Exploring collective future potentiality through doubling in Ben Lerner's 10:04

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Abstract

This thesis explores the extensive use of conceptual and narratological doubling in Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). It suggests that the repeating, overlapping, intertwining and intermingling of all aspects of the novel is used by Lerner to depict and urge the reader to imagine the potential co-existence of a better collective future in the present moment, and that this future is only slightly different from our current world. Our awareness of such potential futures realities, the novel suggests, relies on an ontological shift in our experience of the present moment. These shifts are co-explored with the reader through the novel's autofictional and metafiction inclinations and the protagonists' various experiences throughout the narrative to see which of its actualizations are most viable and sustainable; to separate 'bad forms of collectivity' from its utopian counterpart.

To explore collective future potentiality through doubling, this thesis will refer to and interpret through theories which are incorporated and presented within the narrative, such as Whitmanian collectivism, Giorgio Agamben's philosophical meditations on a potential future community and Walter Benjamin's historic conceptualization of the 'messianic now'. Since the novel explicitly expresses a desire to connect to the reader and the outside world through its genre of autofiction, metacommentary and direct reader references, the thesis also considers authorial intent. This thesis is thusly the result of a close reading of *10:04* which considers both the novel's intratextual theoretic references and Lerner's expressed extratextual theoretical inspirations, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on heteroglossia and plasticity of the novelistic form, to systematically make visible the interconnectivity between novel's themes surrounding collective futurity and the actualization of said themes through conceptual and narratological doubling.

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Introduction

When I first read *10:04* in 2016 for a class on contemporary American literature, I noted how Lerner utilized doubling in several different ways.[1] The novel deals with embodied duality in that the two main characters resemble both each other and Lerner, and the character Ben expresses that he feels like he is an octopus but also like he is a Whitmanian figure. There is a doubling of stories, such as the approaching storms at the beginning and end of the narrative, the revisitation of the opening scene, stories that are told within other stories, as well as stories about events simultaneously happening and not happening. There are grammatical doublings that include sudden shifts and changes in grammatical tense and perspective, creating narrative spatiotemporal transportations. Then there are the different visual and textual genres that are blended into the novelistic formula, as well as intra- and extratextual words, phrases and quotes that are constantly being repeated, with or without variation, in different context throughout the story. I was intrigued by how the novel seemed to fundamentally be built around a concept of doubling; everything was repeated, overlapped, intertwined and intermingled. I wanted to understand how all these different kinds of doubling were interconnected and what Lerner was trying to convey through their implementation. Secondly, the novel also seemed to express a desire to establish a connection with the outside world; to a collective. There are several instances of direct reader references, where Ben is addressing an outsider 'you', and the main narrative is frequently interrupted and taken over by other people's stories, stories which are then linked to and intermingled with Ben's personal narrative and his own writing, like his Marfa poem, the story he planned on writing for his future novel and the actualized future novel, which is *10:04;* the book the reader has been reading. It seemed to me like Lerner was exploring how narratives bring us together through affective interpersonal experience, which make narratives have inherent collective future-oriented potential in that they can be experienced by many people and that they can have real-life effects; that they can be considered potent tools for changing the trajectory of our collective future. The novel's extensive use of narratological and conceptual

[1] For the readers of this thesis, I have included a chapter summary of *10:04* as an appendix, as it can be a little difficult to remember and keep track of the order in which certain events and scenes take place within the narrative.

doubling, and the potentiality of artistic expression to impact our collective futurity, stayed with me all the way until it was time for me to write this thesis.

