4.3 The Atoning Medium in Michael Paterniti's "Should We Get Used To Mass Shootings?" (2016)

In April 2016, *GQ* published an exploration of the ubiquitous gun violence in contemporary U.S. society by Michael Paterniti's reportage, entitled "Should We Get Used To Mass Shootings?" Like John Jeremiah Sullivan or Mac McClelland, Paterniti is primarily known as a magazine journalist, who has written reportage, profiles, and criticism for mainly U.S. outlets such as *Harper's*, *Esquire*, or *GQ*, where he is a correspondent. With several nominations for the National Magazine Award, Paterniti is considered to be one of the pre-eminent current American narrative journalists. After Paterniti published a collection of his magazine writings entitled *Love and Other Ways of Dying*[1] in 2015, a reviewer called it: "journalism elevated beyond its ordinary capacities, well into the realm of literature".[2]

Similar to Saunders's text, Paterniti's reportage zooms in on the reflexivity of violence and the ways in which symbolic responses to gun violence interact with and correspond to its material causes and effects. Claiming to be making amends for his own past neglect, Paterniti tries to make sense of the violence by exerting presence in space and time; Paterniti does so by looking and listening closely at the crime scenes in particular. The resulting narrative's main tension can be located in Paterniti's display of his own dealing with violence, torn between the moral imperative to stay attentive and the psychological necessity to shut out the consequences of gun violence. Paterniti addresses the contradictions of the simultaneously engaging and paralyzing media coverage

1 Paterniti, *Love and Other Ways of Dying: Essays*.

2 Keohane, "Hurting for Words."

of these acts of violence in the self-reflective exhibition of his ambiguous workings as medium. This occurs mainly in three areas: His self-awareness as a human medium is manifested in his self-characterization as a human writer at odds with the technological production and transmission of experience in the media industry. It is apparent in his deliberate acts of remembering the past and imagining the future aimed at countering the ending or negligence of time through deadly violence and media coverage. It is also displayed in his engaging communication with readers imagined as being part of a community of sinners who need to change.

Not unlike the work of John Jeremiah Sullivan, Mac McClelland (Gabriel Mac), and Ghansah, Michael Paterniti's texts have largely escaped scholarly attention to date. Currently, there exists no critical scholarship with a specific focus on Paterniti's work—not even a paper or a book chapter. Passages of his stories have occasionally been used to analyze features of narrative journalism.[3] His work received the most scholarly attention in Norman Sims's book *True Stories*.[4] Sims lauded him as one of the pre-eminent, current American narrative journalists and marked his story of the 1998 Swissair plane crash in Halifax as a modern classic of the genre.[5] Paterniti has talked about his approach to reportage on different occasions. In these interviews, he repeatedly emphasized his specific interest in phenomenological experience as research method. For instance, he told a college weekly: "I don't have some strident message. My work is just to bear witness and tell the story."[6] And in the Longform Podcast, he stated: "I want to see it, whatever it is. If it's war, if it's suffering, if it's complete, unbridled elation, I just want to see what that looks like—I want to smell it, I want to taste it, I want to think about it, I want to be caught up in it."[7]

Still, with its decidedly declared intention to bear witness, "Should We Get Used To Mass Shootings?" appears as a fairly unusual text in the overall body of Paterniti's work, which usually consists overwhelmingly of profiles in which the author examines the inner world of his subjects, rather than his own. In his examination of gun violence, Paterniti visits some of the places where mass

3 Hartsock, "Exploring the Referentiality of Narrative Literary Journalism."

4 Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*.

5 Paterniti, "The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy." The story was first published in print in the July 2000 issue of *Esquire* magazine.

6 Fosler-Jones, "Author Michael Paterniti Talks Process, Travel and Journalism."

7 Linsky, "Longform Podcast 93: Michael Paterniti."

shootings occurred in 2015. Then, over a stretch of ten days beginning in late November, the U.S. experienced 14 mass shootings across the country.

