4.1 Material and Symbolic Violence

If individual and collective possibility makes up a central aspect of contemporary reality in the U.S., so does impossibility. Individual and collective freedom to make and change is not a given. To the contrary, a big chunk of journalistic work is concerned with stories of not primarily the human making or changing of connections but their violent fragmentation or breaking under the pressures of certain structures and abuses of individual and collective power. Ties can not only be strengthened or improved. It is also within the realm of possibility of human interaction that they worsen, and, in the case of violent death, are erased permanently.

The following case studies, then, take a closer look at authorial self-reflection in the face of different kinds of violence in contexts of power that address different degrees of individual and collective responsibility. The first text, by George Saunders, is concerned with the structural and collective yet not necessarily lethal violence of homelessness. The second text, Michael Paterniti's reportage, examines the nevertheless collective violence of singular acts of mass shootings. And the final text by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah positions racial violence as a fundamental responsibility of White America.

As I will show, these texts have a lot in common with the ones previously analyzed, in terms of the self-reflection of the authors as human media. However, in many ways they can be set apart from the texts discussed in chapter two or three. Violence and death, the issues at stake, are more existential. Consequently, there is less room for the emphasis of play and free expression in language. In face of grave matters of existential material destruction, emphasis on the possibilities of symbolic self-making simply will not do.

Overall, compared to the previous six texts, we might observe a shift from the symbolic to the material that takes ethical matters more seriously. In these texts, it is certainly more relevant that the writers exist in reality; that they have themselves bodies that they put on the line. This does, of course, imply a shared

humanity. But in these instances, this shared humanity is not cause for celebration but for the taking of responsibility. Language and mediation matter more in these texts, and it is evident that the connection of material worldmaking and symbolic sensemaking is emphasized with a different kind of urgency.

This is noteworthy, because, intuitively, the physical harming of others appears as entirely a physical matter. After all, the swinging of a fist or the pulling of a trigger are primarily physical acts. Words cannot break bones or pierce skin. However, crucially, every act of violence is also a communicative act that carries symbolic meaning tied to its material effect. Violence thus is a fundamental part of human experience as it influences both human cooperation and reflexive self-making. Importantly, as mediatization transforms human experience, it also affects the ways in which humans individually and collectively employ violence to shape individual and collective identity. "When one has been hurt by new technology, when the private person or the corporate body finds its entire identity endangered by physical or psychic change, it lashes back in a fury of self defense", Marshall McLuhan and Quention Fiore have argued. "When our identity is in danger, we feel certain that we have a mandate for war. The old image must be recovered at any cost."[1]

Furthermore, mediatization also affects the ways in which humans react to and make sense of acts of violence. If technical mediation lends its hands to spatializing and compartmentalizing forces, it might favor the interpretation of acts of violence as more narrowly mere physical acts and push their potential symbolic meanings into the background. The degree to which acts of violence are considered physical or symbolical matters is highly relevant to how a society reacts to past violence, and potentially informs future transgressions.

Writers consider these reciprocities as they reflect on violence in a mediatized society and culture such as the United States. The three texts analyzed in this chapter look at real manifestations of violence and process disturbing events in conjunction with writerly self-reflection to promote a specifically human mediation. Writers intertwine the material effects of physical violence with more abstract symbolic acts of mediation involved in the making of individual and collective identity in each of the texts examined. By way of displayed self-reflection, the writers exemplarily address real violence's material and symbolical causes and effects. Their texts are both evaluations of real physical violence and comments upon this same violence's very mediation, as well

1 McLuhan and Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village: An Inventory of Some of the Current Spastic Situations That Could Be Eliminated by More Feedforward*, 97.

as upon the ways in which material and symbolic aspects of meaning intersect in acts of violence. Thus, they again emphasize the singular and subjective human experience of violence and delineate their approach from any simplistic reproduction of violent experience associated with technological mediation.

In his piece of reportage, George Saunders connects the structural violence of homelessness to communication's social aspects. In his texts on mass shootings, Michael Paterniti considers the similarities between acts of deadly gun violence and industrial mass media's coverage of these acts. Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah explicitly understands her uncompromising profile of a racist mass murderer as a response to American society and culture's collective racist amnesia.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, violence involves the forceful restriction of certain possibilities of human interaction and self-making analyzed earlier. Nevertheless, as such, violence can also be an instrument of the reflexive personal or collective building and maintaining of identity. Broadly, it has been understood as: "violation of the self-same in its purity by an external other."[2] Based on the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' work, Hent de Vries argues more specifically that:

> violence can be found in whatever narcissistic strategy the self adopts to capture, thematize, reduce, use, and thus annul or annihilate the other. Violence can likewise be found wherever some otherness engulfs or seizes upon the self and forces it to participate in what it–in and of itself and, precisely, as other–is not.[3]

This spotlight on violence's universal character is important because it illuminates connections between the rather abstract acts of identity formation and the concrete acts involved in physical violence.