The aesthetic literary form of *10:04* points towards a desire to consciously portray a world which is similar, yet slightly different from our own. In doing so, the novel constructs and presents its own theories on literature and art, theories which posit that certain forms of artistic expression can alter our experience of the present and consequently has the potential to redirect the present into a better collective future by making us aware of the interconnectivity between the real world and imagined worlds, as well as between our collectively shared past and present. In *10:04*, this potential is, in part, actualized by portraying moments in which Ben experiences a sense of spatiotemporal collapse and collective interconnectivity, which are then mirrored in the novel's extensive use of recontextualized extratextual references, showing how the past can be re-experienced with new meaning in the present. Such experiences, the novel suggests, enable us to see points in our collective past where we had the possibility of changing the future's trajectory, leading to a weakened conception of predetermined futurity, which in turn gives us future-oriented agency in the present moment and calls on us to act in the present to reshape the future. Works of art that can achieve such an effect in us, it is suggested, make either purposefully or accidentally their own fictionality visible to the observer of the artwork, like a doubly exposed photograph, so that the potentiality of fiction overlaps with the reality of the real world. This theory is actualized in *10:04* through autofictional and metafictional means; by pointing out the novel's similarity to the real world whilst simultaneously emphasizing its own fictionality and slight differentiation from reality. In other words, *10:04* explores and tests the potential and limitations of its own theories by putting them into practice within its own plot and self-aware form of narratological expression.

In addition to the novel's own theories, my analysis will refer to and interpret through theories which are incorporated or alluded to within the narrative, such as Whitmanian collectivism, Giorgio Agamben's philosophical meditations on a potential future community and Walter Benjamin's historic conceptualization of the 'messianic now', to further illustrate the novel's play on doubling in connection to collective future potentiality. Because of the novel's explicit desire to connect to the reader and the outside world through its genre of autofiction, metacommentary and direct reader references which state said communicative desire, I have

incorporated authorial intent into my analysis. For this, I have relied on various promotional interviews with Lerner from around the time *10:04* was published. This thesis is thusly the result of a close reading of *10:04* which considers both the novel's intratextual theoretic references and Lerner's expressed extratextual theoretical inspirations, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on heteroglossia and plasticity of the novelistic form, to systematically make visible the interconnectivity between novel's themes surrounding collective futurity and the actualization of said themes through conceptual and narratological doubling.

The subject of futurity itself has been comprehensively discussed in academia, creating a complex discourse that spans both decades and fields of research, from philosophy and literature to economy and prediction computing. While I have registered the presence of such academic discussions, joining said discussions would far exceed the scope and focal point of this thesis. My focus is rather on how Lerner approaches the concept of collective futurity through artistic expression and a recontextualization of past historical and philosophical theories that are embedded into the novel itself, namely from Benjamin and Agamben, to contemplate alternative models for imagining futurity. In this regard, this thesis can be seen as a contribution to a complex and ever-growing discourse, but it does not go into direct dialogue with extratextual discussions on the subject of futurity.

Doubling is a concept and a narrative device that I have localized in the text and that I will use as an interpretational tool in my own analysis on doubling's relation to potential collective futurity in the novel. I believe my focus on conceptual and narratological doubling in *10:04* is an important analytic venture, as doubling has, and will continue to, play a large role in any analysis of the novel, regardless of which theoretical or critical lens you view it through. My hope is that my work will kickstart a discussion around Lerner's use of doubling as a permeating concept and storytelling technique in *10:04*; a joint academic search for an ever more complete mapping of the novel's use of doubling in relation to collective future potentiality.

Previous research

The scholarship surrounding *10:04* is both varied and overlapping. These studies can be roughly separated into three main categories: genre-specific readings, ecocritical readings and financial readings. I would like to highlight some of the articles that have been most influential to my own research and explain why I have chosen to focus on the use of doubling as opposed to engaging too heavily and directly with the already voluminous body of genre-specific and thematic research conducted by other academics and scholars.

Genre-specific readings of *10:04* are centered around the novel's autofictional and metafictional inclinations. In this category, it is especially Alexandra Effe who stands out to me as having the most original and interesting take on Lerner's use of genre. Effe relates the novel's autofictional and metafictional expression to Ben's sense of responsibility towards the world, stating that the narrative stresses the "performative power of stories without equating fiction and reality" (2021:743). She links Lerner's particular brand of autofiction as belonging to the New Sincerity movement in that it depends not on truth in and through language, but rather on an expression of the "awareness of [the] limitations of language as medium […] the struggle for communication between author and reader by way of the text", and that Lerner uses this struggle to "[self-reflect] on how to put fiction to work to create a better future" (745,743). The sense of responsibility Effe reads in *10:04* has been of immense importance to my own writing, as I argue that the novel suggest that artistic expression has the potential to have real-life effect, which in turn means that artists, in their creative endeavors, have a certain responsibility towards the world.

Ecocritical readings of the novel make up a large portion of the overall research. Notable contributors to this field of research include Alison Gibbons and Stephanie Bernard. Gibbons argues that the looming prospect of climatic disaster functions as a catalyst for a reemergence of historicity and temporal experience, which breaks from a contemporary and dominant postmodernist presentism which neglects the possibility of futurity. This reemergence, Gibbons claims, is in part done by Ben's anticipation of retrospection, meaning that he conceptualizes and acts in his present moment as if it will one day become his past, which is a form of awareness that takes into consideration the spatiotemporal branching out of consequences of action.

Stephanie Bernard reads the novel as an expression of how it is to live in the Anthropocene; in a period of manmade climate change that stretches far beyond any individual person's lifespan. This state of chronic crisis, which normally leads to apathy, is attempted to be remedied in *10:04* by Ben taking into account how other people's lives are affected by his individual choices, showing how "[p]erception of climate change may begin with an individual observation and proceed to collective consciousness" and that the movement from individual to collective experience is trying to teach us how to "to hold in our minds the idea of a life span, the duration of a nation or even species, and an epoch simultaneously— and to understand where those massively different timescales intersect and diverge" (2021:9,13). Both these ecocritical analyses made me conscious in my writing of how Lerner scales individual experience into collective and ecological considerations.

Henrik Torjusen reads *10:04* in light of the 2007-2009 financial crisis and considers the novel to be a form of 'crisis narrative'. Ben's crisis awareness is, in part, actualized by his recognition of his contemporary world's financial and societal injustices. In his analysis, Torjusen argues that the novel shows how a growing neoliberal mindset limits our ability to imagine collective future change. This mindset, which follows from a capitalist economic model, places the individual above the collective and implores us to consider 'the other' as competitors rather than potential collaborators. This mindset, Torjusen argues, is countered in *10:04* by Lerner and Ben's metamodernist mindset, which is located somewhere between "postmodernist despair and modernism's hope to transgress the current world's boundaries" (2020:106). By depicting glimpses into worlds that are almost the same as our own in the midst of various forms of crises (ecological, financial and personal) and again in Ben's reflections after encountering various works of art, the novel attempts to bypass neoliberal presentism and pessimism towards collective futurity, which is a line of reasoning that has been valuable to my own analysis' concern with the interconnectivity between the major themes of the novel and the novel's own theories on literature and art.

However, when the time came for me to get familiar with what these other academics had written about Lerner's second novel, I was surprised to find that while the concept of doubling was indeed mentioned or implied by a large majority of my fellow scholars, it had never thoroughly been examined as the permeating concept and storytelling technique that it is, but,

rather, different individual instances of doubling were used to argue for particular readings of the novel. If you were to write an ecocritical analysis, for example, you would likely discuss the two storms and how the term ‘unseasonable warmth’ is repeated throughout the narrative, but you would consequently leave out all other intratextual repetitions, the use of overlapping diegetic levels, genre hybridization, or Ben’s embodiment of the Whitmanian ideal. The doubling effect in *10:04* has, so far, only been used to exemplify and justify certain thematic or genre-specific readings of the novel; to validate an academic’s specific field of study. While such analyses are undoubtedly valuable as part of any literary work’s in-depth theoretical, thematic or genre-specific analytic catalog, I was, and still am, more interested in exploring how the use of doubling in *10:04* works holistically; as a permeating concept and storytelling technique throughout the entirety of the novel. This does not, however, entail that these abovementioned academic studies will not be discussed in relation to my own analysis, as an exploration into the use of doubling in *10:04* will naturally encompass many of the same thematic concerns researched in these scholarly works.