Mass Media and Mass Shootings

Compared to homelessness, the mass shootings thematized in Michael Paterniti's text are a more direct, yet no less specifically American, type of violence. More than 500,000 people have died in the U.S. through bullet wounds in the first two decades of the 21st century alone. In 2019, incidents of mass shootings with at least four persons killed reached a new high: 211 persons died in 41 shootings.[8] Although mass shootings occurred previously, they are largely an American cultural phenomenon of the 21st century that was defined in many ways by the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School. This incident was the first mass shooting to be covered live on cable news and it was—second only to the O.J. Simpson case—one of the biggest American news stories of the 1990s.[9] Definitions of mass shootings are ambiguous but typically refer to isolated attacks in a fairly public setting in which at least four people die.[10] In most cases of mass shootings, the shooters suffer from untreated mental health problems such as severe depression or paranoia. Furthermore, shooters are socially marginalized with regard to their masculine identity. In many cases, the shootings also have to be understood as suicide attacks in which the shooters themselves plan to die.[11] Most of the weapons used in mass shootings are legally purchased semiautomatic guns.[12]

In his text, Paterniti focuses on the formal and technical issues associated with live media coverage that has potentially anesthetic effects on viewers. Watching a live event, John Durham Peters has shown, amounts to a kind of passive witnessing that is highly entertaining because it draws on the uncertainty of the present, which is "catastrophic, subject to radical alterations."[13] There have been concerns, then, that live TV's highly entertaining quality normalizes the oftentimes troubling content of the broadcast because it first

8 Miller, *Violence*, 15.

9 DeFoster, *Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of "Terror,"* 44.

10 DeFoster, 46–47.

11 DeFoster, 47.

12 DeFoster, 48.

13 Peters, "Witnessing," November 1, 2001, 719.

and foremost assures the viewer of an access to truth and authentic reality.[14] "Instead of providing news that helps people to understand what happened and what it means", Susan Brockus has argued that "live coverage may force viewers to settle for seeing and hearing what is real and significant *for the moment*."[15]

Despite their frequency, most Americans experience instances of mass shootings mediated through news media.[16] Ruth DeFoster has claimed that the: "role of mass media in helping to perpetuate the conditions that continue to lead to these shootings is considerable and inescapable."[17] DeFoster mainly criticizes the coverage in terms of content as overly superficial for its focus on individualizing the shooters and trying to identify specific reasons why a certain gunman lost control. Such narratives, which emphasize individually troubling experiences of unrequited love or bullying, have tended to ignore the deeper issues such as easy access to weapons, untreated mental health problems, and toxic masculinity.[18] As mentioned previously, acts of mass gun violence and the ways in which the media cover them are deeply connected to America's own cultural identity.[19]

A Human Journalist and the Industrial Horde

Paterniti's self-positioning is absolutely central to the text's overall point. Paterniti styles himself as a human journalist motivated by an internal drive. He is straightforward regarding his motivation for creating the experience and hence determines it as having been intentionally produced. In the text, Paterniti admits that he had a clear idea of what he was doing:

> The idea seemed a little perverse, actually. Ten days in America tracking mass shootings from place to place. Hunting those who had been hunted, to understand that we are being hunted, too.
> Even my wife asked: Why? Isn't there a happier story?

14 Brockus, "Coming to You 'Live': Exclusive Witnessing and the Battlefield Reporter," 31.
15 Brockus, 40.
16 DeFoster, *Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of "Terror,"* 7.
17 DeFoster, 203.
18 DeFoster, 50–52.
19 DeFoster, 59.

> It worries me, she said.
> It keeps repeating, I wanted to say, because we keep looking away. I was a main offender like everyone else.
> So this was my making amends: ten days of mass shootings in America, which could be any ten days in America, really, which could be the next ten days before us, full of possibility, too.[20]

Here, even Paterniti states that he also followed an intention regarding the writing and communicating of the story. He intends to avert future harm simply by fully confronting past violence. Furthermore, he confesses that he feels he has not paid enough attention to past acts of gun violence and wants to make good. This confession clearly imbues the story with a religious component and establishes a central temporality along with a personal connection. By referring to his wife's reaction to his idea, Paterniti further characterizes himself as a human subject with a private life and claims a role beyond that of a journalist merely fulfilling particular functions within an industry. His impetus, it appears, inevitably combines ethical concern with a sense of epistemological obligation.

However, Paterniti does not fully break away from his professional role as a journalist, but instead enters into an ambiguous relationship with the identity that his stated intention carries with it. Just like the other journalists covering a shooting in San Bernardino, for instance, he attends the press conference. "I was there in time for the press-conference phase of assuage," Paterniti writes, "of tell-it-like-it-is, of aftermath and air-of-calm competency, of everyone-relax-situation-under-control."[21] Later, he assumes a more explicit responsibility as he associates with the other journalists present: "The horde, of which I was a part, fiddled with cameras, mics, pens, went straight to the regurgitation of details."[22] As he admits, Paterniti is aware that he is complicit in the established ritualization of the social processing of gun violence through his mere attendance at the press conference, which marks him out as a journalist. As such, however, he is inadequate. For instance, Paterniti admits that when he started traveling to the scenes of the shootings, he had: "wanted to go to all of them but […] couldn't keep up."[23] Furthermore, he fails to get a man he calls

20 Paterniti, "Should We Get Used to Mass Shootings?," pt. 2.
21 Paterniti, pt. 3.
22 Paterniti, pt. 3.
23 Paterniti, pt. 4.

Ray, a witness to the shooting in New Orleans, to talk. "Two hours earlier, he'd had enough, wanted to stand up; now he wanted nothing to do with it, to make himself and his family invisible."[24] Although not explicitly described as manifestations of inadequacy or weakness, but presented rather as consequences of a reality which have simply become overwhelming, these instances designate him as different from the ordinary horde of journalists.

Throughout the text, Paterniti's distinguishing feature can be located in his very human capacity to experience, which he identifies as being at odds with the workings of the media industry. At the press conference following the San Bernardino shooting, for instance, he abandons the mode of immediate retelling, simply stating that: "someone else stepped to the bank of microphones, to offer a logistical update. All of it was uploaded instantly and beamed live; all of it scrolling across America's ticker with equal emphasis, the same valence."[25] In juxtaposition to this mechanical process of seemingly immediate dissemination, Paterniti focuses his attention as a human subject and medium interested in the most human consequences of the tragedy before him. He stays by the side of Lieutenant Mike Madden, one of the first responders to the emergency call, who has stepped back from the microphones:

> But Mike Madden, after stepping back, stood with his hands clasped. He made a show of listening, but wore a pensive frown. He seemed far away, in that unmendable room again. That was an image that stays with me, even now, months later: a man in a crowd, looking through the horde in front of him, to an unshakable memory. The horde, of which I was a part, fiddled with cameras, mics, pens, went straight to the regurgitation of details. Photos of the guns used by the killers were displayed – the two AR-15s, the semiautomatic nine-millimeter – as heads craned and cameras shuttered. At the end, someone yelled, "Can we get a closer look at the weapons?"
> A fellow officer put a hand on Madden's shoulder; he turned and walked away.[26]

Although part of the horde, as noted above, Paterniti cultivates a different kind of attention, focused on a human being in the background, rather than on the deadly technology in the foreground. He describes Madden's physical appearance, imagines his inner thoughts, and ultimately shows him in a comforting

24 Paterniti, pt. 4.
25 Paterniti, pt. 3.
26 Paterniti, pt. 3.

image physically connected to another human being. By contrast, the mass of journalists appears mechanically focused on the mere functional transmission of detail, rather than on human meaning. As he watches them crane their heads, they come across as mere tools performing a mechanical function, simply getting "a closer look."

Paterniti presents a more precise illustration of the mechanical character of mass media in instances when he himself acts as a media consumer and when a member of the mass media, a TV correspondent, describes the routines of the trade. Paterniti is on a plane when the shooting in San Bernardino happens. Still, he is able to follow the proceedings in California on television:

> By going to the CNN feed, and watching live, I could see the snuff in real time: Syed Farook, the 28-year-old Muslim father of a 6-month-old baby, sprawled on the street across from the vehicle, bleeding out, his long rifle flung nearby. I could watch when the police in the BearCat, thinking the whole SUV booby-trapped and ready to blow, dumped Tashfeen Malik, the 29-year-old mother, from the backseat of the vehicle onto the ground.[27]

In this passage, Paterniti describes, with a sense of estrangement, how live TV makes it possible for him to seemingly immediately—"in real time"—watch how real humans, a father and a mother, die. The mechanics of this kind of mediation uncouple time from space, thereby creating a technological experience of the event elsewhere.

