

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Honors College

Spring 5-2021

Speak for Yourself: Examining Subjectivity and Trauma in American Literary Journalism

Nathaniel Poole

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

SPEAK FOR YOURSELF: EXAMINING SUBJECTIVITY AND TRAUMA IN
AMERICAN LITERARY JOURNALISM

by

Nathaniel Poole

A Thesis Submitted to Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

The Honors College

The University of Maine

May 2021

Advisory Committee:

Caroline Bicks, Stephen E. King Chair in Literature, Advisor

Gregory Howard, Associate Professor of English

Naomi Jacobs, Professor Emeritus of English

Mark Brewer, Professor of Political Science

Michael J. Socolow, Associate Professor of Communications and Journalism

ABSTRACT

Due to their relevance and emotional draw for readers, stories of tragedy and suffering are a nearly inescapable aspect of journalism. However, the routine reporting and formulaic styles associated with coverage of these events has contributed to audience compassion fatigue. Studies have been done on the success of some journalists who have historically pushed the boundaries of style and deployed literary strategies to elicit emotion and subvert compassion fatigue in their reporting. However, there is more room in the scholarship on this subject for studies of the specific strategies that contemporary literary journalism writers use and how they adapt them to the nuances of their subjects. Through the application of literary analysis informed by concepts from journalism studies and literary trauma theory, this study examines popular and critically acclaimed works of contemporary American literary journalism by Dave Cullen, Dexter Filkins, and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah to understand how these writers are rhetorically putting their own experiences as witnesses in conversation with the experiences of their traumatized subjects. This study's findings suggest that by telling these stories using subjective and reflexive narrative styles like those deployed by the three authors under examination, journalists across media may not only engage audiences more effectively, but also convey more nuanced, and perhaps more ethical, portraits of trauma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I DAVE CULLEN AND THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA....	17
<i>Columbine</i>	20
<i>Parkland: Birth of a Movement</i>	34
CHAPTER II REFUSING CLOSURE IN DEXTER FILKINS' <i>THE FOREVER WAR</i> .	48
CHAPTER III RACHEL KAADZI GHANSAH AND HISTORIES OF TRAUMA	65
CONCLUSION.....	80
REFERENCES	89
AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY	92

INTRODUCTION

Immersed in a sea of international affairs, wars, domestic terror, pandemics, natural disasters, and seemingly endless stories of loss and suffering, the dedicated readers of prestige press outlets like *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* can be forgiven for forgetting that the disembodied journalist delivering these tragic stories in clear and precise prose is likely just as overwhelmed as they are. The act of reporting, especially in the style of fact-based, detached coverage, constructs an ethos around the narrator as an informed, stoic, truth-telling figure. The problem is, the reporter is a human being and, especially with regards to tragic events, it is their own emotions and reflections which, overtly or otherwise, inform the reporting of every story. As Schroth (1995) writes, “That is the journalist's moral tension: one person's pain is the other's stimulation, his living. Suffering sells. Yet the journalist, insofar as he or she is a human being, must strive to alleviate suffering.” The nature of modern journalism demands stories of loss and pain, and yet the reporter must endeavor not only to avoid causing additional harm, but “alleviate suffering.” This is a challenge that journalists, as writers, must take on rhetorically. While some writers maintain distance from their subjects in their stories, choosing to omit or solely imply their role as a witness from the events, while others, especially in long form and feature work, have sought to mitigate the scrutiny directed towards their subjects by retaining physical presences, their thoughts, and their emotions in their stories. The increasing popularity and critical success of this subjective style raises the question of how it affects narrative strategies and the ways in which they construct their relationships, as well as their readers’ relationships, to suffering and traumatized subjects when journalists begin speaking for themselves.

The primary barrier to consistently engaging audiences in news coverage, compassion fatigue, is a phenomenon that has plagued journalists and readers for as long as news periodicals have existed, but which has only been explicitly discussed for a few decades. According to Kinnick et al. (1996), the term was originally used in studies of job burnout in professions such as nursing to refer to the dulling of sympathy for patients or clients. Later, it was adopted by the press and other public communicators and expanded to “a numbing of public concern toward social problems” (687). Some tragedies receive an outpouring of support and displays of sympathy while others of comparable or greater violence and/or loss receive little attention, and critics have long attributed this to the nature of modern news coverage. Kinnick argues that compassion fatigue is a function of oversaturation and overwhelming competition for “three limited resources: the public’s time, money, and capacity to care” (703). This competition is reflected in journalists’ presentation of sensational stories of conflict and violence without detailed context or meaningful solutions (690), emerging often in routine coverage of international news stories with “repetitive chronologies, sensationalized language and imagery and Americanized metaphors and references” (Moeller 1994, 2). In her book, *Compassion Fatigue*, Susan Moeller (1994) argues that the phenomenon “is not an unavoidable consequence of covering the news. It is, however, an unavoidable consequence of the way the news is now covered” (2). Both Moeller and Kinnick establish compassion fatigue as a vicious cycle, where the media adhere to formulaic, sensational reporting to appeal to the public’s short attention span, which only gets shorter as press entities compete for the newest, attention-grabbing headline.

While public apathy is the primary concern of critics discussing compassion fatigue, journalists' frustrations with the limitations of routine reporting are also nothing new nor resolved, evidenced by the frequency with which Moeller continues to appear in modern scholarship (Dahmen et al. 2019, Irawanto 2018, Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). In both broadcast and print journalism, this emerged in the form of "parachute" and "voice-over journalism," where writers are tasked with reporting with confidence on stories they know little about in places they have never been, becoming "parachutists" who are "trained in crisis, not countries" (Hess cited in Moeller 1994, 26-27). Former CBS correspondent Martha Teichner is one of many journalists that have voiced their dissatisfaction with this assembly-line style of coverage: "I was asked to do Somalia for the weekend news and I've never been to Somalia and I'm thinking, Oh my god.... even if I'm correct and accurate, I'm superficial. And I don't want to be superficial" (Moeller 1994, 27). While Moeller, whose findings and analysis are by now dated in some respects, is mostly preoccupied with compassion fatigue's implications for international reporting, more recent research has focused its attention on coverage of domestic tragedies and conflicts. Dahmen et al. (2019) surveyed over 1,300 U.S. newspaper staffers regarding media coverage of mass shootings and found that "general assignment reporters and reporters who cover hard news—likely the journalists covering mass shootings—expressed greater dissatisfaction with the current state of mass shootings coverage as compared to reporters covering soft news" (897). Not only has the specter of routine coverage haunted journalists, but, with regards to mass shootings, it can have an increasingly negative effect on public well-being as it gives "fame-seeking" perpetrators

exactly what they want by publishing their photos, statements and/or manifestos, possibly inspiring additional, “copy-cat” threats (895).

As journalists have come up against the structural limitations of journalism, it is only logical that some should then choose to abandon the genre all together. Underwood (2011) asserts that this is a tradition that has existed since the emergence of the modern periodical at the turn of the eighteenth century: “the frustrations encountered by [young, aspirational journalists] ... were based on their recognition that the so-called objective or neutral methods for treating events on the news page often disguised a whole system of self-serving news judgements.... Novel writing, on the other hand, offered to free them from the commercial, social, and legal restraints of the conventional journalism, even if they had to fictionalize their stories” (28). The most famous example of this tradition would arguably be the New Journalists of the sixties, a name coined by Tom Wolfe in his 1973 book, *The New Journalism*, to delineate the work of writers like Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, and himself who stretched and novelized reporting into a new taxon of literary nonfiction. According to Robert S. Boynton (2005), author of *The New New Journalism*, The New Journalism was, “a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism’s rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the center of the story, channeling a character’s thoughts, using non-standard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms” (xii). Boynton himself outlines a new generation of The New New Journalists in the early 2000s who take after the New Journalist’s experimentation with literary forms, but focus much more on immersing themselves in their stories through equally experimental investigation and reporting methods. Regardless as to where writers and critics draw the lines between movements and

subgenres in the realm of literary reportage, the point is that the history of journalism in the U.S. is rife with reporters who, recognizing faults in the obstinate tenets of traditional reporting, took rhetorical matters into their own hands.

The purpose of this study, broadly speaking, is to examine and discuss form. The ways that contemporary literary journalists, the descendants of The New Journalists, The New New Journalists, and so on, are deploying experimental, literary strategies and forms to address subjects of compassion fatigue, such as mass shootings, wars, and hate-crimes, will not only be instructive for longform or literary journalists and writers going forward, but for the editors and industry leaders who wish to avoid the exhaustion of their readers' empathy and affect meaningful change through their outlets. While various terms are applicable to the texts discussed herein, such as New Journalism, literary nonfiction, narrative journalism, longform, etc., for the purposes of this analysis I will exclusively refer to the genre as literary journalism. There is a significant, and arguably trivial, collection of discourse around what the most appropriate term is for this genre; Roiland (2015) argues for literary journalism, which he defines as "a form of nonfiction writing that adheres to all of the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of conventional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction. In short, it is journalism as literature" (71). This study fixates on the literary elements of journalism, and for that reason an expansive and self-explanatory term like literary journalism is most appropriate.

Because the stories which impact compassion fatigue and that emerge in literary journalism are often tied to stories of suffering, there are frequent intersections in the scholarship between these subjects and that of literary trauma theory, which in itself

exists at an intersection of literary scholarship and psychological conceptions of trauma. University of Washington Professor of Communications, and author of *Chronicling Trauma*, Doug Underwood (2011), defines trauma as “a broad and holistic term that encompasses the totality of emotional pressure on the human nervous system as it manifests itself in feelings whose sources are not always transparent to the person undergoing the experience” (11). The last part of this definition is critical in that it elucidates an inherent unreliability in the experience and effects of trauma; which is to say, in the realm of objective, fact-based journalism, the memory of a traumatized witness can diverge from the published story. Cathy Caruth, professor of English at Cornell University and author of the influential *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), is concerned with the ways in which “factual history” and “the curious dynamics of trauma” seem to be at odds (1991, 185). Inspired by the Freudian concept of “latency,” or the time during which the effects of a traumatic experience are not apparent (186), Caruth asserts that “trauma is not a symptom of the unconscious but of history” (Whitehead 2004, 12) in that “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth cited in Whitehead, 5). This conception of trauma troubles journalistic efforts to combat compassion fatigue and nurture reader empathy, which Kinnick et al. (1996) define as “a vicarious response to viewing others in distress, and... an inborn, involuntary response” (688). Critics like Anne Whitehead, author of *Trauma Fiction* (2004), inspired by Caruth’s work, have argued that non-linear, narrative strategies in works of fiction and nonfiction, as opposed straightforward and chronologically linear storytelling, are more effective for conveying experiences of trauma: “Her work suggests that if trauma is at all

susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (6). It is important to distinguish between the ways that writers communicate trauma and the ways that they elicit empathy from a reader. The former is less emotional and less formulaic due to the varying, destabilizing nature of trauma. The latter is far more commonly pursued through the use of more common strategies for cueing emotions in reportage through language, emotional imagery, testimony from survivors, and even reflection from the writer.

Some scholars have already set about investigating the ways in which modern-day journalists, within and without name-brand news outlets, have successfully incorporated literary strategies into their work to better understand how they negotiate the potential conflicts between unconventional narrative styles and “the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of conventional journalism” (Roiland 2015, 71). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) situates this tension as a relationship between a “strategic ritual of objectivity” and “the strategic ritual of emotionality” (38). Gaye Tuchman defines the prior as the journalistic tradition of collecting and structuring facts with an unbiased and detached style to avoid the “risks imposed by deadlines, libel suits and superiors’ demands” (cited in Wahl-Jorgensen), while Wahl-Jorgensen situates the latter as the tradition of infusing reporting with emotion through tools typical of literary journalism, such as emotive language, detailed descriptions, judgements and appraisals, dramatic juxtaposition and personalized storytelling (45-46). Sampling one hundred and one Pulitzer prize winning stories across journalistic genres over the past two decades, Wahl-Jorgensen finds that “emotional storytelling is a driving force behind award-winning journalism, with the aim of drawing the audience’s attention to complex topics of social and political import and ultimately

bringing about change,” however, her findings also indicate that journalists do not deploy their own emotions as a tool in their stories, but rather outsource the “emotional labor” to their subjects, as a way to maintain a semblance of fidelity to the strategic ritual of objectivity and stay out of the story (64). Wahl-Jorgensen’s conclusions align with those of Whitehead (2004) and Caruth (1991), as she argues that narrative is the “prime collective resource for examining and understanding emotions that may otherwise arise out of fundamentally ‘unknowable’ and ‘unshareable’ experience” (79), but her findings indicate that subjective, reflexive emotional storytelling from reporters has yet to reach beyond the margins of award-winning journalism.

While some journalists’ outsourcing of emotional labor has enabled them to maintain an ethos of detachment and distance, Wahl-Jorgensen remarks that a consequence of this style of reporting is that the public has little conception of the journalist’s own experience as a witness to suffering. Stephen Jukes suggests that this is partly of the journalists’ design, as a way “to shield themselves from the emotional impact of these events” (cited in Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 33), and Underwood (2011), whose work is especially concerned with the trauma of journalist figures, makes a similar assertion: “Modern journalism’s ‘neutral’ style developed, at least in part, as a way to provide journalists and their audience a means to distance themselves from the emotional impact of trauma as it was used as a repetitive formula in the conveyance of news about warfare, natural disasters, crime, and other traumatic occurrences” (21). Underwood’s reference to “journalists and their audience” together is especially important, as it emphasizes the mutually insulating function of journalistic form for both writers and readers. It stands to reason then, that should a writer make themselves vulnerable and

expose their feelings and reflections to the reader, it would cue a reciprocal vulnerability from them. Jon Krakauer, best-selling author of *Into the Wild*, *Into Thin Air*, and various other works of literary journalism, has admitted that while he is inclined to write from a perspective of omniscience, he has found that centering himself in the narrative has been beneficial for his storytelling: “It feels safer to write in the third person—but sometimes including personal material enhances a book or article tremendously” (Boynton 2005, 179).

Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) suggests the mediative work of journalists “provides an emotional compass that we—as audience members and citizens—can use to orient ourselves in a confusing world” (10), and Sue Joseph (2011), journalist and senior lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney, argues that, rather than outsourcing emotional labor to avoid vulnerability and conflict with traditions of objectivity, journalists should endeavor to reflect on their own emotional reactions to subjects’ traumatic experiences and symptoms in their writing. Joseph not only explains and advocates for this practice but shows it in her accounts of a number of interviews with subjects for her own longform journalistic pursuits. With regards to one particularly difficult interview with a survivor of months of sexual abuse in a Japanese brothel in WWII, Joseph cites her account of the interaction and argues that her own experiences and frame of reference were invaluable to its emotional impact: “Traumatic memory or recall, as painful as it is for the subject, is a haunting incident to witness, and then write about. Immediately, the writer has the story often visually re-enacted, but I suggest embedding the story within the effect it also created in the writer is a technique to once again challenge audiences. But as mentioned earlier, how ethical can it be? Without it, I

could not have written about the moment when this elderly and dignified woman stroked the air, remembering her mother stroking her hair. The writing would not have been as evocative” (12). Joseph’s style is not only sensitive to the feelings of the reader, but also those of the subject and herself. She presents the journalist-witness’s goal as not only to affect the audience emotionally, but to “challenge” them, framing the effect of this style as “transparency” (10), in that she does not omit her own presence from the story. Instead, she uses it to cue critical thought in the reader regarding the mediated, transposed nature of nonfiction storytelling, and their own position and/or responsibility as a mediated witness.

This study proceeds from Joseph’s “reflective practice model” (2011, 5) to not only examine the ways in which literary journalism writers are deploying literary strategies in their works to affect readers and combat compassion fatigue, but to draw out the ways in which they present and use their own position as witnesses within the narrative to become their stories’ “emotional [compasses]” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 10) and engage readers in the complex experience of witnessing the effects of trauma. Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2015), who found in their research that narrative articles immerse readers and create a vicarious “mediated witness” experience, suggest that, “An important next step is to determine which exact narrative features are responsible for evoking this level of engagement” and that “future studies that include a variety of journalistic narratives about different types of news events are necessary to gain a comprehensive view on their impact on the audience” (592). This study addresses both of Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders’ criteria for additional research into reader engagement by investigating the narrative features associated with literary journalists’ subjective

narratives, each of which address distinct news events with their own sociocultural implications and significance. With that said, this work does not aim to suggest that journalists can overcome compassion fatigue with rhetoric exclusively. As Maier (2015) argues, “there is no ‘magic bullet’ or ‘hypodermic needle’ in which the media’s message activates a powerful uniform response” (716). The fact remains that some news events lend themselves more fluidly to narrative and literary strategies than others. This work is primarily concerned with investigating new storytelling avenues for those that would refer to simple, routine coverage of tragedies and stories of suffering in favor of thinking critically or reflectively about how they can use narrative form to better affect the empathy of their audience.