1. Autofiction

In order to start unravelling the intricacies of Lerner's use of doubling, I find it most pedagogically salient to begin with the novel's most obvious rhetorical representation of doubling: its genre. *10:04* is a work that falls into the category of writing referred to as autofiction. Before delving further into the sometimes difficult to grasp variations of autofiction, I find it equally beneficial to first look at its unadorned definition, here from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*: "[Autofiction is a] kind of novel or story that is written as a first-person narrative and that commonly presents itself fictionally as an autobiography of the narrator or as an episode within such an autobiographical account" (Baldick 2008). One may paraphrase this definition to state that autofiction is a genre where the author places a version him- or herself inside of a narrative which is driven by autobiographical facts and experiences, yet still borrowing (to varying degrees) from the imagination; it is *almost* autobiography, but not quite. While a large portion of works of autofiction strive to achieve a sense of extreme realism, Lerner is far more experimental in his take on the genre. I find Patrick Madden's definition of 'The New Memoir' to better resonate with Lerner's work. Madden writes that these alternative memoir writers produce works "which are fundamentally more obtrusively aware of the mediated nature of life, the unwieldiness of experience, the fallibility of memory, and the artifice of textual transformation" (2014:223). A similar idea was issued by Serge Doubrovsky, who first coined the term 'autofiction' when describing his novel *Fils* in 1977. Doubrovsky did not define the term so much as he imbued it with mystery, stating that "autofiction is as a dream; a dream is not life, a book is not life"[2]. Doubrovsky's idea is Jungian, and claims that much like in a dream, the cluttered transmutation of fragments of memory is what best represents the expression of the self, and that this expression is more true, or at least more important, than life as it actually was. Autofiction is, following Doubrovsky's definition, a way for authors to investigate these alternative versions of themselves, where the emphasis is not on plot or character development as much as it is on an exploration of selves traversing different avenues of ontological engagement.[3]

[2] This quote is not found within *Fils* itself, but as a blurb on the cover. Translated by me. Original: "L'autofiction, c'est comme le rêve; un rêve n'est pas la vie, un livre n'est pas la vie".

[3] Parts of this paragraph are taken from my paper titled "Parasitic Friendship and Oversharing in Sheila Heit's *How Should a Person Be?*" (2020), modified to fit the direction and focus of this thesis.

In the epigraph of *10:04*, a Hasidic story of "the world to come", where "[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different" is presented to the reader. Although we will return to this quotation in the final chapter of this thesis as a means of making a more monumental point about Lerner's literary project in *10:04*, it may also serve as a springboard analogy of autofiction itself. Read as such, we can conceptualize that autofiction does not try to replicate life 1:1, but rather let the writing subject's current mode of consciousness, flawed memory and emotion clash and react to their lived life in a post hoc, imaginative fashion.

Presenting its own genre

> …we reached that part of the High Line where a cut has been made into the deck and wooden steps descend several layers below the structure; the lowest level is fitted with upright windows overlooking Tenth Avenue to form a kind of amphitheater where you can sit and watch the traffic. We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited… (Lerner 2014:3) [4]

This quote is taken from the opening passage of *10:04*, a passage to which we will return to at the beginning of every following chapter of this thesis (except for the final chapter, which will refer to the novel's epigraph), as it contains, however convolutedly, Lerner's central project for the novel. Lerner uses this passage not only to entice further reading, but also to present a condensed version of the themes and concepts explored throughout the rest of the novel. This is the reason why the passage will work as our jumping-off point into the following chapters' analyses. In this particular cross section of the

Picture 1: High Line Park (WikimediaCommons 2012)

[4] Future quotations from *10:04* will only include the page number(s), unless the reference source is not made explicit.