Despite violence's universal character, understandings of specific instances of violence differ in many respects. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as:

> The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results

2 de Vries and Weber, "Introduction," 1.

3 de Vries, "Violence and Testimony," 16.

> in or has high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.[4]

However, according to Toby Miller, there exist: "differences between state, collective, and interpersonal violence, between planned and passional violence, and between fatal and non-fatal forms."[5] Furthermore, he argues that non-physical forms of violence such as violence-inciting hateful rhetoric can also be counted as violence.

Some scholars also argue that violence does not have to be as directly perceived as, for instance, the blow of a fist swung into a man's head. As a constitutive aspect of the reflexive self-definition of contemporary Western societies such as the U.S. violence can also attain a collective, even normalized and generally tolerated character in the form of structural violence; in contrast to direct, intentional violence such as warfare, structural violence in part refers to unintentional actions by systems, structures, or institutions rather than human beings. In 1969, the Norwegian social scientist Johan Galtung wrote: "Violence with a clear subject-object-relationship is manifest because it is visible as action. … Violence without this relation is structural, built into structure."[6]

Structural violence, he later elaborated, occurs in: "[s]ettings within which individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever intending to do so, just performing their regular duties as a job defined in the structure."[7] It has to be understood as: "a process working slowly as the way misery in general, and hunger in particular, erode and finally kill human beings."[8] Although criticized for its wide, general scope, Galtung's distinction has made the violent workings of concrete institutions and social structures much more visible.[9]

Importantly, then, in democratic societies such as the U.S., structural violence refers to a certain collective abuse of power tolerated by a majority. This abuse of power infringes upon the freedom of certain individuals to make themselves reflexively in ways that other individuals can. Newton Garver for instance expanded a definition of violence to include structural violence as the

4 Krug et al., "World Report on Violence and Health," 5.

5 Miller, *Violence*, 6.

6 Galtung, "Twenty-Five Years of Peace Research: Ten Challenges and Some Responses," 171.

7 Galtung, 145.

8 Galtung, 145–146.

9 Roberts, *Human Insecurity: Global Structures of Violence*, 22.

violation of fundamental human rights. What he calls covert institutional violence "operates when people are deprived of choices in a systematic way by the very manner in which transactions normally take place".[10] Structural violence then can be viewed as the collective toleration of inequality in terms of, for instance, wealth, gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation, or class. While the concept may be a bit general to account for specific acts of indirect violence or the normalized abuse of power, it nevertheless serves to explore the connections between the social aspects of specific acts of such indirect violence and the social components of the making of meaning and identity.

As is apparent in George Saunders's reportage, distanced structural violence as the toleration of extreme poverty and homelessness can also contribute to more direct physical violence between individuals. In many ways, then, structural violence helps illuminate the perhaps less apparent connection between the real material conditions for collective and individual human self-making and their actual reflexive realizations of individuals. They are, even in a seemingly free society such as the U.S., inhibited or even made and kept impossible by collective (in-)action and repressions of the core social aspects of the reflexive construction of individual and collective identity.

The U.S. provides the specific social and cultural backdrop for the violence described in the three texts analyzed in this chapter. It is an extraordinarily violent country with by far the highest level of gun ownership in the world, the highest homicide rates in the Global North, and high rates of racially motivated hate crimes.[11] Furthermore, it also continues to feature a high rate of homelessness.[12]

It is therefore significant that all three texts analyzed connect the violence of this specific culture to a larger point about mediatization as they grasp violence's fundamental reflexivity in mediatized realities. As acts of individual and collective identity formation, acts of physical violence are always tethered to the negotiation of their symbolic meaning. Importantly, as I will show in the analyses, it is precisely the writer's own display of self-reflection that helps them to unearth the specific dynamics of violence's reflexivity in their respective texts. And this reflexivity, in turn, illuminates the specific qualities of human mediation in distinction from the capabilities of technological media.

10 Garver, "What Violence Is", 265.

11 Miller, *Violence*, 13–18.

12 "State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition."