Furthermore, throughout the text, as hinted at repeatedly above, he seeks to bridge the experiential gap between himself and the reader, employing an informal, conversational tone that communicates intimacy.

Saunders's use of various formal elements, which, in turn, shape the content, heralds Saunders's self-awareness as a medium transmitting text. For instance, Saunders uses a total of nineteen sub-headers spread over the 34 pages of his piece to frame the subsequent prose text. Although printed in identical typographical layout, these sub-headers consist of different modes of speech. In the case of the first sub-header, for example: "PUT THAT STATELY PLEASURE PALACE THERE BETWEEN THOSE OTHER TWO,"[37] Saunders employs the imagined voice of a unified body of high-handed hotel-builders in Dubai addressed to workers to foreshadow his exposé of the then-recent building boom in the city. The header of the text's penultimate section, in which South-Indian workers try to visit the Emirates Towers on their day off, reads similarly: "LOOK, DREAM, BUT STAY OUT THERE." One sub-header consists of a question directed at readers,[38] another of a quote.[39] There are foreshadowing summaries of the narrative content that is to follow,[40] or the conversational admission directed at readers mentioned earlier: "THE TRUTH IS, I CAN'T DECIDE WHAT'S TRUE, HONESTLY."[41] The diversity of these sub-headers sug-

36 Saunders, 55.
37 Saunders, 21.
38 Saunders, 50.
39 Saunders, 45.
40 Saunders, 23, 43, 47.
41 Saunders, 46.

gests their self-referential function, since they playfully point to the inevitable interplay of form and content in text, which points to the medium's flexibility and general openness.

The same can be argued about other formal elements that communicate a certain type of distinct meaning and work exclusively with text. For instance, Saunders forms a: "partial list of wise things cabdrivers said to me in Dubai"[42] that is distinctly formatted and consists of five numbered quotes. Taken together in this way, they illustrate both the plurality of cabdrivers and Saunders's intent to acknowledge and literally incorporate other perspectives into his text. Furthermore, Saunders repeatedly uses italics in order to emphasize particular words, and thus clarify the meaning of his text,[43] or to mark a passage as quoted internal monologue.[44] Similarly, the extensive capitalization he employs serves—just like in David Foster Wallace's reportage—to emphasize concepts with distinct meaning informed by the specific context of the written piece. The "Haves" and the "Have-Nots,"[45] for instance, signify the wealthy and the poor. Text, winkingly exhibited in its own formal plurality, always appears both as mere text and as a context directed simultaneously at both another text and the reader, thereby revealing its own dialogical potential.

However, Saunders's awareness of the plasticity of text is displayed by hints at the potential for the text's formal elements to connect with readers. More directly, the personal, casual voice and direct reader addresses that Saunders employs can be viewed as a concrete manifestation of textual intimacy. At least partly, this implies personal intimacy is grounded in the use of informal or even vulgar language. For instance, Saunders characterizes a few of Dubai's architectural ambitions as "the supercool parts – the parts that, when someone tells you about them, your attention drifts because these morons have to be lying,"[46] lets the readers know that he had been "blissfully farting around"[47] inside a luxury hotel, or tells them that an artificial skiing hall contains "basically a shitload of crushed ice."[48] He also blurs the line between written and oral language in

42 Saunders, 34.
43 Saunders, i.e., 28 and 29.
44 Saunders, 30.
45 Saunders, 31.
46 Saunders, 22.
47 Saunders, 29.
48 Saunders, 49.

his use of fillers. When unable to pay for his room at the Burj Al Arab, for example, he writes that he was: "trying to explain, like some yokel hustler at a Motel 6 in Topeka, that I'd be happy to pay half in cash now, half on checkout if that would be, ah, acceptable, would that be, you know, cool?" With his use of these expressions, Saunders presupposes an intimacy with the reader that not only permits, but encourages the casualness of orality and the specificity of context it implies.

This reduction of distance is also demonstrated in Saunders's direct reader addresses that work both as the self-characterization of a stand-in for readers and as attempts at bridging the gap between writer and readers. In fact, Saunders opens his piece by stating the presupposition that he and the reader might be in the same position regarding Dubai: "If you are like I was before I went to Dubai, you may not know exactly where Dubai is."[49] He then moves on to speculate openly about the readers' knowledge about Dubai: "You may also not know, as I did not know, what Dubai is all about or why someone would want to send you there. You might wonder: Is it dangerous?"[50] As hinted at above, such instances of directly addressing the reader can, on the one hand, be read as reflecting Saunders's internal, circular, self-interrogating process of interpretation. On the other hand, however, they are also attempts at forming a bond with the reader through text. This is particularly apparent in a passage in which Saunders imagines the reader as being American, as he ponders the possible deportation of a simple man from rural Afghanistan accused of terrorism:

> My experience has been that the poor, simple people of the world admire us, are enamored by our boldness, are hopeful that the insanely positive values we espouse can be actualized in the world. They are, in other words, rooting for us. This means that when we disappoint them… we have the potential to disappoint them bitterly and drive them away.[51]

In this way, Saunders marks himself out as being part of an American community with his readers, while simultaneously also imagining a community of people not belonging to this American community. Here, he explicitly presupposes a connection between writer and reader that is not based on their fundamental humanity, but on the assumption that Americans are reading his ar-

49 Saunders, 21.
50 Saunders, 21.
51 Saunders, 52.

ticle in an American magazine. Thus, Saunders shows that text not only works to communicate the possibilities of human connection through text, but that it also communicates the representation of real physical, material presence.

Basic Belief

To conclude, in "The New Mecca," Saunders casts himself as an actively producing human medium, one who reflects both the contingency of material experience and its symbolic interpretation, as he turns both into objects of subjective cognition. He molds global consumerism as a master mediator that both creates and hinders experience. Saunders's self-reflection, as fundamentally human medium, reveals a belief in the unifying power of intra- and interpersonal authenticity as productive fantasies. Despite the fact that he ultimately claims to resist conceptualization, Saunders explicitly resorts to a general, emotional concept of basic human sameness in order to make sense of his experience as well as of his role as a writer. For in this role, his self-characterization as an ordinary guy from Chicago enables him to actively claim similarity or even intimacy with readers as well as the people who inform his first-hand experience on the ground in Dubai: "I've been to Dubai and I believe,"[52] Saunders establishes on the text's third page. It would have been more apt for Saunders to claim that he has been to Dubai and *still* believes, because his experience in Dubai simply reinforces an already-existing belief in basic human sameness.

However, this similarity is always marked as made up by Saunders in the circularity of his interpretations. As he gradually elaborates on his reasons for believing in humanity, he also shows an awareness of temporality. Saunders is familiar with the human capability to be kind and good because he has experienced human kindness and goodness in the past. As long as this capability exists, the possibilities for it to be employed are everywhere. They potentially also alleviate the divisive forces of global consumerism, which Saunders situates in the fragmentation of human experience. Fiercely hopeful as he is, however, Saunders insists on the idea of human sameness against the backdrop of this difference. For him, it is precisely this difference that carries the openness to human understanding and peace—but only if the contingencies and aesthetic character of experience and language are acknowledged.

52 Saunders, 23.

Saunders's self-reflection as human medium ultimately marks out the individualization of human experience combined with the loss of religion or spirituality as the basic problems of mediatized, globalized, and fantastic postmodern reality. The generalizing of Saunders's touristic experience in Dubai only works convincingly in tandem with his embodied belief in basic human sameness. Thus, ontologically, his self-reflection appears exemplarily as a basic human necessity that serves to introduce a critical perspective onto the globalized consumerism that both he himself as well as his readers and subjects live under.