passage, we follow Ben and his agent along the High Line Park aerial greenway, where they sit down to discuss how he will expand his short story which was published in *The New Yorker* into a novel. As readers work their way through the novel, they will gradually and with more certainty come to realize that the expanded version of the short story is in fact the book they have been and are currently reading; *10:04*. What I would like to focus on in this text extraction as an introduction to the autofictional aspects of the novel, is mainly the setting for Ben and his agent's conversation. Ben and his agent are discussing the making of the book we are already reading; a book that explores the reciprocal connectivity between reality and fiction, all the while looking at the reality of the traffic in front of them from the seats of 'a kind of amphitheater'. The two are observing the real world as if it were a movie or a classic Greek play, the reality of the traffic metaphorically morphing into the fiction of traffic as they are seated in rows, looking out of screen-shaped panes of glass. The relationship between artistic creation and the world, a world which is both the inspiration and recipient of both the short story and *10:04* itself, is alluded to. What Lerner is presenting here is *10:04*'s inherent awareness, through its genre, of the interconnectivity between reality and fiction. Following the description of their surroundings, Ben shifts the focus to something he intuited in that very moment. For now, exactly what Ben intuited is not as important as how he presents it: 'I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say…'. As Alison Gibbons points out, this paradoxical phrasing is "somewhat evocative of [Gerard] Genette in his attempt to formulate the 'voice' of autofiction [:] 'It is I and it is not I'" (Gibbons 2018:77, Genette 1993:77). I argue that Lerner is insinuating the ambivalent nature of autofiction's relationship between reality and fiction; how the genre intrinsically inhabits a space where what is objective and true is never a certainty and always up for interpretation. These two aspects of autofiction, that of uncertainty and that of interconnectivity, are what I claim to be Lerner's modus operandi for achieving a doubling effect through use of genre.

Ben, Lerner, 'the author' and forced introspection

In *10:04*, we follow two autofictional versions of Lerner: Ben and 'the author'. Ben, who, like Lerner in time of writing, is a 33-year-old Brooklyn-based professor, poet and author of a surprisingly successful first novel. He too has written a short story in *The New Yorker* titled "The

Golden Vanity", where 'the author' is the main character and a version of both Ben and Lerner, which is printed in verbatim fashion, making up the entire second chapter of the novel. At some point in the narrative, Alena's friend, Peter, even quotes Lerner's poetry to Ben: "'Since the world is ending […] why not let the children touch the paintings?'" (132)[5]. On the other hand, Ben is in a sexual relationship with Alena (or Hannah in "The Golden Vanity") and is helping his friend Alex (or Liza) conceive a child through IUI treatment, while Lerner was, in time of writing, already in a relationship with his current wife, Ariana Mangual Figueroa (*The Guardian* 2015). Ben is diagnosed with a heart condition and 'the author' with a seemingly benign meningioma, while Lerner is, based on public knowledge, not diagnosed with either one of these afflictions. In a promotional interview with *Librairie Mollat*, Lerner explains his interest in the genre of autofiction as follows:

> So, for me, kind of blurring the boundary between […] me as a historical person and the narrator of the book is [a] way of raising [the] question about the porousness between the boundary of fact and fiction, and to try to make that felt as alive in the work (2016)

Pairing the uncertainty of Ben's personhood and lived experience with that of Lerner, a question emerges: What is objectively true and what is made up? How porous is the aforementioned boundary? In other works of autofiction, this question would arise and be made more or less forefront in a reading depending on the reader's knowledge and interest in the author as a historical person. In the case of *10:04*, however, Lerner remedies this variable by incorporating and thematizing the duality within the narrative itself through the implementation of "The Golden Vanity". By having the short story, which was written by Lerner, also be written by Ben, Lerner enables an exploration into the ambivalent, reality-defying characteristics and ambitions of the novel's own genre. Several of the events, characters and themes which are presented and explored within the novel are also explored in "The Golden Vanity", only altered in some sense.

[5] From Lerner's poem "Mean Free Path" from *Mean Free Path* (2010).

By having the short story be published and available to the characters of *10:04*, Lerner can force autofictional introspection.

An example of such forced introspection can be observed when Ben, after having arrived at Alex's apartment and drunkenly tried to seduce her, is confronted by Alex some days later for not taking the task of making a baby with her seriously: "…'if we're going to try to make a baby, however we try to make one, I don't want it to be one of the things you get to deny you wanted or deny ever happened'" (136). When Ben asks her to specify what she means, she quotes 'the author' of "The Golden Vanity" back to him: "'It was the only kind of first date he could bring himself to go on, the kind you could deny after the fact had been a date at all'", to which Ben replies: "'That's fiction…'" (136). Lerner brings attention to how autofiction blurs the boundaries between facts and fiction, and how quickly people who have read a work of autofiction, or any fiction with a character that resembles its creator in some sense for that matter, conflate the historical person with the fictional character. This point is further emphasized when Alex replies: "'What about the part about smoothing my hair in the cab? The part that's based on the night of the storm'" (136). Even though it was 'the author' running his fingers through Liza's hair, in a taxi instead of an apartment, under a completely different circumstance, Alex sees them as one and the same in terms of intent and real-life implication. What 'the author' does or says is considered a reflection of Ben's true thoughts and desires, which again would be considered a reflection of Lerner himself.