The four texts under examination are Dave Cullen’s *Columbine* (2010) and *Parkland: Birth of a Movement* (2019), Dexter Filkins’ *The Forever War* (2008), and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah’s “A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof” (2017). I chose these four texts because they are stories, as well as stories about covering stories of violence, loss, and trauma that have experienced popular and critical success. *Columbine*, *Parkland*, and *The Forever War* are all New York Times Bestsellers and were selected for various press outlets’ “Best of the Year” lists, while “A Most American Terrorist” earned Ghansah a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 2018. In other words, it is evident that readers and critics have found these texts compelling for the stories they tell and the way the writers tell them. It is also useful to examine these four texts together for the ways in which their subject matter align and diverge. Each author, in their own way, is concerned with stories about America. *Columbine* and *Parkland* are both about the peculiarly American phenomena of school shootings, *The Forever War* examines the

nature of America's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq from an on-the-ground perspective, and "A Most American Terrorist" is an examination of America's failure to confront its history of slavery and racism embedded in a narrative of the author's investigation of the town, the state and the country that cultivated the remorseless perpetrator of a violent and despicable hate crime. School shootings, war, and hate crimes are all stories that, unfortunately, recur in the U.S. media landscape, and are thus frequently subject to routine coverage and compassion fatigue. All of these writers are approaching stories that have been well covered by the national media, told and retold, but that they recognized had not yet been addressed in some vital way. Cullen and Filkins had previously covered their stories in traditional press formats but were ultimately dissatisfied with the questions that they left unanswered, and all three journalists explicitly draw attention to the inadequacies of the mass-media narratives surrounding their subjects within their texts. These journalists are writing for audiences that are often under the impression that they have heard their stories before, and each subverts these expectations by illuminating new subjective and emotional truths that traditional media coverage is unable to evoke. While each author's style is deeply distinct, they all use their rhetorical perspectives as bridges to their stories' subjects; they offer the reader access to their own perspective, thoughts, and feelings as a way to compel them to empathize with the stories' subjects and develop a more nuanced conception of their trauma.

Dave Cullen's school shooting books are the first subjects of this study's analysis because they present two fundamentally different styles of writing applied to what are ostensibly similar events. Informed by ten years of reporting and research, Cullen's immersive and exacting story of the shootings at Columbine High School in April, 1999,

as well as the precipitating investigations and community response, has been widely lauded as a “definitive account” (Cullen 2010, dustcover). While Cullen’s focus seems all-encompassing in *Columbine*, it is far narrower in *Parkland: Birth of a Movement*, which Cullen researched and wrote in the course of a year in the wake of the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in 2018. Where Cullen dives into the psyches of the killers and delivers moment-to-moment details from the shooting in *Columbine*, in *Parkland* his interest is directed entirely towards the immediate activism of the survivors in the wake of the attack and their journey as they negotiate both trauma and their meteoric rise in the public eye. In his first book Cullen is concerned with truth, with setting the record straight, but the latter is far more concerned with catharsis and moving forward in the wake of traumatic experience, not only for his subjects but for the journalist as well. These different rhetorical goals emerge in Cullen’s stylistic decisions as he narrates from a third-person omniscient perspective in *Columbine* but with a first-person subjective voice in *Parkland*. Far from a trivial change, this shift in narratorial presence, or “epistemic location” (Morton 2014), gives readers invaluable access to Cullen’s reflections on his experience of *Columbine*, his relationship to subjects, and his own trauma. As he explains in the introduction to *Parkland*, the process of recounting a detailed look at an entire community’s trauma took a mental and emotional toll on Cullen, and he tells the reader as much in the prologue of *Parkland*: “I spent ten years researching and writing *Columbine*, and discovered that post-traumatic stress disorder can strike even those who have not witnessed trauma directly” (2019, 4). The concept of “secondary trauma” has been peripherally referred to in literary trauma scholarship as a consequence of overexposure to disturbing witness and/or survivor accounts (Joseph

2011, 3, Underwood 2011, 197, Whitehead 2004, 35). In Cullen's case, he situates his extensive and immersive reporting process for *Columbine* as the source of his personal trauma to then frame *Parkland* as a cathartic experience of witnessing survivors persevere and advocate despite their trauma.

Of these three writers, Dexter Filkins, a Pulitzer-prize winning international correspondent who reported from Afghanistan and Iraq from 1998 to 2006, produces the closest thing to what is typically expected from an actual embedded journalist in *The Forever War* (2008). Filkins not only subverts the style of objective, fact-based journalism with which he originally reported for various prestige press institutions, but also the narrative expectations of readers. This is to say, Filkins' book is a chaotic assemblage of dispatches from his time reporting from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He is not concerned with crafting a cohesive, linear narrative, but rather structures his book as a series of vignettes collected from the nine years he spent in the Middle East in an effort to convey the distorted, unresolved nature of the conflicts, and how disorienting it was to experience them on the ground. Underwood (2011) argues that Dexter Filkins is a member of a group of modern journalists who "are framing their themes of battlefield trauma in more inconclusive, paradox-filled, and professionally detached circumstances that reflect the nature of anti-insurgency combat fought by volunteer forces against indigenous foes in seemingly permanent campaigns of nation-building" (159). Rather than seeking to convey or elicit emotion like the other selected writers, Filkins narrates his experiences and interviews with fighters and civilians from the many different sides of the conflicts with a degree of numbness that resembles shellshock. Filkins' detached, subjective narration is not a function of any journalistic imperative, but rather a means to

convey the impact of living in and adapting to an environment traumatized by senseless and relentless violence. As a result, Filkins rarely deploys emotional language to elicit the audiences' empathy, as his primary concern is conveying a portrait of the trauma embedded in the environment itself. Instead, he allows the imagery and subject testimony of loss and suffering to speak for itself.

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's Pulitzer prize-winning GQ article, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylan Roof" (2017), is similar to Cullen's work in that it is about a mass shooting, as well as Filkins' in that her story is concerned with the trauma embedded within a geographical and cultural environment. However, Ghansah uses her own emotions and centers her experience and conception of trauma as a Black woman within the narrative in ways that deviate significantly from Cullen and Filkins. "A Most American Terrorist" is a sort of write-around profile of Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man who shot and killed nine parishioners at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. At his trial, Roof expressed no remorse and refused to acknowledge the pain he had caused the family members of his victims as they stood before him, and so Ghansah decided that, rather than writing a story about the victims, she would hold Roof accountable by going to his home and interrogating the environment that made him. While his name features in her title, Ghansah does not pursue an empathetic understanding of Roof, but rather redefines who he is and what he represents by reporting her own experience as a Black woman in the environment that nurtured his hatred. Ghansah uses her own experiences in South Carolina as a Black person to examine the white populations' naïve dissociation from the cultural/generational trauma of chattel slavery and the present culture of ignorance and

racism that it has perpetuated. She uses her embodied experience and her knowledge of the cultural trauma of Black Americans to not only channel the emotions of the survivors and the victims' loved ones, but to elucidate their resilience in the face of unjustified hatred and loss.

Trauma is complex and often considered to be conventionally “unspeakable” (Balaev 2008, 151) by those that align with Caruth’s theories. It is a broad term that can account for a range of experiences, from the individual, community, national, and generational levels, which is why this study suggests that reporters’ use of fact-based, routine structures and styles when mediating stories of individual or mass suffering is ultimately inadequate for engaging readers’ empathy and doing those stories justice. The following sections will rhetorically analyze the ways that these literary journalists push the boundaries of journalistic storytelling by not only engaging with subjects’ feelings, but also their own.

CHAPTER I

DAVE CULLEN AND THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA

Personalized storytelling, “a form which draws on the experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a particular social issue” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 47), characterizes much of literary journalism and “the strategic ritual of emotionality” (38) because it is a strategy that writers often use to make sense of chaotic or destabilizing events in narrative, and it is exceptionally pertinent for stories of trauma. Underwood claims that personalized narratives have a therapeutic effect with regards to confronting trauma, as “the use of memory to develop a narrative can be a critical feature in a person gaining an emotional framework and some sense of control over a tragic event” (2011, 13). However, there is a significant difference between narratives which are personal and narratives which are personalized in journalism. Reporters typically only draw on the experiences of subjects in their storytelling, giving readers access to the thoughts and feelings of vulnerable, traumatized individuals, while concealing their own epistemic location. Epistemic location broadly defines the narrative position of the author, and addresses questions of “what type of epistemic agent the knowledge belongs to; where the knower is located physically, socially and politically in respect to their subject; and, finally, what the reasons are behind the knower’s interest in their subject” (Code cited in Morton 2014). Revealing one’s epistemic location, how the journalist witnesses and thinks about the subject, is a rhetorical means to share the “emotional labor” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 32), or the management of emotion in storytelling, outsourced to a subject and affect the way that the reader perceives their own experience

of mediated witnessing. Dave Cullen is an author who, between two school shooting stories published ten years apart, who has written with and without an explicit epistemic location, elucidating different strategies for affecting readers' emotions and empathy in the process.

The relationship between Cullen's two books is paradoxical, similar in subject matter yet opposed in storytelling. Advertised as a "definitive account" (Cullen 2010, dustcover), *Columbine* is the story of the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School and an effort to debunk the myths that were circulated by media coverage immediately thereafter. Informed by 10 years of research and reporting, Cullen delivers portraits of the killers, the massacre, and the painstaking recovery of the community, all in exacting detail. Cullen's 2019 book, *Parkland*, was similarly catalyzed by the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in 2018, but this time it only took Cullen about one year to research, write, and publish. Compared to the *Columbine*, he dedicates minimal attention to the shooting and the killer in favor of reporting on the victims-turned activists and the March for Our Lives movement that quickly emerged and outshined the tragedy. The notable differences between the books are a product of their intertextuality and the shift in Cullen's rhetorical priorities.

Cullen himself cannot be understood as a storyteller and a journalist without *Columbine*; as he writes in his introduction to *Parkland*, the book's success turned him into "the mass-murder guy whom reporters and producers call to interview after every big shooting" (Cullen, 2019, 6). Readers receive two very different Dave Cullens between the two books, each with his own style, rhetorical goals, and narrative presence. In *Columbine*, Cullen omits himself in favor of an implied author; the narrator is a ghost, an

omniscient figure delivering testimony that the reader can only assume the author was there to hear. It is with this disembodied voice that Cullen brings the reader into the subjects' perspectives, narrating the thoughts and feelings of subjects as reading their minds. However, there is nothing at all implied about Cullen's presence in *Parkland*, his own perspective and personal relationship to his subjects unmistakable in a way that cuts a stark contrast to *Columbine*. With this in mind, the importance of the first story to the second cannot be overstated; Cullen's shift in style, in orientation to his subjects, in presence, and in purpose in *Parkland* is a product of and a response to his traumatic, transcribed experience of *Columbine*. The result is two divergent examples of the ways that a writer can employ or omit their own positionality and experience in an effort to communicate stories of trauma and affect the empathy of readers.

The different narrative styles that Cullen employs in *Columbine* and *Parkland: Birth of a Movement* certainly do not exhaust the rhetorical possibilities for communicating trauma in literary journalism, but their differences do help to convey the possibilities of the genre. In constructing narratives out of experiences that “[overwhelm] the individual and resists language or representation” (Whitehead 2004, 3), writers and reporters face difficult decisions regarding how they convey suffering while maintaining a fidelity to the subject's experience. Even though *Columbine* has enjoyed significant critical and popular acclaim, Cullen abandons that style in *Parkland*. The following analysis suggests that this shift is, at least partly, due to the way that Cullen chooses to omit his own position and reactions from the narrative in *Columbine*. By suppressing his own compelling, emotional experience of trauma, he presents a less complex and accessible narrative of victims' and survivors' experiences. Partly because of this

experience, Cullen employs a style in *Parkland* that retains the individuality of his and his subjects' perspectives, and arguably communicates a more nuanced portrait of trauma. This is not to say that one style affects the audience more than another, or that one is right and the other is wrong, but rather there are a range of options available to writers in the liminal genre of literary journalism, and they all require considerations of each decision's implications for the subjects, the audience, and the author.

Columbine

On April 20, 1999, in Jefferson County, Colorado, two young men entered Columbine High School with guns and bombs and proceeded to open fire on their teachers and classmates, killing 13 and wounding 20 before turning their weapons on themselves. The event received unprecedented, 24-hour media coverage, and Dave Cullen was just one of the many journalists who raced to the school on that day to join in the frenzy. The next day he published an article echoing a number of the ultimately false rumors that would become synonymous with the tragedy, including allegations that the young men were part of a group called the Trench Coat Mafia and that they had been primarily targeting jocks who had bullied them. Even years after they were debunked, the rumors from the initial coverage continued to haunt Columbine's story in public discourse around school shootings. In Cullen's own words, his book, *Columbine*, is about "setting the story right" (2010, xiv), correcting the myths propagated by the media fumbles immediately following the shooting and crafting a definitive explanation of what happened, the lives it impacted, and why.

One of the underlying narratives in *Columbine*, and one of the exigencies that purportedly calls for such an in-depth account of the story in the first place, is the tension

between the truth behind the Columbine massacre and the televised and published speculations of the pack media. Cullen's criticism is generally subtle and often focalized through the perspectives of other individuals, such as the parents concerned about the impact of the incessant coverage on their children's mental health as they deal with the mental and emotional fallout from the tragedy. Cullen measures some criticism of the media's immediate response to reports of shots fired at the high school against new tensions at the turn of the twentieth century: "This was the first major hostage standoff of the cell phone age, and they had never seen anything like it" (2010, 66). More than ever before, the entire nation had access to news as it, seemingly, unfolded before their eyes. However, with unprecedented access came unprecedented complications; namely, the immediate, unedited testimony of traumatized high schoolers.

The result of this folly was the rumor-turned-fact that the killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were actually members of the Trench Coat Mafia, a conglomeration of "Goths, gays, outcasts, and a street gang." It did not matter that the only corroboration for this information had come from distraught teenagers, or that the explanation often arose out of leading questions like "Were they outcasts?" (Cullen 2010, 72). Consumers needed answers, and news organizations needed consumers to stay-tuned. The overwhelming desire for more information to feed the news cycle eventually generated an adversarial relationship between the community and the journalists, as they felt that, because of the media, "their school was a symbol of mass murder" and the students "had been cast as bullies or snotty rich brats" (272). Before the first chapter, in his "Author's Note on Sources", Cullen clarifies to the reader that he was, in fact, "among the guilty parties" (xiv) as a member of the pack journalists, framing *Columbine* as something of a

redemptive act. Where Cullen and other pack journalists had failed to previously approach the members of the Columbine community with empathy and with a consideration for their own reporting, *Columbine* represents a different rhetorical approach, one that crucially accounts for both the subjects' trauma and the audience's perception of that experience.

Columbine is divided into five sections that organize the book's 53 chapters. The first section, "Female Down," is the only chronologically linear part of the narrative, following the events preceding the massacre, the day of the shooting, and the initial response from the community and authorities. Cullen's third-person omniscient narrator moves between the perspectives of various characters, including the killers, staff members, students, parents, and investigators, as he endeavors to not only emotionally invest readers in the lives that were lost and disrupted, but to deliver an exhaustive, encompassing view of the tragedy. The second section of the narrative, aptly titled "After and Before," deviates from the largely linear structure of part one by moving back-and-forth from chapter to chapter between the reconstructed development of the two killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, from troubled young men into murderers, and the extensive fallout within the community. This pattern continues through parts three, four and five as Cullen intermittently returns to scenes from the shooting itself, holding back the final shots, the killers' suicides, until the second to last chapter. In a lecture video posted to his YouTube channel in 2010, Cullen tells a group of students that he employs this pattern and disperses the scenes from the massacre so that the most intense and engaging parts of the story would not be clustered in one part of the book. There is a certain practical aspect to this structure, as he argues that if the story were told linearly,

then the two “protagonists” would be killed off half-way through the narrative and Cullen would have to introduce a whole new cast for the rest of it.

Columbine is essentially two intertwining narratives, the before and the after, the killers and the survivors, that occasionally come into contact in reconstructed scenes pulled from the massacre. One could say that only half of *Columbine* is truly concerned with trauma and its effects, while the other is concerned with *why*, with addressing the questions that rose out of the event, and with making the losses comprehensible. The narrativization of previously misunderstood or misrepresented events is an important aspect of reporting stories of trauma, as Whitehead writes, “the intertextual recovery of hitherto marginalized voices signals the ethical dimension of trauma fiction, which witnesses and records that which is ‘forgotten’ or overlooked in the grand narrative of History” (2004, 86). While history books and news reports may capture the facts of the shootings at Columbine, Cullen brings individual faces and voices forward to record the emotional truths and trauma that might otherwise go unwitnessed and forgotten.