As Paterniti describes it, this seeming transcendence of space is combined with a temporal selection based on predicted audience interest. When meeting a TV correspondent, Paterniti asks her to elaborate on the criteria for determining how much attention they pay to mass shootings. She answers that it is largely based on how quickly the assailants die or are imprisoned and how easy it is to determine a motive. "There is a formula," she writes, "sadly after the killer is gone or imprisoned, the flowers die at the memorials and the press packs up, these communities are widely ignored by the national media."[28] There is, as Paterniti indicates by means of her explanation, a particular, superficial, and predetermined narrative for the TV coverage of a mass shooting that isolates the actual crime and its perpetrators from the victims. Significantly, as the TV correspondent makes clear, this story is informed by the interests of both the TV

27 Paterniti, pt. 3.

28 Paterniti, pt. 8.

viewership and the networks. By making this TV narrative an object of his own narrative, Paterniti distances himself from this way of telling. He feels the need to view these events differently than TV viewers and to narrate them differently than the TV cameras, even though he is also part of the media—the horde.

Acknowledging Human Time

The entire thrust of Paterniti's text then, it could be argued, works against a particular, inhuman way of experiencing and processing gun violence that he deems complicit in the shootings themselves. Paterniti's own interpretation of the experience necessitates a more productive and preventive approach to narrating and experiencing. In his view, such approaches necessitate a broader awareness of the meaning of time in human existence. As I have sought to show, Paterniti describes live media as the creator of a particular kind of experience that disconnects time from space and that isolates moments of spectacular attention, that show a present without a past, future, or shared space.

However, human life is, as Paterniti writes, characterized by the very experience of time that creates a past, present, and future. Wanting to "raise an alarm, years past it mattering,"[29] Paterniti establishes this acknowledgment of temporality as the basic premise for the interpretation of his experience:

> We couldn't take back our past. Couldn't rewrite it. We couldn't teleport to that McDonald's in San Ysidro, 1984, to warn the 21 dead to flee as a 41-year old-father of two walks in, armed with an Uzi, pistol, and shotgun, and says, "I killed thousands in Vietnam, and I want to kill more." We couldn't go back to the University of Texas, in 1966, to warn the 14 dead about the unhinged engineering student, carrying an M1 carbine, who is perched in the clock tower about to fire. And we couldn't go back to that midnight show of The Dark Knight Rises in the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater, in July 2012, interrupted by a neuroscience Ph.D. candidate, who opened fire on the crowd, killing 12 and injuring 70.[30]

Paterniti emphasizes the temporality at the center of human life, and thus at the center of lethal violence, by declaring the fundamental impossibility to change the past and undo three past acts of gun violence.

29 Paterniti, pt. 3.

30 Paterniti, pt. 3.

In this way, he lays the groundwork for a framing of acts of gun violence as acts that, in their particularity, end time. A metaphor for this ending of time is the interruption of traffic in San Bernardino, where, right after the shooting, "everything was concentrated and frozen in that moment."[31] Paterniti observes a similar stasis in New Orleans, where violence caused a stoppage and the ensuing fear silences potential witnesses and disguises the potential existence of video evidence of the shooting. "We were in the middle of the city," Paterniti writes about sitting at the playground where the shooting occurred, "and yet nothing moved here."[32]

However, the ending of time also has a spatial component in Paterniti's interpretation. This is manifested in the ways in which Paterniti refers to death at least twice. In a summary of shootings, he mentions a deadly day in Chicago, where "three people are… shot dead/erased/vanished."[33] When remembering the shooting at Columbine High School, he writes that the victims: "had been erased/disappeared/vanished. There were the families now clustered around these sudden erasures and absences, and families gathered around those families gathered around the void."[34] Death creates not only a temporal stoppage, but also a physical void because the end of a human life time also means the end of a human body. Here, then, space and time are connected as they are both anchored in concrete human bodies that disappear, vanish, remember and mourn in Paterniti's transmission, where the human medium is different from live television.

Hence, to acknowledge time for Paterniti involves confronting not only its stoppage in the particular case of death, but also its continuation in the general processing of the particular. Continuation, in such a morally charged context as a mass shooting, means oblivion. If stopped traffic serves as a metaphor for death in the text, flowing traffic signifies forgetting. It is the restarting of traffic that bothers Brittany, the girl working in the hotel lobby in San Bernardino, because it makes her aware that the interruption was only temporary, that her life continues despite the fact that it has ended for others.[35] Paterniti emphasizes this metaphorical connection between traffic and forgetting as he devotes

31 Paterniti, pt. 3.
32 Paterniti, pt. 4.
33 Paterniti, pt. 6.
34 Paterniti, pt. 9.
35 Paterniti, pt. 1.

an entire section of his article, number 7, to this interpretation: "History evaporates, but here we are again. From the hotel desk, she can see the traffic moving. And that's when we begin to forget again…"[36] The traffic metaphor here serves to illustrate the basic ambiguity in the human perception of time that includes the possibilities of both ending and continuing, locating this connection in human consciousness.

For Paterniti, then, acknowledging time naturally points to the element of human agency in its perception. He emphasizes the human subject's agency while remembering the Columbine shooting and the various rituals of mourning and he concludes: "It seemed as if the traffic stopped for a long time, that first time."[37] Paterniti suggests that the length of time the traffic is stopped for, how consciously the dead are mourned, depends.

This emphasis on human agency in the perception of time consequently includes the agency of a human medium and in Paterniti's case can even be seen as a moral obligation. As such, Paterniti makes his point in passages in which he explicitly remembers the past, faces the present, and imagines the future. His making amends necessarily includes a confession of his past oblivion. When he reported on the Columbine shooting, Paterniti remembers: "I didn't just look away, I ran."[38] He confronts what he deems a past failure by remembering that he fled Columbine in order to be able to avoid having to face the grief of the victims' relatives:

> I now wonder if part of the reason I wanted to get out was to avoid the onslaught of their pain, perhaps a typical response/reflex. To avoid full responsibility. To remain untouched. To live my Manichaean illusion: There's good and evil, and the latter can be avoided.[39]

This remembering of past repression consequently necessitates the retroactive taking of responsibility.

So Paterniti does what he could not bring himself to do seventeen years previously: he visits some of those left behind. Looking closely at the present for him involves looking at a present that is affected by past gun violence and by its normalization. This is what he hears from the mother of one of the Columbine

36 Paterniti, pt. 7.
37 Paterniti, pt. 9.
38 Paterniti, pt. 9.
39 Paterniti, pt. 9.

shooters who "disagreed with the word 'epidemic' to describe these events. "It gives it a normalcy I think is dangerous.""[40] It is also what he concludes after visiting a father of a boy killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. This shooting proves that shootings have become so normal that they can happen anywhere and even affect his own family: "My youngest son was in second grade at the time. That is, *we* were the Newtown parents, and they had been us, too, formerly."[41] Looking closely at the present also brings with it a moral necessity; if normalization of gun crime has fostered gun crime, then it is paramount not to normalize it, not to look away when it happens, but to keep looking. "He didn't take anyone's guns away," Paterniti writes referring to Mark Barden, the father, "he just wanted to make us look at what they'd done to us."[42]

These acknowledgments of past and present affect Paterniti's imagination of the future. This future also involves the possibility, hinted at previously, that we will be personally affected by gun violence. In section 5, Paterniti imagines this possibility, addressing not only himself, but also his readers:

> It began, begins, will begin again. With a sound, reported as a dull crack. A firecracker in the distance. A backfire, a chair tipped, hitting the floor.
> It's a shift of air, an exhale. It will begin with a thud, a whimper.
> On a robin's-egg-blue morning in my town, yours.[43]

In the entire passage, too long to quote in full here, Paterniti imagines the future as a possibility derived from the reassessed past and the unflinchingly confronted present. Consequently, the future as he imagines it is a collective one in which present collective inattention will lead to a collectively shared risk of being affected by gun violence. Paterniti also imagines, as a future consequence, the question about where the shooter got the gun from and the necessary answer: "[I]f answered honestly," Paterniti writes, "each and every time we'll realize that we gave it to the killer ourselves. By amnesia, inaction, or the true belief that every American should own a gun, if they want."[44] Citing amnesia or inaction as causes, Paterniti also presents, as a necessary cure to the problem, the simple acknowledgment of temporary dimensions and the activation of a memory that he is exercising as a writer himself.

40 Paterniti, pt. 9.
41 Paterniti, pt. 11.
42 Paterniti, pt. 11.
43 Paterniti, pt. 5.
44 Paterniti, pt. 5.

A Threatened Nation's Consciousness

The collective address is one of the text's key rhetorical characteristics. In his communicative relationship with readers, Paterniti explicitly affiliates himself with them as a fellow citizen as he sounds a call for a different kind of attention from an entire national community threatened by random gun violence. In his narrative, then, Paterniti communicates a sense of urgent national unity and connection on a personal level, while fragmenting his perception of live police radio in passages of montage that correspondingly make the experience appear strange.

As detailed above, Paterniti presents gun violence as a communal threat with the potential to affect both himself and his readers. In the text, this sense of community is gradually established, expanding outwards from Paterniti's acknowledgment that he is included in this threatened community to include his readers too. Paterniti begins this gradual expansion with an interpretation of an utterance by the girl working in the lobby of the hotel in San Bernardino. She tells him that she only had a breakdown when the traffic started moving again after the police barriers had been removed:

> I only realized later what she'd been saying underneath, about the cars and all.
> What she was saying was that she felt they were coming for her.
> What she was saying was: I don't know how to tell you this, but you're next, too.[45]

In these final lines of the text's opening section, Paterniti accepts the girl's sense of being threatened as threatening to himself, too. It appears to be an ethical move on Paterniti's part because he only acknowledges the threat indirectly, as his own interpretation of her confession about the breakdown related to traffic. To feel threatened, then, is something that he presents as an ultimately moral choice based on the acknowledgment of another's experience. This, of course, has the consequence that not only Paterniti, but also his readers, could make this decision and accept the threat if they were only willing to look at reality in the same way as Paterniti. In this initial passage, then, the reader's inclusion in the threatened community is only invoked through Pater-

45 Paterniti, pt. 1.

niti's embodiment as a stand-in for people not yet affected, but who are willing to pay attention if necessary.

This invocation turns more explicit as Paterniti's narrative progresses, explicitly designating readers as parts of a community, too. After listing the mass shootings that occurred in the span of just a few days, ultimately including the shooting in San Bernardino, Paterniti refers to a shared consciousness: "Of course, it's San Bernardino that will score the deepest mark on our psyche, that will force us to pause,"[46] he writes. The communal psyche he invokes here suggests that the community he is referring to inevitably includes readers. While on the plane, listening to the reports about the shooting in San Bernardino, Paterniti refers to this community again:

> The flight attendant was motioning. Coffee? Smiling, I mouthed the words "I'm good." But I was thinking the opposite. I wanted to raise an alarm, years past it mattering. That was the stark desolation of the moment we now found ourselves trapped in.[47]

This reinforcement manifested in the use of the inclusive "we" creates a sense of urgency and common experience. The community that Paterniti and his readers are parts of not only has a psyche, but it is also trapped in a moment of "stark desolation."

This sense of urgency is raised as Paterniti marks the community as national, directly addressing his readers as fellow citizens. After relaying the details of a shooting in Columbus, he writes: "We must consider this a historical event. But the novelty came in the details, not in the event itself. And indeed it had the staying power of dew in our national consciousness, which is to say none at all."[48] The communal consciousness appears not only as explicitly national here, but also as forgetting. Hence Paterniti, as mentioned above, takes it upon himself to refresh the communal memory and address his readership as a nation, concluding "there's your rough year, America."[49] As a human medium, then, Paterniti does not claim to be different from either the people he experiences in reality or the real readers for whom he writes. On the contrary, the

46 Paterniti, pt. 2.
47 Paterniti, pt. 3.
48 Paterniti, pt. 4.
49 Paterniti, pt. 6.

very point of his text is to lay claim to identity and an exemplary model for taking responsibility for it, since he views communal action as the way to change reality.

In Paterniti's model, this imagined change of reality involves a way of seeing reality that acknowledges its mediation. This is manifested in his use of montage to present the experience of police radio from live TV as strangely familiar. In part 3, for instance, he describes his westward flight:

> a normal flight – guy reading Clive Cussler, woman doing Sudoku, flight attendants shuttling up and down the aisle with fizzy soda – except I was listening via in-flight Internet to the disembodied, live streamed voice of the female dispatcher on the police scanner in San Bernardino, the call-and-response of various units, from three various crime scenes, crisscrossing over her[50]

What makes the normal flight strange, then, is Paterniti's own intentional experience of hearing the police scanner in San Bernardino that is juxtaposed with his experience of sitting on a plane, being on a "normal flight." In his narrative, Paterniti replicates this experience for the reader who is reading a normal text. Paterniti intersperses his own narration with unmediated excerpts from police radio transcripts that appear as intrusions from reality.[51] This juxtaposition reveals the existence of two different kinds of mediated reality: On one side, the experience of the reading of a written text about gun violence; on the other side, the grim experience of listening to people actually reacting to gun violence. Furthermore, as a consequence, the juxtaposition emphasizes the latter aspect and, thus, characterizes the experience of listening to police radio as unusual, making its very familiarity appear strange.

Human Memory and Attention Against Violence

Paterniti's text, then, can be read as the urgent testimony of a human medium who interweaves his experiencing and telling in a particular way of being in the world, based on his self-awareness of being human. Against the backdrop

50 Paterniti, pt. 3.

51 Paterniti, pt. 4.

of the threat of potential random gun violence is the fact of Paterniti's possession of a body, and consequently living and being vulnerable in time; this accounts for the text's urgency. This aspect is crucial because it positions the text in such a way that serves to illuminate broader discussions of genre and reference, of fact and fiction in the specific context of violence. John Durham Peters has argued that: "the boundary between fact and fiction is an ethical one before it is an epistemological one: it consists in having respect for the pain of victims, in being tied by simultaneity, however loosely, to someone else's story of how they hurt."[52] From this point of view, the ethical component of Paterniti's text derives from his own humanity. However, willingly choosing to pay attention to how others are hurting, as Paterniti does, also very much carries with it epistemological implications. By looking at the present grief of others, Paterniti drags the cause of this pain from the past into the present and, hence, frames it as worthy of our present attention. "Living people's pain is news, dead people's pain is history,"[53] Peters goes on to say. It is precisely the dead's pain that Paterniti seeks to save from history by confronting the present and by remembering the past.

The workings of history, collective consciousness, and attention are explicitly thematized in the text by way of Paterniti's references to a Milan Kundera novel that he reads and from which he quotes.[54] These references illustrate the core ambiguity in his own role as human medium that he seeks to overcome, because he sees it as the main reason for collective inaction on gun violence. The pace of events makes every shooting a historical, newsworthy event. As it becomes historical, though, the victims' pain recedes into the past, giving way to other events demanding our present attention. His role as a narrator of experience requires him to give an account of the past. His role as a witness requires constant attention in the present. As a narrator, he has to work against the forgetfulness of history. As a researcher immersed in experience, he has to resist distraction. As Paterniti suggests, both tasks are specifically human and cannot satisfactorily be delegated to media technology or to the industrial logics of mass media coverage driven by capital.

52 Peters, "Witnessing," 2009, 38.

53 Peters, 39.

54 Paterniti, "Should We Get Used to Mass Shootings?," 4.