Fiction affecting reality and projecting into the future

In the same fashion an author weaves their life experiences into works of fiction, Lerner is concerned with how the same fictions loop back into the life and world of the author; how it is not a one-way, dead-end street. When 'the author' is set up on a date with Hannah (Alena in *10:04*) by Josh and Mary (Jon and Sharon), he begins to worry if she, like the women he has been set up with before her, will read his first novel and compare him to the protagonist: "This meant that instead of the conventional conversations about work, favorite neighborhoods, and so on, he'd likely be asked what parts of his book were autobiographical" (66). Rather than having what one might consider a normal conversation with the goal of getting to know another person,

an author might find him- or herself faced with having to distinguish themselves from a fictional character that resemble them in some way, shape or form: "Even if these questions weren't posed explicitly, he could see, or thought he saw, his interlocutor testing whatever he said and did against the text" (66). In this example, it becomes a case of fiction affecting reality, where the fictional character, who is supposed to only be based on the author's person or experience, in effect enters the real world in place of the author: "…because his narrator was characterized above all by his anxiety regarding the disconnect between his internal experience and his social self-presentation, the more intensely the author worried about distinguishing himself from the narrator, the more he felt he had become him" (66). 'The author' feeling as if his fictional self is in practice becoming a part of him unintentionally and against his will, is meant to show that some level of metaphysical unification through fiction is possible and hints at the prospect of embodying an 'other', which plays a major part in Lerner's use of doubling as a means of expressing the potential of sensing and addressing the collective, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 6. For this particular part of my analysis, I argue that planting "The Golden Vanity" as a fictional layer set deeper into the narrative structure of the novel impels introspective discussion of the genre and highlights that there exists an interconnectivity between the main narrative layer of *10:04* and the short story. The reader is, as a result, primed not only to look for and consider connections between Ben and 'the author', but also between the two and the historical Lerner.

Within the confines of *10:04*, even the characters of Ben and Alex are aware of and discuss the ways in which Ben's writing has and can affect their lives. When debating a pre-published version of "The Golden Vanity" with Alex, Ben tells her that he wants to use the money he earns from the story to pay for Alex's wisdom teeth extraction, partly because he based a part of his story on her dental operation, but also because it would be "a nice crossing of reality and fiction, which is what the story is about in the first place" (57). In a more extreme case of the awareness of the interplay between fiction and reality, Alex warns Ben about "'writing about medical stuff […] Because [he will] believe, even though [he will] deny it, that writing has some kind of magical power'" (137-8). When Ben was writing his first novel, in

which the protagonist pretends his mother is dead[6], he learned that his real-life mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, now believing there was a connection between his writing and her illness: "I felt, however insanely, that the novel was in part responsible, that having even a fictionalized version of myself producing bad karma around parental health was in some unspecifiable way to blame for the diagnosis" (138). Alex, equally superstitiously, tells Ben not to write about 'the author's' meningioma because he is "probably crazy enough to make [his] fiction come true somehow" (138). In trying to establish the power fiction has on our lives, Lerner is pushing autofiction's effect to the extreme, into the future, as the consequences of Ben's written and published fictionalized accounts of the past seep back into his reality. Precisely because the autofiction of "The Golden Vanity" and *10:04* has and can enable change in the realities of Ben and Lerner respectively, it is always targeting and projecting into the future. As I will elaborate on and make more perspicuous throughout my analysis at large, Lerner is interested in how doubling, exemplified here in the synergetic relationship between fact and fiction, can create a spatiotemporal and reality-defying overlapping effect in a present moment, which can expose momentary cracks in the foundation of what we perceive as predetermined future, cracks through which we are able to glimpse into a different, and hopefully better, future than the one we are collectively heading towards.