While *Columbine* itself is an act of bearing witness to trauma, Cullen omits his own role as an embodied witness in favor of immersing the reader in that position to facilitate greater emotional resonance and empathy. In his Author’s Note on Sources, Cullen writes, “To avoid injecting myself into the story, I generally refer to the press in the third person” (Cullen 2010, xiv), and in the “Notes” section, Cullen writes, “I thought it was best to get out of the way, to write myself out of the narrative” (408). In other words, as a member of the press Cullen only ever refers to *himself* in the third person. His experience as the witness to the survivors’ pain and trauma is omitted in favor of placing the reader in his shoes, obscuring the mediated nature of narrative in favor of more

immersive storytelling. While Cullen crafts a seemingly omniscient perspective for the reader, he also maintains, or seems to maintain, a fidelity to transparency by making necessary attributions to himself and other sources in a paratextual notes section. Cullen's decision to write around his presence in *Columbine*, intentionally or otherwise, maintains "the strategic ritual of objectivity," and "the strategic ritual of emotionality" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 38), suggesting that his storytelling, while literary and theatrical in tone and structure, is still informed by a journalistic tradition and process. He primarily outsources the "emotional labor" (2019, 39) to subjects through quotes, narrative descriptions, and indirect thought report.

Cullen's protagonists, which can be understood as those characters through which Cullen focalizes much of the narrative, do the emotional, mediative, and even analytical work that he himself avoids in any rhetorically explicit, reflective, or self-referential manner. These characters tend to be cognizant of and sensitive to the complexities of emotions and trauma and serve as an "emotional compass that we - as audience members and citizens - can use to orient ourselves in a confusing world" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 10). Additionally, Michelle Balaev (2008), a professor of psychology who has written extensively on trauma theory, argues that "the protagonist carries out a significant component of trauma in fiction by demonstrating the ways that the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place" (156). Trauma's relationship with place, in a historical and material sense, is well evidenced in school shooting stories, as the school's name, be it Columbine, Newtown, or Parkland, inevitably comes to define a single, horrible moment in a place's history, displacing and marginalizing personal narratives related to that place in the process. Cullen uses his

protagonists' personal relationships to the high school and the community to draw attention to the margins, to a story of Columbine beyond April 20, 1999.

Principal DeAngelis, or Mr. D, is one of the central protagonists of the post-shooting, recovery narrative that runs through *Columbine*, and he fulfills the protagonist's role as an "emotional compass" in the aftermath of the massacre and, as Columbine's principal, he plays a central role in situating his, his students', and his faculties' trauma in relation to what happened at the school. Two days after the shooting, Mr. D is called on to make an impromptu appearance onstage at a megachurch where the student body has gathered to mourn and comfort one another. Cullen makes it clear that the principal is keenly aware that the way he expresses himself to the students will impact how they themselves confront and deal with their emotions and trauma, as he consults with trauma counselors before going on stage who tell him to honestly express his emotions. He does just that:

The students were awaiting his appearance, and when he walked in, they started chanting the school's rallying cry, which he'd last heard at the assembly before the prom: "We are COL-um-BINE! We are COL-um-BINE!" Each time they yelled it more loudly, confidently, and aggressively. Mr. D hadn't realized it until he heard them that he had been longing to draw strength from them, too. He'd thought he was just there to provide it. "I couldn't fake it," he said later. "I walked on that stage and I saw those kids cheering and the tears started coming down."

This time he decided to address the tears. “Guys, trust me, now is not the time to show your manliness,” he told them. “Emotion is emotion, and keeping it inside doesn’t mean you’re strong.” (Cullen 2010, 117)

Cullen situates Mr. D as a synecdoche for Columbine as both a “culture and place” (Balaev 2008, 156), signaled by the students chanting the school’s name as he approaches the stage. Mr. D understands this role, as he uses his own authentic emotion to send a message to the student body that it is important that they confront and express their grief. As Cullen transcribes this moment, not only is Mr. D the emotional compass for the students, but also for the reader, who is tasked with developing an empathetic position towards a tragedy that they have a purely mediated experience of. It is evident that Cullen’s goal is for the reader to connect with the principal’s emotions directly, as he omits his presence from a moment of reflective testimony from DeAngelis, “I couldn’t fake it,” during one of his many interviews with Cullen. Additionally, Cullen briefly places the reader directly inside the mind of DeAngelis as he is on-stage, as he writes that Mr. D “realized” that he had been “longing to draw strength” from his students, information that Cullen chooses to include as indirect thought, rather than direct testimony, to better immerse the reader in the protagonist’s emotional experience.

Cullen also uses Principal DeAngelis’s experience of the attack to give the reader a more accurate impression of the potential impacts of trauma on the survivors, communicating the ways in which their memories can often be distorted, unreliable, and even manufactured. Mr. D has a vivid memory of where he was and what he did when he heard the first shots fired in the school, and even after he was told that his memory was inaccurate, that it had to be fabricated, it remained just as vivid in his mind: “He came to

accept that version of the truth, but he can't picture it. His visual brain insists that the false memory is real. Multiply that by nearly two thousand kids and over a hundred teachers and a precisely accurate picture was impossible to render" (Cullen 2010, 206). Once again, Cullen situates Mr. D's individual experience not only as a way to not only understand what other survivors are going through, but also as a way to understand the complexity of traumatic experience in and of itself. Cullen explicitly acknowledges the multiplicity of a traumatic story and the impossibility of "a precisely accurate picture," evoking perspectives informed by Cathy Caruth that establish trauma "as that which, at the very moment of its reception, registers as a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter" (Whitehead 2004, 5).

While Cullen's narrative frequently follows the trajectory of a group of select protagonists to convey the larger impact of the massacre on the community, he also uses his third-person, omniscient narration to bounce between various characters' perspectives in order to convey both the community's fear in response to the emerging news of the attack and their overwhelming sense of loss in the aftermath. One of the more emotionally affective storylines that Cullen follows through the first two sections is that of Dave Sanders, a coach, teacher, and father who "personified the community" (Cullen 2010, 19) around Columbine, and who was also one of the 13 people who did not survive April 20. When Cullen's narrator evokes the reaction of Sanders' wife, Linda, to the news that there had been a shooting at the high school, he briefly channels her emotions through the narration: "Most of the news was good. Only one adult was reported injured, and it was a science teacher, which ruled out Dave. So why hadn't he called?" (Cullen 2010, 87). By this point in the story, the narrator and the audience are aware that Dave

has been shot and is bleeding out in the school, but Lisa's concerned thoughts momentarily emerge in the narration as free indirect speech, as if the narrator is unaware of Sanders' dire circumstances, generating both morbid dramatic irony and a tone of anxiety. In this way, the absence of Dave Cullen himself occupying the position of the narrator not only erases Cullen's presence, but generates opportunities for the narrator to engage the audience directly with subjects' thoughts and feelings.

Cullen's narrative reconstructions of the scenes within the school on the day of the massacre are some of the book's most compelling moments, and they are also some of the most complex due to the way that he must orchestrate a patchwork of testimony and collected details in a way that gives the reader a sense that they are witnessing something that not even the journalist was present for. Cullen's reconstruction of Dave Sanders' death is particularly effective. Shot through his face and carotid arteries while running from the killers and directing students to safety, Sanders is dragged to a classroom to shelter with other faculty and students, two Eagle Scouts do what little they can for him by administering first aid as he bleeds out:

Sophomore Kevin Starkey, also an Eagle Scout, assisted Aaron. "You're doing alright," the boys whispered to Dave. "They're coming. Just hold on. You can do it." They took turns applying pressure, digging their palms into his wounds.

"I need help," Dave said. "I've got to get out of here."

"Help is on the way," Aaron assured him.

Aaron believed it was. Law enforcement was first alerted to Dave's predicament around 11:45. Dispatchers began responding that help was "on the

way” and would arrive “in about ten minutes.” The assurances were repeated for more than three hours... (Cullen 2010, 141)

According to Cullen’s notes (2010, 392), he pulled from various sources in transcribing this scene, such as court documents from the lawsuit that the Sanderses eventually filed as well corroborating details from individuals who were present and coverage from various print news sources. However, he forgoes disruptive attribution in this scene in favor of reporting the dialogue between Sanders and the Eagle Scouts as if the reader were right there with them. Placing the reader in this position is all the more effective when the narration pulls away from the present scene to look three hours into the future and show the reader just how futile the Scouts’ valiant efforts are. As they administer first-aid to the fading Sanders, Cullen writes, “they felt Dave’s skin grow a little colder. He was losing color, taking on a bluish cast. *Where are the paramedics?* they wondered. *When will the ten minutes be up?*” (2010, 141). Not only does Cullen’s omniscient narrator communicate sensory details that should be exclusive to Aaron and Kevin’s experiences, such as the feeling of Dave’s skin, he also delivers direct insight into subjective experiences of the young men through indirect thought report, “*Where are the paramedics?*” These moments are presented in conjunction with direct quotes from testimony after the fact like, “‘The door opened, and Mr. Sanders [comes] in and starts coughing up blood,’ sophomore Marjorie Lindholm said” (139), which lead the audience to assume that Cullen’s reconstructions are rooted in interviews with the subjects. However, he never explicitly communicates his own presence as an interviewer or witness. As a result, the reader is able to forget that he is mediating the emotions and memories of the subjects, and they are able to feel that much closer to the scene and

subjects. Rather than framing the Eagle Scouts as ‘other,’ Cullen gives the reader direct access to how the subjects remembered what they experienced to deliver a tense narrative moment and facilitate empathy for the students who had to endure it.

The power of *Columbine*’s omniscient narration is that it generates a sense of absolute control over the perception of the narrative. Another element of storytelling that Cullen exercises significant control over to engage audience emotions is the structure. The way that Cullen structures his book, its chapters, and its paragraphs can be understood as an orchestration and repetition of memory. Whitehead remarks that making sense of trauma through writing has generally been viewed favorably by scholars like Caruth and Pierre Janet who have argued that “the conversion of traumatic memory into narrative memory represents the process of recovery from trauma.” However, Whitehead also argues that there are risks involved with creating “too narrativized, too definite an account of trauma,” that the writer can “forget the challenge that trauma poses to representation” (2004, 87). Intentionally or otherwise, one of the ways that Cullen avoids writing a story of recovery that is “too narrativized,” too contrived, and too easy is by employing a structure that always brings the audience back to the killers’ narrative and the question of why they did what they did. *Columbine*’s structure implicitly reflects the trauma of its subjects with dramatic tension and the repeated returns to scenes from the shooting in the organization of its chapters.

Wahl-Jorgensen describes dramatic tension as one of the means by which “emotions may... be *built into* the narrative” (2019, 46). She remarks that journalists commonly embed dramatic tension into their stories by “setting up a situation of ‘normalcy’ that is then interrupted by a ‘remarkable event’ or a ‘problem’” (51). Reader’s

generally have certain expectations for the style and content of stories based on synopses, titles, front matter, etc., and writers like Cullen can play on the audience's expectations of violence and tragedy for a book about a school shooting by first introducing 'normalcy' and positive imagery. In a two-part lecture posted to his YouTube page, Cullen discusses *Columbine*'s structure and discusses his rhetorical efforts to raise the dramatic tension: "One of the slightly manipulative things I did was I knew that I wanted to introduce several [characters] before the murders and have some of them die and some of them live and not have [the audience] know which ones" (Dave Cullen 2010). Cullen's characterization of his own structural decisions with a negative term like "manipulative" while walking young writers through his decision-making process seems to imply that he recognized that he may be stretching journalistic or literary standards of objectivity and/or transparency but decided to prioritize the immersive and emotionally affective potential of the story.

Once again, it is worth analyzing the decisions that Cullen makes in telling Dave Sanders' story to exemplify the author's structural decisions. Before Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrive at Columbine High School on the day of the massacre, Cullen dedicates the majority of two chapters to developing Dave Sanders' character. Cullen's language is unrestrained in its praise of Sanders, describing him in the way that a close friend might: "Coach Sanders outclassed most of the clientele, but he didn't think in class terms. He cared about friendliness, honest effort, and sincerity" (2010, 20). It could be argued that Cullen's narration in this instance reflects his own subjective opinion, however, as with the rest of the narration in the primary text of *Columbine*, it can also be argued that he is simply channeling the perspectives of Sanders' friends and family. This

is evidenced in Cullen's frequent reliance on anecdotes implicitly focalized through the perspectives of Sanders' loved ones, all of which present him as a dedicated, loving individual.

Both chapters are sandwiched between narratives of the last days of Eric and Dylan's preparations, which strike a starkly contrasting, menacing tone. Cullen avoids explicit foreshadowing in both of the Sanders chapters, but the juxtaposition of his introduction with those of the shooters is enough to create a sense that his life hangs in the balance. For instance, in the last scene in chapter 9, "Dads," Dave and Linda Sanders rush through the morning and forget to kiss each other good-bye, and Cullen ends the scene on an image that would be harmless out of context: "Dave blew her a kiss from the driveway" (39). Just a page later Cullen opens chapter 10, "Judgement," from the perspective of the shooters on their last morning as they prepare for the attack, implying just what exactly is waiting for Sanders when he arrives at school: "Dylan scrawled the schedule into Eric's day planner under the heading 'make TODAY count.' Eric illustrated it with a blazing gun barrel" (40). The question of Sanders' fate has the intended effect of enticing readers to keep turning the pages; additionally, the two chapters of introduction to him makes the grisly description of his demise even more emotionally impactful.

The scene of the second to last chapter, the end of Dylan and Eric's story, is brutal. Cullen's details are visceral and disturbing in their detached medical precision, describing one blast "causing 'evacuation of the brain,'" and an explanation of how they "blew out their medullas, the brain center that controls involuntary functions" which causes their hearts to stop pumping, and instead of bleeding, their corpses "leaked"

(2010, 353). The transition from this scene to the graduation ceremony in the next chapter is jarring. At the end of the last chapter, Patrick Ireland, who recovered from a near-fatal brain injury after the shooting, says at the graduation ceremony, “the shootings were an event that occurred... But it did not define me as a person. It did not set the tone for the rest of my life” (358). Patrick’s use of the past tense, that the shooting “occurred,” implies that he has no intention of minimizing the tragedy or its impact, but in the same breath he makes it clear that now that he has recovered from his physical trauma, he will not allow the event to hold him in any further stasis. Cullen’s juxtaposition of Dylan and Eric’s demise and Patrick’s triumph channels the survivor’s sentiment, that it is not the omission or forgetting of violent, horrifying memories that facilitates moving forward, but the acknowledgement of them, that they “occurred” and are now done.

While *Columbine* has enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim since its release, the rhetorical decisions that make the narrative so compelling have not gone without criticism from literary trauma scholars. Lindsay Morton, Research Chair of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, is one of few critics to direct their attention to *Columbine* and takes aim at the epistemological problems that result from Cullen’s rhetorical decisions, particularly his omission of his “epistemic location” (2014, 236). Cullen attempts to resolve the potential issues that arise from not disclosing his physical and social relationship to his sources in the narrative by providing a notes section. Morton describes this strategy as “disclosure transparency,” which “makes clear the process of content selection, publishing links to original material and sources and revealing personal positions in relation to the news” (2015, 170). This way of framing a narrative allows the author to establish the credibility of their “truth-claims” while

retaining certain aesthetic qualities in the storytelling. Morton suggests that Cullen's omniscient narration generates a problematic effect of "distanced reflexivity," which is to say that he is critical of a group that he was a member of, the pack journalists, and yet rhetorically takes a position separate from them in the narrative. She argues that the problem with the way that Cullen constructs, if not avoids, his positionality is that it "sets up reader expectations that are epistemically—if not ethically—untenable" (172). In essence, Cullen justifies his manipulations within the narrative by being transparent in its paratext, and Morton argues that in doing so Cullen risks compromising the reader's understanding of where Cullen's narration, and thus his knowledge, is actually coming from.

While Whitehead, citing Dominick LaCapra (2001), argues that it is vital to recognize and adhere to the difference between empathy and identification, as empathy implies "an affirmation of otherness" and also "emphasizes the importance of 'cognition and critical analysis.'" Identification, on the other hand, "fails to recognize such limits and the receiver of testimony succumbs to a secondary trauma" (2004, 8-9). As Cullen explains ten years after the fact in *Parkland*, the concept of "secondary trauma" is deeply relevant to the personal experience that he omits from *Columbine*, and it not only seems to affect the purpose of his second school shooting story, but also the strategies that he uses to tell it.

Parkland: Birth of a Movement

In addition to journalistic tradition and integrity, it could be that Cullen distances himself and his thoughts from the narrative in *Columbine* to insulate his mental and emotional well-being from trauma. Underwood argues that "modern journalism's

‘neutral’ style developed, at least in part, as a way to provide journalists and their audience a means to distance themselves from the emotional impact of trauma” (2011, 21). However, Cullen’s introduction in *Parkland* seems to suggest that Cullen’s effort to evoke the experiences of his subjects in *Columbine* put him at greater risk. He explains that, after ten years of immersing himself in the Columbine tragedy, he experienced a “secondary trauma”: “I had never heard of secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious traumatization (VT), until it took me down, twice, seven years apart.... I could study the killers at will, because they didn’t burrow inside me—it was the survivor grief that did me in” (2019, 4). It is difficult to discern to what degree Cullen’s writing process for *Columbine* contributed to his depression, whether it was an attempt to insulate himself from it, or whether his style had nothing to do with his emotional state at all, but in at least one instance he has discussed how the emotional toll of re-constructing a subject’s story informed his writing process.

In an interview with The Hastings Report, a blog, shortly after *Columbine* was first published, Cullen explained that part of his strategy in collecting information and stories for *Columbine* was allowing himself to become emotionally invested in his subjects and their trauma: “I went through the emotions with the people as I interviewed them. I didn’t try to hold myself back. I let myself feel those, really feel, as I went through the process. In two scenes, I had to keep stopping every day because I cried every day.” Cullen said that the scene in *Columbine* that affected him the most as he wrote it was the death of Dave Sanders, noting that what made it especially hard was the affection Cullen had for Lisa Sanders and the emotions he felt during their five-hour interview to discuss her husband and the effect of his death on her: “Thinking about it,

focusing on what was happening to Dave, knowing the impact this caused. The fact Eagle Scouts tried to save him” (Hastings 2009). Knowing that this emotionally taxing research and writing process ultimately resulted in the decline of Cullen’s mental wellbeing is fascinating in that it is completely omitted from the scene of Dave Sanders’ death or any other scenes involving Lisa Sanders in the published manuscript of *Columbine*.

Where *Columbine* is characterized by the pursuit of a controlled, definitive story, *Parkland: Birth of a Movement* emerges as a piece of transparent reportage that is concerned more with emotion and catharsis than the pursuit of absolute, fact-based truth. While both books contend with the difficulty of representing trauma, in the latter Cullen retains his presence in the narrative to recognize the confounding, subjective nature of trauma. Rather than empathizing or identifying with destabilizing or unspeakable experience, *Parkland* is about the experience of moving past it. While he conveys the experience of a physically embedded reporter, Cullen simultaneously embeds his traumatized subjects’ stories within his own emotionally charged experiences and impressions of them. This positional shift between his two books aligns with Wahl-Jorgensen’s findings that audience’s value “user-generated content over ostensibly ‘objective’ news stories produced by professionals because it provided ‘emotive’ information about what the person behind the camera was ‘feeling.’” Cullen surrenders absolute narrative control in favor of “emotional authenticity” (2019, 76) to engage his audience and subvert their expectations, and this shapes his use of first-person narration, intertextuality, and linear structure in *Parkland*.

In *Columbine*, Cullen completely omits his narrative presence in favor of an omniscient narrator, but in *Parkland* he jettisons this stylistic decision and presents

himself as an embodied witness. Morton's unanswered query with *Columbine* is "where are you coming from?" (2015, 170), which is to ask where Cullen gets his information, or what his epistemic location is. In his second work of literary journalism, Cullen seemingly responds to this criticism by making both his physical access to the subjects and his emotional motivations explicit. In the prologue to *Parkland*, Cullen reveals the trauma he experienced as a result of immersing himself in the *Columbine* story and includes a clear statement of his motivation for writing another book about a mass shooting: "I flew down the first weekend, but not to depict the carnage or the grief. What drew me in was a group of extraordinary kids. I wanted to cover their response.... These kids chose a story of hope" (2019, 5). Cullen not only expresses his affection for his "extraordinary" subjects to the audience, but he also explains exactly what sort of story he intends to tell and implies that it is directly shaped by the students' mission. In essence, this is the first indication that the 'victims will have a degree of rhetorical agency not previously seen in Cullen's work. By committing to subjective narration, Cullen surrenders a degree of control and leaves room for diverging narratives.

In *Columbine*, Cullen introduces characters and tells their stories with scene-by-scene reconstructions of events delivered with vivid details, the perceived authenticity of which is often rooted in the audience's faith in Cullen's extensive research. In *Parkland*, Cullen limits these sorts of reconstructions of the shooting, and generally defers to the storytelling of his subjects, however disjointed. For instance, when Cullen introduces Jackie Coryn's experience on the day of the shooting, he opens with the narration focalized through her perspective: "Jackie was annoyed when the fire alarm sounded. Again? They had already drilled that day" (2019, 24). By the second paragraph Cullen

not only shows the reader where his insight into Jackie's perspective is coming from by explaining "It was two weeks later when Jackie first described this to me," and rather than using the details of her testimony to reconstruct an entire scene, he simply includes Jackie's lengthy word-for-word explanation, despite the fact that it reads like a frantic run-on sentence that "all spilled out in a jumble" (25). One advantage of communicating uninterrupted testimony in this way is that direct quotation is the simplest way for a writer to support their knowledge claims about a subject's experience. Additionally, Felman and Laub (1992) suggest that there is an ethical component to the use of testimony in communicating "the incoherences of trauma." They argue that the listener must strike a balance "between the necessity to witness sympathetically that which testimonial writing cannot fully represent and a simultaneous respect for the otherness of the experience" (as cited in Whitehead 2004, 7). By establishing himself as a separate, embodied figure within the narrative, Cullen is able to preserve Jackie's jumbled, subjective experience and communicate the incoherent nature of her trauma without appropriating or over-identifying with her experience.

Cullen's interviews with the Parkland kids also give them opportunities to remark explicitly on their own trauma. Something that comes up a number of times in the interviews is "triggers," or any stimuli that elicit a dissociation or cause one to re-experience a moment of trauma. In a group interview, Cullen asks three MFOL activists about their triggers, and one, Daniel, responds by slamming his hand on a table and "despite watching the windup, Alfonso and Ryan practically jumped out their chairs. They went white and silent for a moment, then everyone laughed hysterically" (2019, 156). This moment somewhat characterizes many of Cullen's interactions with the

Parkland students; they are brutally honest about their trauma but equally difficult to discern. As the writer explains, “They *seemed* to be OK.... They tended to put on a brave face, but deeply resented people reading that as recovered” (155). It is in moments like this where Cullen makes his limitations clear; he conveys his impressions and the words of his subjects and shows how their personal experiences are ultimately unknowable with hedged language such as, “they *seemed*” and “they *tended*.”

Another product of Cullen’s narrative presence is that he is able to not only share his reactions as a witness with his audience, but also the relationships he has with his subjects, which in turn helps him to deliver a more human portrait of their characters. David Hogg was one of the students who gained the most notoriety in the wake of the shooting for his natural media savvy and strong personality, and while Cullen’s interviews indicate as much, he also uses their interactions to humanize the teenager. Cullen makes it clear in a number of instances throughout the narrative that he is at the mercy of the student activists in terms of collecting information, writing that during one interview, “more than once, David grew irritated at me lingering on a topic and snapped, ‘Next question!’” (2019, 136). Unlike *Columbine*, Cullen is anything but in control; the students’ struggle to develop the emotional maturity to contend with the roles they have found themselves thrust into is part of the story that Cullen is interested in sharing. He makes measured evaluations of David and other subjects, such as, “pacing himself, that just wasn’t in his character— or not a trait he had developed yet. He was seventeen” (141). While Cullen acknowledges that David comes off as angry and impatient, he softens his judgements with a tone of sympathy. When Cullen’s descriptions are not so sympathetic and border on conjecture, he makes sure to let the reader know where he is

coming from. For instance, when he writes “David didn’t give a shit. In fact, he kind of enjoyed being attacked,” he then tells the reader, “I bounced that analysis... off David. He chuckled and agreed” (256). This reciprocal relationship that Cullen constructs between himself and his subjects contributes to the authenticity of the narrative. Instead of manufacturing an objective or interior perspective of the students’ experience, Cullen presents his own impressions and relationships with them so that the audience understands the students not just as characters, but as human beings.

The value of Cullen’s own personal experience to the narrative is most clear when he reports his emotional responses to the MFOL activists. At what is arguably the climax of *Parkland*, the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., Emma Gonzalez delivers a speech composed of four and a half minutes of silence as she stands eerily at the dais and cries. This moment is mirrored by a peak in Cullen’s own emotion, as he reports his reaction: “My cheeks were soaked, it was hard to watch, but I saw a young woman radiating power” (2019, 205). This embedded reaction represents Cullen clearly subverting the “strategic ritual of emotionality” by carrying part of the emotional load himself to engage his audience (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 39). He does not suggest that he understands what is going through Gonzalez’s head as she stands in front of 470,000 people; where he might focalize the narration through Emma’s perspective, Cullen’s narrative voice simply reacts, “I was aghast... Why deprive her of her agency to make her own brutal choices?” (2019, 204-205). Indeed, Cullen lets Emma’s silence speak for itself; instead of using information from an interview to give the reader a direct sense of how she felt standing up there, he offers up his own thoughts and lets the audience react with him. Suffice to say, there are no passages even remotely like this in *Columbine*. This

is partly due to the fact that the majority of Cullen's reporting in *Parkland* is a product of his own first-hand experiences, whereas the majority of *Columbine* is a complex conglomeration of police reports, first-hand accounts, videos, news reports, and various other sources, as well as Cullen's own experience. However, I would also submit that the change in style is a direct result of Cullen having become a more informed outsider, having witnessed the trauma at Columbine High School and admittedly gotten too close to it. This time Cullen embraces his status as an outsider and narrates as such.

Part and parcel to Cullen's insider-outsider perspective is how he sees the parallels and divergences between the aftermath of the shooting at MSD and that of the Columbine massacre. The way that he frames it, *Parkland* is more of a sequel and/or recontextualization of *Columbine* than a separate narrative. Cullen's self-espoused purpose in *Columbine* was "setting the story right" (2010, xiv), but he uses *Parkland* as a chance to communicate the subjective truth that he omitted from the first book. In *Parkland*, Cullen not only reflects on his position to the present students, but also takes the opportunity to discuss his own thoughts and feelings regarding the Columbine victims, such as when he recounts an episode in which Linda Mauser breaks down in a dentist's office 10 years after losing her son to the massacre: "after ten years, I still didn't grasp the immediacy of her pain. I have no kids. I'll never see this through Dad's eyes, or Mom's" (2019, 205). This is a moment that Cullen also reports in the Afterword to *Columbine* in the extended paperback edition:

Linda felt the urge to cry. For years after Columbine, she sucked the tears in. This time, they flowed. Her mouth quivered and the instruments pulled back.

She laid into her accuser. “My child died! I’m sorry, I just didn’t feel like flossing.”

“Oh,” the hygienist said. “Did your child die recently?”

“When your child dies, it’s always recent,” she shot back. (2010, 359)

Cullen narrates the scene as if the reader is privy to Mauser’s interior feelings with lines like “Linda felt the urge to cry,” and he adheres strictly to her emotions, never giving the audience an indication of his own personal reaction to this story as she relayed it to him. Sue Joseph advocates for reporters and writers to include these sorts of reflections when writing about traumatized subjects, suggesting that it is “a step forward – creating transparency by reflecting within the text. This allows the reader to engage with the writer on an entirely new level, a level where genuine reflection enriches the transposed interaction” (2011, 8). This “enrichment” refers to an effect of not only inviting the reader to approach the story as a consumer, but to think critically about the writer and how they are mediating the story. In essence, Cullen makes himself vulnerable in *Parkland*, a narrator with his own emotional experience and admittedly limited perspective. The purpose of Cullen’s first book is setting the record straight, but Cullen’s second book actively asks the reader to challenge his perspective and empathic capabilities, and, in effect, their own.

Columbine serves as a sort of measuring device in *Parkland*, as Cullen uses his extensive knowledge of that incident to mark the significance of the MFOL movement. That the 1999 tragedy will contextualize the activists’ narrative is something Cullen cues at the beginning of the first chapter, writing that it took Laura Farber, who was a freshmen during the Columbine shooting, 19 years to create a documentary about the

event, while “David Hogg filmed his Parkland ordeal as he lived it.... and conducted his first on-camera interviews with the kids trapped alongside him” (2019, 15). From the outset, Cullen delineates a story of two generations, nearly two decades apart, framing himself as somewhat of a relic of the Columbine generation who is frequently surprised by the MSD students’ willingness to take swift action. In a way, the trauma that Cullen admits to having suffered as a result of becoming so involved with the subjects of *Columbine* enables him to report the details of *Parkland* in a way that few others could. When Cullen arrives at the site of the temporary memorial for the MSD victims, he describes it as if it were a trigger for his own trauma: “A wave of sadness knocked me to my knees, and all I could feel was Columbine. This one had promised to be different, but these spontaneous memorials are horribly familiar” (22). Details like this legitimize Cullen’s position as an insider-outsider, someone who is deeply familiar with witnessing the aftermath of school shootings, who can articulate the emotional toll as a witness without confusing his experience with those of victims and survivors.

While Cullen communicates the ways in which the Columbine and Parkland tragedies overlap, he also addresses how the events and their stakeholders diverge and even conflict. Cullen not only uses his perspective on Columbine to remark on the MFOL movement, he also includes testimony from others who were present, including one of the daughters of Dave Sanders, Coni, who writes to Cullen, “I am in awe of what is happening... It’s working, Dave. All these years and its working” (2019, 98), and even one of the shooter’s parents, Sue Klebold, who met with the Parkland students and remarked, “I’m smitten with those kids” (284). However, as much as the survivors and stakeholders in the Columbine community support the MFOL movement, Cullen

acknowledges that the intergenerational gap, like any, creates some conflict. Specifically, when the movement plans a national walkout on the anniversary of Columbine, there is a protest from current Columbine students as well as the former principal, and survivor of the shooting, Frank DeAngelis. This moment in the narrative is significant because it demonstrates that despite the similarities of the two events, it does not mean that the Parkland students inherently understand the trauma of those at Columbine, as “many of the survivors battle PTSD symptoms that day.... and reserve politics to the other 364 days of the year” (232). Cullen does not seem to include this moment to promote a negative opinion of the MFOL activists, but rather to introduce nuance into the portrait of trauma. While the walkout conflict points to the chasm of understanding between traumatic experiences, Cullen also includes a scene of a private session in which DeAngelis discusses his experience with the Parkland students in order to facilitate their healing process, “DeAngelis loved the airplane oxygen mask analogy, and shared it with these kids: They always instruct you to put your own on before helping others. You’re useless if you don’t help yourself first” (226). While Cullen displays that shared trauma does not equate to shared experience, he also shows that the act of sharing and communicating about trauma can assist with processing and healing. As a witness to both experiences, he orchestrates these intergenerational perspectives in such a way that conveys a story that is bigger than the horror of a school shooting, that acknowledges the legitimacy without shying away from challenging them or introducing complexity.

While the Columbine-centric lens is something that Cullen accentuates and constructs, the structure of *Parkland* is more notable for what it does not do than what it does. Cullen avoids the narrative contrivance of *Columbine* by not only adhering to a

largely linear structure, but also by dedicating as little time as possible to the shooting and the shooter without omitting those details entirely. In the prologue, Cullen explains his reasoning for omitting the name of the Parkland shooter, “who quickly grew irrelevant,” while not entirely undermining his previous book: “We must examine the perpetrators as a class, both to spot threats and underlying causes. And it’s fruitful to study influential cases... particularly the false narrative of the Columbine killers” (2019, 9). While he implicitly argues that the content of *Columbine* was “fruitful,” he does not make any argument for how he told that story. Additionally, he observes that “in the mid-2010s” the conversation around school shootings shifted from examining the “why” to “some variation of ‘How do we make this stop?’” (2019, 10), and Parkland’s narrative reflects this shift. In *Columbine*, reconstruction of the moments between the first and last shots makes up the majority of the first hundred pages, and half of the remaining pages are dedicated to the development of the shooters. In *Parkland*, Cullen dedicates the third chapter, a total of three pages, to the shooter and the shooting. While Cullen returns to scenes during which the shooting occurred as he introduces some of the prominent activists, none of them are at all violent or near the action. This does not suggest that the subjects in those scenes did not experience trauma, but rather that Cullen does not consider reconstructing detailed scenes of violence as necessary for the purpose of this story as he did in *Columbine*.

Despite moral or cultural concerns, Cullen’s goal, like any reporter or writer, with both of his books must be engaging and compelling his audience. However, in *Parkland* this pursuit is complicated, and simplified in some ways, by the fact that his subjects, the MFOL activists like David Hogg and Emma Gonzalez, are already engaged in the

process of finding ways to effectively communicate their experience as Cullen is interviewing and observing them. He explains early on that a combination of the smartphone generation's media savvy and familiarity with the reality of school shootings in the U.S. prepared the students to jump into activism in the immediate aftermath of tragedy. Cullen writes that despite the fact that most of the activists could not vote yet, they impress individuals like John Della Volpe, polling director at Harvard's Institute of Politics, who "couldn't recall a more powerful combination of speakers in the past several decades." When Cullen tells the students about Della Volpe's reaction and asks how "choreographed" their speeches were, they react with amusement and explain that "they were just thrown together that day," with the simple understanding that they had to engage their audience emotionally before they explained their policy agenda: "heart first, then head" (2019, 192). Since his subjects are already concerned with telling their story effectively, Cullen finds himself in the position of an audience member. Instead of imposing his power as a storyteller, he opts for a linear narrative of his experience as a witness tracking the development of the young activists.

The different narrative styles that Cullen employs *Columbine* and *Parkland: Birth of a Movement* certainly do not exhaust the rhetorical possibilities for communicating trauma in literary journalism, but their differences do help to convey the possibilities of the genre. In constructing narratives out of experiences that "[overwhelm] the individual and resists language or representation" (Whitehead 2004, 3), writers and reporters face difficult decisions regarding how they convey suffering while maintaining a fidelity to the subject's experience. Even though *Columbine* has enjoyed significant critical and popular acclaim, Cullen abandons that style in *Parkland*. I argue that this is at least partly

due to the way that Cullen chooses to identify with his subjects in the narrative, not only risking his emotional well-being, but the misrepresentation of his subjects as well.

Because of this experience, Cullen employs a style in *Parkland* that retains the authenticity of his and his subjects' perspectives, arguably communicating a more nuanced portrait of trauma. This is not to say that one style affects the audience more than another, or that one is right and the other is wrong, but rather there are a range of options available to writers in the liminal genre of literary journalism, and they all require considerations of each decision's implications for the subjects, the audience, and the author.

CHAPTER II

REFUSING CLOSURE IN DEXTER FILKINS' *THE FOREVER WAR*

Across discourses, trauma has often been considered an ailment of the memory; moments of sudden violence or overwhelming emotional stimulus have been thought of by trauma researchers and theorists as having an amnesic effect on those that experience them. This concept can be traced back to influential trauma literature scholars like Cathy Caruth, who argues that narrative and “imaginative literature” are ideal tools to recover traumatic memories and render them coherent (Pederson 2014, 334). However, the concept of narrative as a means to unearth buried memories and “recover” from trauma is complicated by scholars who suggest that the supposed amnesic effect of trauma is scientifically out-of-date and critically overstated (Pederson 2014), as well as by those that point out the capacity for recovery narratives to obfuscate truth and marginalize diverse perspectives in favor of more satisfying closure (Deer 2017). It is in war narratives, those stories which historically dominate literary discussions of trauma, that truth and closure are especially disparate. The paradoxical relationship of truth and memory in war stories is something that Tim O’Brien meditates on in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Things They Carried*, where he writes, “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way” (O’Brien 1990, 67-68). O’Brien and other war writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Michael Herr, and Gloria Emerson champion the distorted experiences and “disturbances in temporality that have long been understood to accompany traumatic events” (Luckhurst 2012, 723).

As O'Brien argues, there is nothing to recover or clarify from "what seemed to happen," because that incomplete, subjective experience is the whole truth. Viewed in this light, the satisfying, heroic war stories that can be put down and forgotten are, at best, flights of fancy, and at worst, tasteless propaganda.

The trouble with communicating distorted and unresolved narratives of trauma is that those are not characteristics that audiences are typically expected to embrace in storytelling. Underwood reflects on this challenge that contemporary trauma storytellers face, remarking that "the ability to keep readers moving through such trying material is a talent in today's publishing environment, and... the capacity to induce empathy in an audience rather than the impulse to simply shut the book is a literary gift" (Underwood 2011, 197). Dexter Filkins is one such storyteller; a foreign correspondent for The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times, Filkins spent 9 years reporting from Afghanistan and Iraq from 1998 to 2006, for which he was nominated as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting in 2002. Although Filkins' reporting from the Middle East captured important details about the conflicts and climate on the ground, in 2008 he published a book in an effort to capture "what it really feels like to be there," as he told Charlie Rose (2008) shortly after the book was released, "because that's what people always ask when I come back to the United States."

Filkins' book, *The Forever War*, is not so much a linear narrative as a collection of snapshots from Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Manhattan on 9/11, arranged to create an impressionistic portrait of an environment that seems to have lost any sense of its past or future. Filkins' snapshots are often composed of detached mini-profiles of various subjects from Taliban to Iraqi civilians to 19-year-old marines. Cohesion between

chapters is of little concern to the writer, as he weaves in and out of moments of violence, tragedy, humor, humanity, and absurdity; characters and moments come and go, and very rarely do they return. Filkins' interest in conveying the experience and implications of a war with no foreseeable resolution, rather than making a clear political statement, represents a trend in literary journalism rather than an exception; Underwood (2011) observes that modern journalists such as Dexter Filkins, David Finkel, and Sebastian Junger "are framing their themes of battlefield trauma in more inconclusive, paradox-filled, and professionally detached circumstances that reflect the nature of anti-insurgency combat fought by volunteer forces against indigenous foes in seemingly permanent campaigns of nation-building" (159). While Filkins' previous reporting and much of his narration in *The Forever War* can be described as "professionally detached" in tone, Filkins himself has alluded to feeling a significant attachment to his time in Afghanistan and Iraq that is recognizable in his stories. Discussing the changes he observed during his brief return to Iraq in 2007, the correspondent seems to nearly mourn the loss of the Iraq that he had experienced at the height of the American conflicts in the region: "I think even when I was back this last time, in Baghdad, there were so many things that were gone. I'd seen them and I had a sort of palpable sense that these things I had seen, these people, these scenes, are gone. They were here. They were extraordinary, and they're all finished" (Charlie Rose, 2008). The ambiguity with which Filkins' discusses his experience of Iraq in this interview, a sense that the incomplete record of memory is all that is left, permeates his book. Even though the word "trauma" appears only twice in *The Forever War*, the disruption of temporality and the resistance to conventional narrative are fundamental preoccupations driving the narrative, which

Filkins delivers through detached subject portraits, dramatic juxtaposition, and narrative reflections.

Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) suggests that most journalists rely on their subjects to perform the emotional labor, or “the responsibility for the expression... and the elicitation of emotion” (52), and Filkins is far from an exception. However, he does not seem to be as interested in connecting his audience to the emotions of subjects on an individual basis, as much as using their portraits in a larger collage that communicates the incomprehensible, collective trauma of the entire region. Filkins articulates this difficulty a number of times throughout the book as he encounters scenes and stories of cruelty: “I couldn’t comprehend the pain or the fortitude required to endure it. Other times I thought that something had broken fundamentally after so many years of war... a numbness wholly understandable, necessary even” (2009, 20). Filkins implicitly clarifies that his goal is not to communicate a comprehensible version of his subjects’ trauma, but rather what effect that experience has on them. This is in line with Whitehead’s (2004) explanation of postmodernist novelists’ conception of trauma: “trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event” (82). Violence is abundant in the stories of Filkins’ subjects, and while he does not avoid or censor grisly details, their emotional potency lies in his focus on the witnesses’ reactions or delivery. When Filkins relays a refugee’s story about tactics deployed by the Taliban who had chased them from their home, he omits his own reaction to the story in favor of allowing the subject to speak for himself:

I was using a translator, and Sakhi, numb and depressed, kept using the Dari words *barcha*, which meant “spear,” and *tabar*, which meant “ax.” I still have the words in my notebook. My translator was having trouble understanding, so I asked him to ask Sakhi to slow down and tell us what the Taliban fighter had done. And Sakhi told me, in the lifeless way that he was speaking, that the Talibs were doing with the *barcha* what anyone would do with such an instrument, they were pushing them into people’s anuses and pulling them back out of their throats. He and his family had come on foot.

“We walked across deserts and mountains,” he said. (2009, 21)

The violence and cruelty of Sakhi’s story is shocking, but equally important, if not more so, is the way that Filkins characterizes the refugee’s attitude towards the violence. Sakhi’s “lifeless” delivery and his seamless transition from discussing the disturbing purpose for the *barcha* and the length of his family’s journey indicates that such cruelty is commonplace in a reality dominated by the Taliban. Sakhi has the last word, as his final line of testimony, “We walked across deserts and mountains,” marks the end of the scene. Filkins’ absence here indicates that the refugee’s experience, the simple magnitude of his journey and desperation, is beyond further interpretation, implicit or otherwise. The very circumstances of the scene, the limitations of Filkins’ communication with a translator and the chasm between the experiences of Sakhi and the writer leave Filkins speechless, suggesting to the reader that there is no proper way to empathize with the trauma Sakhi and his family experienced.

Filkins’ depiction of the trauma in Afghanistan and Iraq is not isolated to the native inhabitants; rather, he conveys it as a characteristic of the environment itself:

“Some days I thought we had broken into a mental institution.... It helped in your analysis. Murder and torture and sadism: It was part of Iraq. It was in people’s brains” (73). Even as Filkins is abundantly aware of the day-to-day brutality of Iraq and Afghanistan he remains reliably awestruck by it, which is part of the reason that an outsider audience can identify with his perspective. *The Forever War*’s very first chapter is a public amputation/execution conducted by the Taliban in a soccer stadium, and after the grisly scene Filkins interviews a member of the crowd who explains to him: “In America you have television and movies... here there is only this” (16). The disturbing reality that this individual articulates to Filkins’ and his American audience is part of what allows him to communicate a compelling picture of trauma; he adapts and articulates the ways in which the people and the societal fixtures in the region are not so different from our own, be it politics, economics, religion, or entertainment, but it is all refracted through a prism of misery. Filkins’ embedded interactions with American soldiers in the region help to solidify this theme, as they seem to become just as alien to Filkins through their experiences as the Afghans and Iraqis he meets:

“Best feeling in the world,” he said, eyes bright. “To get hit with an IED and live. It’s like bungee jumping.”

You serious? I asked.

“Yeah,” Nelson said. “You get these vibrations all over your body like somebody pounded the hell out of you.”

Right. What about the gash on your head?

“I hit the window,” he said.

How many times is that?

“This is my fifth,” he said. “The first time we were going to Abu Ghraib, the prison, and it hit our Humvee. Wounded one of the guys. Really weird, you know, your first time.”

Right, I said. (Filkins 2009, 304)

In this scene, Corporal Jonathan Nelson has just returned from surviving a roadside bomb in his Humvee on the same day that he had taken Filkins out in the same Humvee for a routine escort. Filkins doesn't say much in this exchange, but his affirmative responses (“Right”) to Nelson's exhilarated second-person promptings, such as “you know, your first time,” call attention to the chasm between their perceptions of reality. Despite his affirmations, Filkins clearly cannot identify with Nelson's experience any more than he can identify with the casual spectator at the public execution, but his initial incredulous response to Nelson's exhilarated exclamation signals to the reader that understanding the individual experience of trauma is impossible. Rather, Filkins is concerned with conveying the effect, the distortion of one's senses and experience to the degree that getting hit with an IED can become the “best feeling in the world.” Whitehead (2004) argues that “testimony requires a highly collaborative relationship between speaker and listener” (2004, 7), and Filkins evokes that relationship, in this instance, by embedding his reaction into the dialogue. As a result, the reader can approach the testimony of traumatized subjects in Filkins' book with sympathy while recognizing the limitations of both narrative and their own capacity for identifying with those subjects.

Another strategy that showcases Filkins' voyeur-embedded position in the Middle East is his use of juxtaposition. More specifically, this strategy often emerges in the journalist's focus on age. Whenever a new character is introduced, especially a younger

one, Filkins draws attention to their age, and when he describes scenes of violent combat, he refers to American soldiers as “kids,” embedding his accounts of battle with a sense of dissonance. This is evident in *The Forever War*’s prologue, where Filkins contrasts the excessively explicit dialogue of the marines, who are running from suicide bombers during the Battle of Fallujah, with a description of them as “kids”: “‘Fuck!’ the kids were yelling, running back. ‘Fuck! Fucking jihadi rag-head motherfuckers! They’ve fucking rigged themselves’” (2009, 6). The dissonance produced from the marine’s language and Filkins’ perception helps to convey the seeming unreality of conflicts like Fallujah. A few sentences later, the ages of the marines once again become their defining trait: “More nineteen-year-olds went up to the roof with their giant guns” (7). Filkins’ references to age don’t appear to be any sort of mournful statement on a sentimental loss of innocence, but rather a matter-of-fact observation from a middle-aged reporter: this war is not fought by heroes or countries, but by sons.

Filkins’ extends the ambiguity generated by his references to the youth of his subjects in his characterizations of insurgents and civilians. Filkins’ describes meeting a group of “boy soldiers” who are only fighting for the Afghanistan Northern Alliance because they are paid enough to take care of their families, or as one of them explains to Filkins, “My mother is not weeping.” Filkins does not use any explicitly emotional language in his description of the scene because there is already emotional weight inherent to the situation of young men who fight so that their mothers do not weep, which is only multiplied when Filkins alludes to the boys’ deaths: “The Taliban came down the road a few months later. I’ve got the boys’ picture on a bookcase in my apartment” (2009, 18). Interviewing a 20-year-old former-Taliban fighter who had lost an arm and a

leg to land mines, Filkins describes the young man cycling between hope and despair as “he looked up at me with the dreamy eyes of a child” (27). This sort of observation often characterizes many of the moments during which Filkins sympathizes with the Taliban and other insurgent fighters, and in turn seeks to communicate the raw humanity of oppositional subjects using the same sentimental strategy.

However, just as Filkins’ seems to humanize soldiers by framing them as children, he also subverts the inherent emotional value of youth by framing a number of child subjects as antagonists. In one instance, he describes civilian children rejoicing when a Humvee is hit by a roadside bomb (157), and in another, as Filkins’ and his company are being chased by an angry mob in the aftermath of a suicide bombing, he eggs on his driver as he veers to hit a young member of the mob: “I saw sunlight at the other end but a kid, too, already winding up like a baseball pitcher. Vida Blue, I thought, Vida Blue, the pitcher from the 1970s. The kid had great form and Waleed gunned the engine and swerved to get him, and I was yelling, Hit him, Waleed, hit him! As the kid released his pitch and dove” (128). By this point in the book, Filkins’ uses of the word “kid” and theme of youth have seemed to be efforts to elicit sympathy, but he confuses that pattern in this instance as he effectively cheers for the demise of a “kid.” Suddenly, the distance between Filkins’ experience as reporter and those of numb, reckless soldiers does not seem so far. What this suggests is that, in addition to eliciting sympathy, Filkins’ use of terms and imagery associated with youth is meant to communicate that the violence and trauma brought on by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan erase the Western conceptions of the boundaries between youth and adulthood. This destabilization is signaled through the juxtaposition of Filkins’ internal perspective with his outward

reaction to the unfamiliar, hostile environment, as his internal praise of the youth's pitching form contrasts with his adrenaline-induced urging of Waleed.

Filkins use of juxtaposition is always a function of his voyeuristic position, as he comments on details that others disregard and is privy to information that others are not. Because he is often witnessing multiple narratives at once, he can disrupt one with another. For instance, when Filkins' visits a maternity hospital in Diwaniya, Iraq with Paul Bremer, a political representative for the American occupation authority, he shows multiple narrative disruptions that effectively convey the willful miscommunication between American representatives and Iraqis: "One of the Iraqi doctors smiled and motioned to Bremer, suggesting he give one of the stuffed animals to one of the lifeless babies. Bremer grimaced. 'I don't like seeing this at all,' he said. One of the doctors whispered in my ear. 'Four babies died in one week'" (138). In the first sentence Filkins uses one word, "lifeless," to disrupt what would otherwise be a harmless narrative involving a smiling doctor, a stuffed animal, and a baby. The following sentences clarify the two narratives that have suddenly come into contact: Bremer's exclamation indicates that he had no intention of "seeing" or being a witness to anything that wouldn't preserve the narrative of American occupation producing progress in the region, and the doctor's "whispered" confession to Filkins' indicates that they too have a vested interest in preserving the cognitive distance between their world and Bremer's. The use of juxtaposition in this case displays its power as a literary strategy, especially in trauma narratives, a writer's goal is to elucidate the stories which have been marginalized in favor of more convenient narratives. Whitehead argues that the "ethical dimension of trauma fiction" is "the intertextual recovery of hitherto marginalized voices" (2004, 86),

and while Filkins' conceptions of Bremer's experience and the doctors' experiences are incomplete, he is able to put their narratives in conversation to reveal a different truth; that is, the self-deception involved in American-Iraqi communication.

Historical representation and truth have always been subjects of concern in trauma theory, especially with regards to literature, and they are concerns that emerge in Filkins' orchestration and juxtaposition of details. Luckhurst (2012) argues that the Iraq War in particular has been difficult to integrate into a readable history due to its lack of a definitive end: "the Iraq war existed in an odd stage of incompleteness, at once a war, a civil war, and a postwar occupation... insurgency, and the classic violent aftermath of colonial withdrawal" (721). Filkins has said that he titled his record of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan *The Forever War* because it "feels" like forever (Charlie Rose 2008), but the title is just as appropriate for the conflict's lack of historical boundaries, as if it existed out of time. This concept is something of a thesis for Filkins, and it emerges in a surreal moment of the first chapter's public execution scene: "Just then a jumbo jet appeared in the sky above, rumbling, forcing a pause in the ceremony. The brother stood holding his Kalashnikov. I looked up. I wondered how a jet airliner could happen by such a place, over a city such as this, wondered where it might be going. I considered for a second the momentary collision of the centuries" (16). In this moment, one world intrudes upon another; the modern world of innovations passes by, and the third world is literally paused in time. This is set off by the juxtaposition of artifacts from these two worlds: a modern feat of transportation, and a World War II-era rifle. This somewhat poetic set of details might be easily overlooked by a reader, but Filkins makes its significance abundantly clear by injecting his own reflection on "the momentary collision

of the centuries.” He offers no solution, no way of bridging the gap between worlds, he simply conveys that his stories are a perpetually incomplete record of a world shackled by its trauma, unable to cement its historical boundaries.

While Filkins’ is mostly distinguishable in the narrative for his detached observations of the environment and subjects in Iraq and Afghanistan, the narrative reflections on his embedded experiences are just as fundamental to capturing the feeling truth of his own experience. The nature of the correspondent’s embedded presence in Iraq and Afghanistan is complex as he not only accompanies platoons of soldiers in battlefields like Fallujah in Iraq, but also forges his own way through the region without such protection. The ethical implications of embedded reporting have persisted as long as the practice itself, often based on the conception that the “military’s embedding program is clearly intended to encourage self-censorship” as journalists focalize their reporting, intentionally or otherwise, through the perspectives of the soldiers that they are embedded with (Maguire 2017, 9). Where Filkins records his recollections of being embedded with American soldiers, he makes his fondness for them clear: “Usually, if we weren’t working, Ash and I would sit around and talk with the kids.... We had become part of the team. I knew they would save me if I got in trouble. (And in fact they did.)” (Filkins 2009, 197). However, as Filkins ‘embeds’ himself in the seemingly otherworldly environments of Iraq and Afghanistan, beyond the tunnel vision of the military units, his perspective becomes that of an outsider, unable to identify with young American soldiers, insurgent forces, or civilians, yet uniquely positioned to give his audience voyeuristic insight into their lives.

Filkins' first-person presence in the narrative introduces complexity to the way he tells his stories as he has to draw a distinction between the reactions and observations of the embedded Filkins' and the reflective analyses of the narrator. This is not an unusual characteristic in genres like literary journalism or memoir, where the line between past and present, memory and meaning making, is an especially important distinction to make; however, Filkins is also distinguishing between two different states of mind, that of the reporter and the literary journalist. The distinction between these two voices is no clearer than in the case of Marine Lance Corporal William L. Miller's death. In the chapter titled *Pearland*, Filkins recounts his and New York Times' photographer Ashley Gilbertson's embedded experience with Bravo Company during the Battle of Fallujah. Under the impression that the fighting is over, Gilbertson and Filkins ask Captain Omohundro, the leader of the unit, if they can go back to a minaret, in which some marines had spotted the dead body of an insurgent, to take a picture of the corpse for the paper (Filkins' explains that seeing insurgent corpses was rare due to the efficiency with which they collected and buried their dead). Several marines accompany the reporters back to the minaret and one of them, Lance Corporal Miller, is shot and killed in front of Filkins and Gilbertson as they are ascending the minaret by an insurgent that had come back to retrieve the body.

The significance of this moment in *The Forever War* is partly due to its appearance in Filkins' direct reporting from the field in a 2004 New York Times article. In the article, Filkins maintains an 'objective' style in his writing, omitting personal pronouns as well as any reference to his or Gilbertson's presence. Filkins' explanation of Miller's death in the article is brief and leaves out the reporters' role in the situation: "later a Marine in Company B was killed while climbing the stairs inside, shot by an

insurgent who had somehow remained above. After two other marines retrieved his body, a pair of 500-pound bombs were called in and the mosque was no more” (Filkins 2004). While Filkins’ reporting makes it seem like his knowledge of the event could very well be second-hand, his three-page narrative of it viscerally describes the blood that he and Gilbertson literally have on their hands: “Ashley was sitting on the stoop beside the entrance to the minaret mumbling to himself.... My fault, he was saying, my fault. There was blood and bits of white flesh on his face and on his flak jacket and on his camera lens. My fault” (Filkins 2009, 209). The discrepancy between these two accounts is something that Maguire (2017) is critical of in Filkins’ reporting, arguing that “one would be hard-pressed to see how this scenario could escape any reasonable definition of newsworthiness” (9). While the fairness of Maguire’s criticism is up for debate, his observation that Filkins’ ‘objective’ rendition of Miller’s death is significantly less effective at meeting an ethic of transparency than his subjective account is significant and worth expanding on.

Understanding that Filkins’ voyeur character at the scene of Miller’s death is the one that relays the events in his 2004 article, the seemingly detached perspective with which he describes Miller’s death and the emotions of Gilbertson and the other marines seems to make more sense. Filkins’ is vivid in his descriptions of other subjects’ reactions to Miller’s death; Gilbertson is clearly traumatized and guilt-stricken, “mumbling to himself like a child” (2009, 210), while the marines react with both determination and rage: “You could see the marines, too; it was in their eyes. Obsessed and burning. Maybe the whole platoon would die, I thought” (209). The only immediate emotional reaction that Filkins’ fails to include is his own. Rather than describing his

horror or guilt, Filkins' tone seems like that of a writer pondering how best to construct the image of Miller's corpse to his audience: "his face was opened in a large V, split like meat, fish maybe, with the two sides jiggling" (210). The imagery is brutal and disturbing, but Filkins' aside, "fish maybe," suggests that his voyeur character, himself struggling with a traumatic experience, has not begun to process the evidence of Miller's death, as he assesses the appearance of the corpse's physical trauma without consideration for the fatal implications.

It is not until three lines later that Filkins' reveals or considers his own feelings about the incident. The moment is triggered by Filkins' only dialogue in the scene as he tells Gilbertson, "He's dead." Filkins' narrator then pulls back from the memory, the use of the second person signaling a literal reflection, and he very clearly expresses his feelings of guilt, not only indicting himself but his very profession: "The life of the reporter: always someone else's pain.... Your photographer needed a corpse for the newspaper, so you and a bunch of marines went out to get one. Then suddenly it's there, the warm liquid on your face, the death you've always avoided, smiling back at you like it knew all along. Your fault" (2009, 210). Filkins ends his reflection by echoing Gilbertson's traumatized mumble, "My fault" (209), but whereas he had just previously othered his photographer's reaction as "like a child" (210), Filkins' repetition of it suggests that he feels his experience was not so different. While the use of the second person in this moment can be interpreted to exclusively be directed at Filkins' himself and his profession, it's difficult to believe that he is not also speaking to the audience. That is who Gilbertson was trying to take the photograph for, after all: the audience, the reader, the countless voyeurs who would casually scroll past the details of the marine

who died climbing the minaret in Fallujah in Filkins' *New York Times* report. His reflection is an expression of guilt and of trauma, but it is also a meditation on the culpability of the witness. He does not offer up a path towards catharsis or closure, rather he challenges the audience to empathize with Gilbertson and himself while taking a critical view of his position, as well as their own.

Filkins' narrative style seems to be in line with Joseph's (2011) "reflective practice model," (5) by which she argues that engaging subjects empathetically and "enduring the subject's clear distress and pain, in an intimate interview situation, leads to a deeper understanding and potentially more evocative writing" (7). However, he does not frame his subject as any one individual in his stories, but rather Iraq itself. In a chapter located about halfway through the book, Filkins tells the story of finally leaving Iraq. As his plane lifts off he admits to the reader that as much as he is able to affect the narrative of the country, it had its own indelible effect on him: "After so long I'd become part of the place, part of the despair, part of the death and the bad food and the heat and the sandy-colored brown of it. I felt I understood its complications and its paradoxes and even its humor, felt a jealous brotherhood with everyone who was trying to keep it from sinking even deeper" (147). Not to stretch Joseph's model too far, but it is as if Filkins has been engaged in a years long interview with Iraq itself, and literally looking back at it as his plane lifts off, he acknowledges that his perspective is anything but detached. His personification of Iraq, with "its paradoxes and even its humor," and his somewhat inexplicable woe at leaving it behind evokes the humanity of the country and serves to complicate audience attitudes towards what might seem to be an irretrievable region. However, like any of soldiers or civilians in the book that had similarly adapted to life in

Iraq, Filkins acknowledges that he did not walk away unscarred: “My friend George, an American reporter I’d gotten to know in Iraq, told me he couldn’t have a conversation with anyone about Iraq who hadn’t been there. I told him I couldn’t have a conversation with anyone who hadn’t been there about anything at all” (340). Although Filkins’ transparency is constructed, like anything in a narrative, he does not feign a detached perspective to protect himself from the emotional impact of his experiences like many journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 33); rather, he contributes his experience to his overall portrait of trauma that would have otherwise been undermined should he have left Iraq without having been affected by it.

CHAPTER III

RACHEL KAADZI GHANSAH AND HISTORIES OF TRAUMA

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah is a journalist and essayist, who, in her own words, has built her work on the concept of “writing love letters to people I admire” (Linsky 2017). She has developed a particular niche of writing profiles dedicated to significant Black figures in popular culture, such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Missy Elliot, Jimi Hendrix, and Dave Chappelle. Part of what makes these profiles so compelling, and what has earned them critical acclaim, is that Ghansah makes them just as much about her experience as a Black woman and her relationship to these figures as the figures themselves. In several instances, Ghansah’s subjects, such as James Baldwin and Dave Chappelle, have either been unable or unwilling to be interviewed for her profiles, and in their absence, she has turned to the environments which they inhabited to better understand them. Recording her own interactions with the historical and social realities of these places, be it Baldwin’s dilapidated home in France or the small town in Ohio to which Chappelle retreated from fame, Ghansah has consistently delivered human portraits of near-mythical figures in history and culture that call attention to the ways that race altered and defined their journeys, and, in effect, her own.

At the beginning of 2017, Ghansah attended Dylann Roof’s trial to write a story about the impacts and implications of the Charleston Church Massacre that had occurred nearly two years before. On June 17, 2015, the 21-year-old had walked into Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church with a semi-automatic handgun and opened fire on 12 attendees, killing 9. As she told podcaster Max Linsky on the

Longform Podcast in 2017, Ghansah had every intention of making her story about the victims and how they were contending with their loss, but as she proceeded with interviews, she began to question whether her efforts might be doing more harm than good: “I had done all of these interviews, and this was a weird moment because what you start to imagine is, these people didn’t ask for this, they didn’t ask to have to talk about the worst moment in their life and it’s kind of wrong to ask them to.” Interviewees face undeniable risk by subjecting themselves and their stories to the editorial power of the writer, as Sue Joseph similarly acknowledges, “The journalist, when sitting in front of his or her computer, ultimately has the final say, despite what has transpired throughout the interview process” (2011, 4). This risk is compounded for subjects who have experienced trauma, as the interview process itself forces them to relive “the worst moment in their life.”

In the wake of this ethical dilemma, Ghansah decided that the story that she needed to tell was not that of the victims, but of Dylann Roof. Unlike her other profiles, “A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof” is not an effort to locate empathy or to evoke the humanity of Roof’s experience. In the very first section of the feature, Ghansah criticizes the comforting narrative of “the church’s resounding forgiveness of the young white man who shot their members down” in much of the press coverage, erasing the visceral pain and anger that many victims were still feeling. Meanwhile, Roof remained obstinate to his victims’ suffering throughout the trial; he refused remorse, refused to explain why, and thus “he remained in control, just the way he wanted to be” (Ghansah 2017, 3). Ghansah’s story not only evokes that pain with her own subjective narrative voice, but holds Roof accountable, through his family, his

church, his town, and his country, to the pain and trauma of his victims. It is this effort that earned Ghansah the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 2018.

Ghansah's rhetorical decisions are shaped by the frames of her own experience, of Black history and advocacy that emerge in her writing: "when I do these write-arounds, it's often because I think Black people saying 'no', Black people saying 'I can't do this', Black people in pain — people don't back off, and so [it is] humanizing people enough to say 'you don't need to talk anymore'" (Linsky 2017). Rather than interrogating victims to communicate their trauma to a public desperate for a resolvable narrative, Ghansah puts her own anger and the cultural trauma of African Americans in contact with a South Carolinian culture which prefers to ignore and romanticize the history that contributed to that trauma. The sociologist Neil Smelser defines cultural trauma as "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation that is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (cited in Eyerman 61-62). If personal or individual trauma is an ailment of the memory, then cultural or national traumas are ailments of collective memory and history. The thesis that drives "A Most American Terrorist" is the idea that the United States' failure to grapple with the history and the collective trauma of chattel slavery is what cultivated Dylann Roof and his twisted worldview. Ghansah speaks to a larger, cultural trauma not only to call attention to its too frequent omission in American culture, but to contextualize and validate the immediate, individual trauma of the victims.

Part of the way that Ghansah situates her rhetorical role in the text is as a proxy and advocate for the Mother Emanuel victims. Along with her interviews or reflections,

she seeks to convey a reaction to violent hatred against Black Americans that does not simply comfort its audience with a story of graceful forgiveness. After the essay was published, Ghansah remarked that one of the sentiments fueling her process was “a sense that Black flesh doesn’t have deep wounds, as if this is all it’s meant to do in America, which is contain and endure and be a site of pain that stoically marches on” (Linsky 2017). Of the literary journalists discussed in this study, Ghansah is the writer who most clearly violates the traditional, detached reporting style and the “strategic ritual of emotionality” found to be abundant amongst Pulitzer Prize-winning stories (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 38). Whereas most journalists writing a feature on a hate crime or mass shooting would typically “rely on the outsourcing of emotional labor to non-journalists” (39), such as the Mother Emanuel victims, to compel an audience to keep reading and to “[provide] an emotional compass that we – as audience members and citizens – can use to orient ourselves in a confusing world” (10), Ghansah deploys her subjective style to carry the majority of her essay’s “emotional labor” herself, with the exception of one moment of subject testimony that is discussed below. Otherwise, she circumvents many of the ethical hurdles that emerge in the process of mediating the emotional experiences of subjects, especially those that have experienced some sort of trauma. In “A Most American Terrorist”, it is Ghansah’s flesh, it is her wounds, her anger and her pain, conveyed through her rich use of language and imagery, that makes her the audience’s protagonist, their “emotional compass.”

To understand how Ghansah is adapting her own style to develop a portrait of Dylann Roof in “A Most American Terrorist”, it is instructive to look at how she has written around two past subjects of her profiles, Dave Chappelle and James Baldwin.

Ghansah published her profile of Chappelle, “If He Hollers Let Him Go”, in 2013, and it was a finalist for the National Magazine Award in 2014. Ghansah’s purpose for writing this profile is not dissimilar, superficially speaking, from that of “A Most American Terrorist”; that is, to answer the question of “why?” In Chappelle’s case, it is to understand why he abruptly quit his immensely successful television show, leaving \$50 million on the table in the process. His explanation to Oprah Winfrey was that he felt his sketch show, which frequently and ironically deployed racial slurs and stereotypes, socially irresponsible; that he felt like a “prostitute” (Ghansah 2017). In one scene from the essay, Ghansah has lunch with Neal Brennan, Chappelle’s former co-creator, and listens to the comedian, who is white, tell her jokes from his stand-up special in which he uses a racial slur. The main tension of the scene is generated from Ghansah describing the physical tension she feels build up as she waits for Brennan to tell her his joke, to awkward and anticlimactic results: “The thing is, I like Neal Brennan. And I got the joke, I think. But when he first told it to me, there was an awkward silence that I think both Brennan and I noticed. The cafeteria seemed to swell with noise. And for a brief moment, my head clouded, and there was nothing I could think of to say, so to get out of the silence, I did what was expected: I laughed. When I got home, this troubled me deeply” (Ghansah, 2013). Ghansah uses her reaction to a situation that Chappelle likely found himself in on a day-to-day basis to help the audience extrapolate what it felt like for him to write sketches that played on Black stereotypes and included racial slurs, ironic or otherwise, with white writers and for white audience members. In a moment of awkwardness, Ghansah fulfills an expectation that conflicts with her own ethical values,

and her subjective narration of this experience gives the audience an empathetic look at what might have been Chappelle's own internal conflict.

In her 2016 profile of Baldwin, "The Weight of James Arthur Baldwin", Ghansah uses imagery from her visit to the writer's home in France as it is being prepared to be demolished, as well as personal detail, to connect to a less imposing, more human portrait of Baldwin. Whereas Ghansah connects to the social environment of Chappelle in "If He Hollers", she develops an implicit relationship to Baldwin's physical environment, as it reminds her of the remains of her own grandfather's home: "what I found left behind in his house was something similar to what I saw as we waded through my grandfather's house after it had burned down... the scattered, empty beer cans... construction postings from a company tasked with tearing it down. So that nothing would remain. No remembrance of the past. In both places there was not even the sense that a great man had once lived there" (Ghansah 2017). Although Ghansah's sentiment is exclusive to the feelings connected to her own grandfather, it imbues both a figure and a home that has passed on with a life and humanity that was previously inaccessible to the essayist and the reader. Running through both of her essays is an effort to locate the subjects' empathetic, human qualities and to illuminate the struggles and injustices experienced by Black people in America, whether they are a journalist or a historic literary figure.

In "A Most American Terrorist," Ghansah uses the same methods of narrating her own impressions and experiences in her subject's environment, but rather than empathizing with Roof, Ghansah illuminates the social and cultural elements that nurtured her monstrous subject. Trauma, both cultural and personal, is always tied to place, as Balaev (2008) argues, "The primacy of place in the representations of trauma

anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context because place attains its meaningful import based on individual perception and symbolic significance accorded by culture” (160). As Ghansah filters Dylann Roof’s town, his family, his friends, his church through her individual perspective, Roof becomes a proxy for his environment, his symbolic significance interpreted through the lens of Black history and the trauma associated with it. This significance, or insignificance, is elucidated in Ghansah’s final determination: “I know exactly who Dylann Roof is, I know that he is hatred” (2017, 23). Interpreting Roof through her perspective, she uses his visceral hatred to call attention to the pain, anger, and resilience of the Black community, and how it is so often erased by dominant American culture and history.

Running through most of Ghansah’s scene reconstructions from her time in Columbia is a recurring theme of the writer being met with fear, suspicion and ridicule. When she attends a service at Dylann Roof’s church she describes the gazes of its white parishioners “making me feel like a I was a shoplifter trying to steal from their God” (2017, 10), and she validates this instance of possible paranoia when she stumbles upon the church’s safety and security manual, which instructs ushers to treat “a questionable unknown visitor” in the very same way as they did with Ghansah (11-12). When Ghansah leaves the home of Dylann’s father, Bennet, after their brief interview, he lets “his two giant Rottweilers out the front door to track me and to make sure I’d gone back into the dark street and the black night that I’d come from” (5), and when she requests to visit a plantation with slave exhibits that Roof took selfies with, she writes that, “I was told I was not welcome there unless I submitted a media request, since I might have a negative view of the plantation” (18). What Ghansah argues, and displays in these scenes, is that

the very presence of someone with her skin color in the environments that enabled and reinforced Roof's extremist views disrupts the fractured history within which those spaces are contextualized: "This black body of mine cannot be furtive. It prevents me from blending in. I cannot observe without being observed" (10). Because Ghansah chooses not to subject Roof's victims or their experiences to her lens, she is left to showcase the impacts and consequences of cultural trauma, of a state and country's failure to fully acknowledge a history of slavery and violent racism, using her own subjective experience of South Carolina. It is impossible for Ghansah to fully convey the suffering and anger of the victims, but she can, and does, evoke the pain and anger of living in a place in which she is subjected to suspicion and fear because of the color of her skin.

Only pieces of Ghansah's experience from South Carolina are narrated as first-person reconstructions, with the remaining sections consisting of analysis and commentary on the intersections of her in-person observations, public reactions to the tragedy, and the state's history of chattel slavery and racism. However, this orchestration of cultural and individual trauma is not a far cry from what Balaev (2008) believes to be "The trick of trauma in fiction," which "is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined" (2008, 155). Situated as the de facto protagonist in her limited, subjective narration, Ghansah not only challenges Roof's physical and social environment, but its history as well. In the section titled, "The Matriculation of a Murderer", individuals close to Roof approach Ghansah and suggest

that the ‘real’ reason he killed 9, mostly elderly, mostly female, Black parishioners is because someone close to him had been raped by a group of Black men. She situates the accusation within a fabricated, white history:

As they saw it, this story of a fraudulent “revenge” placed Roof in his proper lineage. He had joined the long line of white men who thought the letting loose of black blood... could somehow reprieve and rescue a white woman's honor while securing a white man's position. These men, like Roof, weren't victims, they weren't knights in an honorable war, they were murderers and mercenaries who were searching for their Tara, and someone to blame and punish for their decline and all of their worldly grievances. (Ghansah 2017, 16)

Ghansah indicts those that would justify Roof's actions as some sort of righteous, tragically misled act of vengeance, arguing that their narrative, perpetuated by “murderers and mercenaries” is both anachronistic and illogical. Ghansah situates the appeal of this narrative in a state where it was acceptable for an upper-middle-class white woman to approach Ghansah and “[demand] that I drive her somewhere ‘girl’;” a state which highlights “the economic necessity of slave labor” in school lesson plans, “that flew the Confederate flag” and “has a bronze statue of Benjamin Tillman,” a white supremacist politician, outside of its statehouse (18). Approaching South Carolina and Columbia as an outsider, Ghansah recognizes its accumulation of silences in the wake of past and present traumas forced upon the Black Americans and holds them up against each other to exemplify the degree to which Roof himself is a consequence of those silences.

Ghansah also draws compelling connections between the culture of these environments and Roof's murders in the records of her interviews with Roof's father and pastor. In each interview, Roof's associates seem unable or unwilling to acknowledge a connection between the 21-year-old's actions and a culture of systematic racism that they themselves participate in. When Ghansah asks Bennet Roof to shed light on why his son did what he did, all that he can say is, "I don't know what happened, I just know that the boy wasn't raised that way" (2017, 5), and when she asks his pastor a similar question, he responds, "I don't know what's going on with Dylann, but I know there's a wickedness or evil in the world....There's things I just don't understand that get into a realm that make absolutely no sense whatsoever." When she asks him about whether the suspicion that she sensed from other parishioners during the church service had to do with "a larger inability to deal with race or racism," he again fails to produce an explanation (11).

Ghansah does not explicitly address the ways that both men avoid culpability for their part in both Roof's upbringing and a larger culture of racism, and actually embeds sympathetic reflections within her narration, as she describes Bennet Roof having "the sad look of a man who wanted any other life than this one" and now had to endure the "intrusions from strangers who wanted an answer and felt that the nature of his son's crime warranted one" (5). She similarly reflects on her interview with the pastor that "perhaps I shouldn't have charged him with answering to" his church's reaction to the murders, but she also acknowledges that "in that room, we had become proxies for the people who weren't there" (11). In other words, it does not matter to Ghansah that it might be unfair to demand that Roof's father and pastor answer for his actions. Her

responsibility is to serve as a “proxy” for the victims, to find the answers to questions that Roof refused to answer, and to validate and evoke their anger and their trauma.

The first section of Ghansah’s piece is a collage of moments from Roof’s trial, culminating in the victim impact statement, in which, after he is sentenced to death, the victims have a chance to speak directly to the murderer. While Ghansah has said that the victim impact statement was a deeply emotional experience for her (Linsky 2017), her account of it is brief and pales in comparison to the disgust that oozes from the imagery she uses to describe Roof. Ghansah’s description of the killer is remarkable in the way that it twists his appearance, commenting on “the thinness of his neck,” the “ever growing bald patch” that made him resemble a “demented monk with a tonsure,” his “thick, slow tongue” and “the ever present twitch, a gumming of his cheeks that sometimes ended with his tongue lolling out and licking his thin lips” (2017, 2). Ghansah draws out the physical attributes that mirror the ugliness of Roof’s hatred, painting a figure that the audience can be just as repulsed by as she is.

Ghansah also contrasts this image of Roof with the only instance in which she relies on the literal testimony of a victim to carry the emotional load of the scene. Felicia Sanders was one of the three survivors, and while Ghansah keeps it brief, her story is deeply affective:

Felicia Sanders... told the courtroom early on that Roof belonged in the pit of hell. Months later, she said that because of him she can no longer close her eyes to pray. She can't stand to hear the sound of firecrackers, or even the patter of acorns falling. Because of Dylann Roof, Felicia Sanders had been forced to play dead by lying in her dying son's blood, while holding her hand over her whimpering

grandbaby's mouth. She had pressed her hand down so tight that she said she feared she would suffocate the girl. (2017, 2)

The traumatic effects of Sanders' account are clear and troubling, as Roof has altered her relationship to her religion and the world around her, no longer able to relax enough to pray with her eyes closed. However, the emotional resonance of her experience lies in the image of a mother silently lying in her son's blood, all the while fearing that she could be suffocating her "whimpering grandbaby." Sander's trauma, like any trauma, is ultimately impossible for the audience to fully grasp, but the vicarious experience of witnessing her testimony and her violent ordeal communicates the weight of her loss and of Roof's crime effectively.

Sanders' account is also useful for accessing Ghansah's rhetorical purpose as she contrasts it with Roof's mother's emotional reaction at the trial. While Ghansah artfully conveys Sanders' testimony with affecting imagery, she describes Roof's mother's emotions as "a kind of fit" or ailment, as she shakes and quietly repeats "I'm sorry" to no one in particular. Ghansah, who is seated behind Roof's mother, responds not unsympathetically, but with significantly more detachment, commenting on "the radiant shame one must feel when your son has wreaked unforgivable havoc on another woman's child. Whatever it was, it was Gothic" (2017, 2). She does not necessarily attempt to elicit any antipathy towards the trembling white woman before her, but Ghansah makes it clear that her concern with this piece is solely the pain of the Black victims who she fears will be too soon discounted and forgotten by the media and by history. When Roof's mother faints and the writer begins to dab her head with a cold compress, she reflects, "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” (2-3). This is a reflection that informs the entire piece; Ghansah does not want to write “inside of a history” that too easily ignores the suffering of Black people in favor of a fainting white woman. This is the “place” that she grapples with, the culture that is too quick to forget that a Black grandmother watched her son die as she held her grandchild and too slow to condemn the white man that killed him.

The scene of the tragedy, the emotional climax of the story, is the only one she narrates which she was not present for herself. More so a collection of epitaphs than a tense or excessively violent account, Ghansah erases Roof’s perceived power by evoking the staggering value of what was lost, rather than how it was taken. She does not rely on a sensational image of trauma by drawing on grisly details, or the fear that the victims certainly felt, or by telling the story from their perspective. She already gave the readers access to Felicia Sanders’ testimony; it was enough. Instead, she implicitly focalizes her narration through the perspectives of those that considered the victims as loved ones and communicates the love that the victims had for others and with which they had proceeded through their lives. Instead of retreading upon Sanders’ horror, Ghansah tells the reader that her son, Tywanza, “doted on the women in his family, in particular his aunt Susie,” and that “he died with his arm stretched out toward her.” Roof is the figure that disrupts these lives, these narratives of love, but rather than affording him power, Ghansah minimizes his role and his power, rendering him as “the stranger” that “shot and killed Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and DePayne Middleton-Doctor” (2017, 21) Even when Roof decides not to kill Polly Shepard so that she can “tell the story,” (22) Ghansah suggests that it is because of Shepard’s “vast and unwavering” (21) gaze and not his own

will, remarking, “as if it was his choice and not their otherworldly command” (22). Dylann Roof thought that when he took nine lives that it would become his story, his place in history, and in this scene Ghansah takes that story and returns it to the victims.

However, while Ghansah devotes this scene to the victims and the lives they lived, the narration is not impervious to her own anger. It emerges in brief details and asides, such as when she writes, “Ethel Lance, unlike Roof, was needed in this world,” or when Roof approaches the praying Polly Sheppard and tells her to “shut up,” and Ghansah simply states, “Polly Sheppard is 72 years old” (21). In that moment Roof has murdered eight people, but Ghansah’s narrator still finds it remarkable that he lacks the respect for his elders so much that he would tell a 72-year-old to “shut up” while she is praying. It is subtle, but she is not above continually reminding the reader just how unsympathetic Roof truly is, because there are still hard feelings. The admiration for the victims, the sense of loss, and the righteous anger that Ghansah conveys in this scene are entirely her own, but they also echo and acknowledge the pain and anger of the victim’s family members without appropriating or relying on them to subject their experience to the reader.

Ghansah draws a direct contrast between herself and Roof by ending the piece where he started, at Mother Emanuel. Arranged immediately after her troubling reconstruction of the murders, Ghansah uses her experience to not only communicate Roof’s failure to plant a seed of hatred at Mother Emanuel, but to also bring her readers a moment of catharsis and hope: “I felt vulnerable and alone in a new city. I wanted to be around the familiar, my people, so when the smiling man pointed to the doors, the same doors that had let the murderer in, but also the ones that were still flung open to the

world, I walked in.” Like Ghansah, the scene of the murders leaves the audience “vulnerable and alone,” but by framing herself as “the stranger,” placing herself in the same shoes that Roof used to violate a place of worship, she proves to the reader that the same trust with which they greeted him survived. The victims’ pain, the cultural trauma of Black Americans, South Carolina’s unacknowledged history, and the question of why Dylann Roof killed 9 people in 2015; Ghansah brings all of these threads together to explain something that Roof simply could not have accounted for: “Nothing in his fucked-up study of black history had ever hipped him to this: The long life of a people can use their fugitivity, their grief, their history for good. This isn’t magic, this is how it was, and how it will always be. This is how we keep our doors open” (22). Ghansah explains that it is precisely because Mother Emanuel is a place that has had no other choice but to contend with its long history and cultural trauma that it has been resilient, that its doors and its community have stayed open. Her use of “we” indicates that his attempt to fracture a community has only brought it closer together, and brought outsiders like herself to its defense. Her tone does not portray any graceful forgiveness of Roof or anyone who subscribes to “his fucked-up study of black history;” rather, directs her attention to the congregants who survived, and to the “millions [that] have survived the incomprehensible” (23) while Roof accomplished nothing.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is not only to examine the boundary-defying strategies deployed by popular literary journalists to better affect readers' empathy, but also to understand how they are mutually engaging, both in their reporting and their rhetoric, with their subjects and their subjects' environments. Since Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) characterizes the outsourcing of "emotional labor" (64) as a function of a "strategic ritual of emotionality" (38) amongst journalists, one may go as far as to delineate the writing styles of Dave Cullen, Dexter Filkins, and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah as part of an increasingly common and critically lauded strategic ritual of subjectivity and/or reflexivity. Instead of, or in addition to, outsourcing emotion, these writers have endeavored to give readers access to their own thoughts, reflections, and emotions which arose in the process of reporting on stories of death, violence, and startling resilience. While the position of the storyteller is ultimately one of control, this rhetorical act of reciprocity and empathy maintains some of the subject's agency and individuality of experience by drawing a distinction between their position in the story and the journalists' role as an embodied witness and a human being. As Joseph (2011) argues, "Genuine empathy is of paramount importance in engendering trust and upholding this relationship, not just during the interviewing process, but afterwards, at the computer screen, when that relationship is transposed onto the page, filtered through the writer's own lifetime experiences" (16). In essence, by speaking for themselves journalists can distinguish and respect the emotional labor of subjects while engaging the critical thought of readers regarding their own mediated position and their conception of trauma itself.

While all three of the journalists discussed here use subjective storytelling as a rhetorical framework for conveying experiences of trauma and eliciting readers' emotions, their style is determined by the nature of the trauma they have witnessed and experienced, which in turn affects the way that they construct their relationships with subjects, structure their narratives, and convey emotion-laden moments. Whereas Cullen's secondary trauma draws out the epistemic location in *Parkland* that he previously omitted in *Columbine*, Filkins' experience of consistent, life-threatening circumstances contributes to his blunt, detached narrative voice and construction of a paradoxical, disordered narrative; and Ghansah's experience and knowledge of the cultural trauma of Black Americans informs her moral purpose, her investigative process, and the rhetorical structure of a write-around profile. While all three writers employ the journalistic strategy of outsourcing emotional labor to their subjects, they also make their own contributions to the emotional power of their work by making themselves vulnerable and exposing the feelings of awe, anger, and despair in the process of witnessing suffering. Not only do these writers engage with Wahl-Jorgensen's "strategic ritual of emotionality" and Joseph's "reflective practice model" (2011, 5), they move beyond them to further push the boundaries of literary journalism.

The sort of focused analysis conducted in the course of this study is necessary and useful for writers partly because the ways in which rhetoricians and storytellers across genres and discourses are depicting and engaging with trauma are always changing. Scholarly trends in trauma theory, constantly negotiating the scientific, social, and rhetorical aspects of destabilizing experiences, are representative of this dynamic. In the past, widely accepted theories, like those of Caruth (1991), have described trauma as that

which “is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs” (187) and situated subjects as haunted and “possessed” by their trauma (Whitehead 2004, 12). This conception of the traumatized individual as a helpless victim has been appealing to literary scholars studying trauma as it is “a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature” (Pederson 2014, 334), but it does little to account for the agency and resilience of the survivor. Trauma theorists since Caruth have sought out new frameworks for understanding trauma that not only address new scientific findings but recognize the power of those who have experienced trauma as well. While she interprets silences or gaps in subjects’ narratives as a result of gaps in their memories, Balaev (2008) argues that silence can often be a function of an individual’s own conscious decision-making: “silence is a rhetorical strategy, rather than evidence for the epistemological void created by the experience of trauma” (162). While Caruth’s theories emerged from examinations of Sigmund Freud’s work, Balaev draws on representations of trauma in fiction in that they demonstrate “how the protagonist views the self before and after the traumatic experience depends upon the type of traumatic event and the place of its occurrence, which highlights the available culturally-informed narrative structures for expressing the experience” (162). Alternatively, Pederson (2014) alleges that Caruth’s theory of trauma’s “unspeakability” is undermined by “contemporary psychological research [that] suggest that trauma victims can both remember and describe their traumatic past in detail,” and he suggests that, going forward, “a new generation of trauma theorists should emphasize both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it” (338), and that “as the science of trauma changes, the literary theory of trauma must change too” (334). As

trauma theory develops and changes, it only makes sense that journalism and literature addressing trauma should continue to develop as well, establishing an exigency for researchers to track this evolution.

The issue of audience compassion fatigue from news coverage is not a problem that can be addressed, let alone solved, without the maintenance of ongoing conversations within and between the public and the press about how to properly witness and mediate pain and suffering. On March 22, 2021, as I was completing the final draft of this thesis, a gunman entered a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado and opened fire on its patrons and staff, ultimately ending ten lives. Much of the typical coverage precipitated; images of police cars at the scene, a solemn press conference with the chief of police, an impromptu memorial accompanied by countless mourners. As with any publicized shooting in Colorado, allusion was made to *Columbine*. However, as elucidated by a *New York Times* article published a week after the shooting, many journalists also grappled with the ethical complexity of reporting on these events and the emotional weight of doing so. As NBC news anchor Lester Holt told the outlet, “I think it’s OK to be a little pissed off.... As a journalist, it’s not an editorial position to be upset or angry at mass murder, of people going about their day, shopping, getting cut down by a stranger. It’s OK to be upset about that” (Grynbaum and Koblin 2021). Cullen, resigned to his role as “the mass-murder guy whom reporters and producers call to interview after every big shooting” (2019, 6), was also interviewed for the piece, and remarked upon not only the journalism industry’s shift in focus from perpetrators to victims since *Columbine*, but the public’s expectations of that coverage as well: “Now, when I mention the names of a shooter from an older case on television, I will get angry tweets from people. The public expectation

has changed” (Grynbaum and Koblin 2021). The public’s uptake of the reflexive and ethically concerned shifts in coverage suggests that, especially with regards to events of loss and suffering, readers and journalists could be receptive to stretching journalism’s detached style and routine coverage even further. Strategies like those seen in works by Cullen, Filkins, and Ghansah represent where journalists and editors can go from here.

A subject that this study fails to address is personal or childhood trauma, in the sense that the shootings at Columbine, Parkland, and Charleston, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, all generated traumas for subjects and journalists that were, in one way or another, collective or shared by others. This is primarily because the collection of scientific, psychological, and literary scholarship on childhood trauma is beyond robust and beyond the scope of this study. This, however, does not mean that the same concepts and strategies related to constructing relationships of rhetorical reciprocity between subjects and journalists, like subjective voice, testimonials embedded within writer reflections, emotional language, experimental structures, and richly detailed scene reconstructions, cannot all be applied to disparate forms of trauma, but it falls upon the writer to think critically about how and why to adjust these strategies to account for the nuances of each subject. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is vital that reporters locate compelling and critical ways to communicate the effects of childhood trauma, as it is considered to be one of side effects of social isolation precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 9, 2021, Ezra Klein, of *The New York Times*, spoke with Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, first surgeon general of California, on his podcast about the long term physical and mental health effects of trauma on young children and the ways that

COVID-19 could compound that threat. Describing the pandemic as “a major generational trauma,” she explains that negative impacts will vary widely from child to child: “When we talk about, for example, children whose parents are essential workers who face the issue of, you either go to work or you don’t have a job, they’re stressed out about being exposed to COVID. That stress comes home.... Those kids are going to have significantly increased risk of long-term negative developmental, educational, health, and mental health consequences” (Klein 2021). Amidst such an extended period of instability and uncertainty, many important and troubling narratives are and will be at risk of being forgotten and marginalized in favor of easier, more accessible subject matter. The COVID-19 pandemic is especially interesting to think about as an extended traumatic event in relation to this study, as its impacts echo themes from the work of all three writers under examination. The pandemic’s immense death toll and the accompanying extended period of isolation, paranoia, and anxiety reflect aspects of the traumatic experiences which Cullen and Filkins portray in their accounts. Additionally, the rising xenophobic, anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. since the outset of the pandemic reflects aspects of the cultural and historical trauma with which Ghansah wrestles in her article. Ghansah displays the ways in which subjective reflection on and embodied narration of the modern impacts of cultural trauma can insulate victims and survivors while holding perpetrators to account, which may be a useful strategy in conveying the long history of discrimination against Asian Americans in the U.S., in which “infectious disease discourses helped fuel anti-Chinese social sentiments and contributed significantly to the passing of a series of federal Chinese exclusion laws by the (nineteenth) century’s end” (Kong 2019, 382). The pandemic has brought marginalized issues of racial equity across

medical and societal contexts to the forefront of national and community conversation, and it is a conversation that journalists can and have made themselves a part of. In this way, telling stories of suffering whilst considering how one's own position and perspective factor into particular experiences of trauma can be a means to promoting social justice.

It should be noted that these findings are inherently limited as this research is dedicated to only four primary texts selected from an 11-year range. Similar analytical research could further this work by designing corpora around specific press outlets, time periods, or even different genres of tragedy. While this study approaches literary strategies favorably, more work could be dedicated to following the lead of critics like Lindsay Morton (2015, 2016), who considers the ethical implications of the creative liberties that literary journalists take, as well as how they situate their own positions within their stories. While this study details the ways in which specific literary strategies emerge from subjectivity and personal storytelling, future studies could build on this research by isolating rhetorical moves associated with affective, first-person storytelling and collect feedback from readers in an effort to determine if specific aspects of subjective storytelling impact readers' emotions and empathy, and if so, which ones. A potential confounding variable in future, semi-quantitative survey research could also be the varying lengths of stories which can be located on the spectrum of literary journalism, and so it would be worthwhile for researchers to compare reader responses to varying lengths of stories, from columns, to features, to novels. While plenty of research has found that many journalists are dissatisfied with the routine news coverage which scholars allege produces compassion fatigue, little work has been done to understand how

journalists feel about the use of literary strategies and subjectivity. It is all well and good that this study should find that reflective storytelling is useful and critically successful, but, just like subjects, journalists must buy into the idea of a story which exposes their own thoughts and feelings for their writing to engage audiences and reciprocate the vulnerability of subjects.

Suffice to say, I have subjected the works of Cullen, Filkins, and Ghansah to quite a bit of scrutiny in the process of conducting this research, and it seems appropriate that to conclude this piece, I should speak for myself as well. As the editor for the opinion section at the University of Maine's student newspaper, *The Maine Campus*, the articles that I write and publish each week not only represent my thoughts and beliefs, but also those of the editorial board. While individual contributors to the section are comfortable deploying personal pronouns and informal voice in their writing, it is something I am unable to do. It is this plural voice, seemingly from nowhere, with which I have written commentary on contentious and troubling issues, such as racial justice, tribal sovereignty, natural disasters across the country, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I myself am a cisgender, heterosexual, white male from a middle-class family, and yet my editorials contain the measured, authoritative voice of someone who is qualified to speak on the discrimination and suffering experienced by those whose lives, in many ways, could not be more different than my own. This is to say, when I, as a reader, witness Dave Cullen witnessing the resilience of high school shooting survivors, Dexter Filkins witnessing the numb detachment of American soldiers in Iraq, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah witnessing a young man who she knows, with every fiber of her being, is hatred, I recognize the rhetorical and emotional power of being in awe, of being unable to explain and accepting

uncertainty. To express uncertainty and emotion, to showcase the process of critical thought and working through, without it being decried as equivocation, should not, I think, be impossible. For the journalist to rhetorically acknowledge what they do not know and what they cannot access regarding an individual or collective subject's experience not only represents a new kind of transparency but enables subjects to retain more control over their own voices and their own silence. A focus on empathy, on emotion, and the responsibility of the witness in journalism becomes its own kind of access to a subject's life and environment. An individual's experience of trauma may very well be unspeakable and inaccessible to the journalist and the reader, but humanity is not.

REFERENCES

- Balaev, Michelle. 2008. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 41 (2): 149+.
- Boynton, Robert S. 2005. *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*. New York: Vintage.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1991. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies*, no. 79: 181–92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930251>.
- Cullen, Dave. 2010. *Columbine*. Illustrated Edition. Twelve.
- . 2020. *Parkland: Birth of a Movement*. Reprint Edition. Harper Paperbacks.
- Dahmen, Nicole Smith, Jesse Abdenour, and Karen McIntyre. 2019. "Journalists' Perceptions of Mass Shooting Coverage and Factors Influencing Those Perceptions." *Journalism Practice* 13 (8): 895–900. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1642131>.
- Dave Cullen. 2010. "STRUCTURE in COLUMBINE, Part 1: Book Club & Classroom Series, by Dave Cullen w David Ulin." June 11, 2010. Video, 9:56. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svlX515SQ4M>.
- Deer, Patrick. 2017. "Beyond Recovery: Representing History and Memory in Iraq War Writing." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 63 (2): 312–35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2017.0024>.
- Charlie Rose. 2008. "Dexter Filkins." Accessed January 11, 2021. Video, 18:49. <https://charlierose.com/videos/25636>.
- Eyerman, Ron, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. 2004. "Cultural Trauma." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 1st ed., 60–111. University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9nb.6>.
- Filkins, Dexter. 2004. "In City's Ruins, Military Faces New Mission: Building Trust (Published 2004)." *The New York Times*, November 16, 2004, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/16/world/middleeast/in-citys-ruins-military-faces-new-mission-building-trust.html>.
- . 2008. *The Forever War*. 1st Edition. Vintage.
- Ghansah, Rachel Kaadzi. 2013. "If He Hollers Let Him Go." *Believer Magazine*. October 1, 2013. <https://believermag.com/if-he-hollers-let-him-go/>.

- . 2017. “A Most American Terrorist: The Making Of Dylann Roof.” GQ. Accessed September 29, 2020a. <https://www.gq.com/story/dylann-roof-making-of-an-american-terrorist>.
- . 2016. “The Weight Of James Arthur Baldwin.” BuzzFeed. Accessed February 27, 2021b. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/rachelkaadzi Ghansah/the-weight-of-james-arthur-baldwin-203>.
- Grynbaum, Michael M., and John Koblin. 2021. “What the Media Has Learned Since Columbine.” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2021, sec. Media. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/business/media/shootings-atlanta-boulder-media.html>.
- Hastings, Michael. 2009. “Interview: ‘Columbine,’ and How to Write a Tragedy.” *The Hastings Report* (blog). July 30, 2009. <https://michaelhastings.wordpress.com/2009/07/30/interview-columbine-and-how-to-write-a-tragedy/>.
- Irawanto, Budi. 2018. “Narratives of Natural Disaster Survivors in Indonesian Media: The Case of Tempo Magazine.” *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa* 24 (1): 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v24i1.410>.
- Joseph, Sue. 2011. “Recounting Traumatic Secrets.” *Journalism Practice* 5 (1): 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2010.506059>.
- Kinnick, Katherine N., Dean M. Krugman, and Glen T. Cameron. 1996. “Compassion Fatigue: Communication and Burnout toward Social Problems.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (3): 687–707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909607300314>.
- Klein, Ezra. 2021. “Covid’s Future, Trauma’s Long Shadow and California’s Lessons.” The Ezra Klein Show. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/09/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-nadine-burke-harris.html>.
- Kong, Belinda. 2019. “Pandemic as Method.” *Prism* 16 (2): 368–89. <https://doi.org/10.1215/25783491-7978531>.
- Krieken, Kobie van, Hans Hoeken, and José Sanders. 2015. “From Reader to Mediated Witness: The Engaging Effects of Journalistic Crime Narratives.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 92 (3): 580–96.
- Linsky, Max. 2017. “Longform Podcast #260: Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah.” Accessed February 27, 2021. <https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-260-rachel-kaadzi-ghansah>.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2012. “In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq.” *Contemporary Literature* 53 (4): 713–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2012.0040>.

- Maguire, Miles. 2017. "Embedding Journalists Shape Iraq News Story." *Newspaper Research Journal* 38 (1): 8–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532917696104>.
- Maier, Scott R. 2015. "Compassion Fatigue and the Elusive Quest for Journalistic Impact: A Content and Reader-Metrics Analysis Assessing Audience Response." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 92 (3): 700–722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699015599660>.
- Moeller, Susan D. 1994. *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. London, United States: Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umaine/detail.action?docID=180279>.
- Morton, Lindsay. 2015. "Where Are You Coming From?" *Journalism Practice* 9 (2): 168–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.906931>.
- . 2016. "Evaluating the Effects of Epistemic Location in Advocatory Literary Journalism." *Journalism* 17 (2): 244–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914554178>.
- Pederson, Joshua. 2014. "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory." *Narrative* 22 (3): 333–53. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2014.0018>.
- Roiland, Josh. 2015. "By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism." *Literary Journalism Studies* 7 (2): 60–89.
- Schroth, Raymond A. 1995. "'But Its Really Burning': Tragedy and the Journalistic Conscience." *Columbia Journalism Review* 34 (3): 43.
- Underwood, Doug. 2011. *Chronicling Trauma: Journalists and Writers on Violence and Loss*. Baltimore, United States: University of Illinois Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umaine/detail.action?docID=3413831>.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin. 2019. *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Polity.
- Whitehead, Anne. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press. <http://www.jstor.org.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r2534>.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Nate Poole was raised in Martinsburg, West Virginia and South Berwick, Maine. From a young age Nate knew that his passion for reading and writing would shape his career path, and after graduating from Marshwood High School in 2017, he enrolled at the University of Maine in the class of 2021 to pursue a degree in English.

In his time at the University of Maine, Nate held several titles, including consultant in the Writing Center, president of the Track Club, and resident assistant in various residence halls across campus. During the second semester of his fourth year, Nate also had the opportunity to work as a research assistant for the Coping with COVID-19 project in the English department, collecting and posting stories from everyday individuals across Maine and beyond about how they found ways to communicate and live during the pandemic. Of all his positions, Nate is most proud of his time spent as a contributor and editor for the opinion section of *The Maine Campus*. It was through this experience that Nate crafted his most valuable skill: making opinions that no one ever asked for palatable and, he can only hope, compelling.

Following graduation, Nate will be taking a gap year to reacquaint himself with a world beyond the Zoom room and to better understand what he wants to do with his life. He suspects that the latter may take more than a year, but, as always, he will try his best.