The future path we are currently on, the novel implies, and academics agree (Torjusen 2020, Bernard 2021), is problematic in that we are unable to imagine collective futurity because of a ruling and expanding neoliberal capitalist mindset which demands individualistic and competitive thinking, locking us in a temporal stasis; we have no choice but to continuously fend for ourselves against our fellow man, even at the cost of our ecological futurity. The looming presence of manmade ecological extinction, in turn, makes the individual feel powerless at the prospect of enacting meaningful change, leading to feelings of hopelessness and apathy. Regaining the ability to imagine collective futurity, the novel suggests, is necessary for our sense of agency and consequent responsibility to a larger collective, which can lead to a more united, just and sustainable world. As my analysis continues, these thematic points will become more crystalline in their relation to the use of conceptual and narratological doubling in *10:04*.

[6] This is an extratextual reference to Lerner's debut novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), in which the main character, Adam Gordon, tells people that his mother is dead when she is in fact alive.

2. Metafiction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *10:04* is a book that tells the story of its own conception: a story about writing the story we are currently reading. It is consequently a work of metafiction. I argue that to truly understand Lerner's form of autofiction, one needs to understand how he uses metafiction to strengthen the novel's autofictional aspects. Lerner uses metafiction as a means of doubling down on the introspective features of autofiction, further emphasizing the future-oriented synergetic relationship between reality and fiction whilst simultaneously making the reader aware that the world of *10:04* is slightly different than the real world. As I did with autofiction, I would first like to present a bareboned terminological description of metafiction as a starting point for further investigation: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 1984:2). Metafiction is, based on this description, a form of fiction in which self-referentiality and introspection of its own creation is laid bare for the reader, and which also, like autofiction, is an exploration of the relationship between art and the world. Lerner himself has stated that he is not interested in metafiction's ironic mockery of "novelistic convention" that aim to "show the impossibility of capturing a reality external to the text", but rather to use the tropes of metafiction to show "how we live fictions, how fictions have real effects [and] become facts in that sense" (*Foyles* 2016). In other words, Lerner is not interested in metafiction as an instrument for ridiculing fiction's inability to connect to real experience or the real world as such, and is instead, as Alexandra Effe points out, interested in "offer[ing] a sincere engagement with reality in the form of exploring the effects of fiction" (2021:746). For Lerner, then, metafiction becomes an earnest way of exploring fiction's potential to affect our lives in the present and in the future, as well as a way for him to invite the reader to participate in the elaborate unfolding of his literary ambitions and motivations. If we now return to the opening passage of the novel, we can see that Lerner uses Ben's writing of *10:04* within the universe of *10:04* to create a doubling effect which aims at making the reader concurrently conscious of both the inner reality of the novel and the outer reality of their own world:

> …the agent and I were walking […] after an outrageously expensive celebratory meal in Chelsea that included baby octopuses […] A few months before, the agent had e-mailed me [about turning] a short story of mine […] into a novel […] I managed to draft an earnest if indefinite proposal and soon […] we were eating cephalopods in what would become the opening scene (3-4)

By having the introductory scene be referenced to as part of the narrative that the fictional character is going to write, which the narrator already knows will be written, which in turn is also the scene that the reader has just read, Lerner generates narrative and temporal confusion to further emphasizes the autofictional themes discussed in the previous chapter. Throughout the narrative, Lerner uses such metafictional tools to further the theme of interconnectivity between reality and fiction, and to project said themes into a not yet determined future. By pointing towards itself and its own artificiality as a work of fiction, *10:04* is an attempt to point back, outwards, towards the present tense reader and world. In this chapter, I will present examples of Lerner's use of metafiction to further stress the themes of interconnectivity and futurity in relation to fiction's effect on our lives.

The telling of stories

As one reads *10:04*, the thematization of storytelling itself becomes evident. It is not only a telling of how the story we are currently reading came to be, but also an observation and inspection of how and why stories are told in general. By having the characters of Ben and 'the author' be writers contemplating their own work, Lerner is constantly hailing the concept of storytelling at the reader. In chapter 2, "The Golden Vanity", when 'the author' brings Hannah (Alena) on a family trip, Lerner emphasizes metafictional self-referentiality to great extents, making it an excellent encapsulation of how he uses the genre and its toolbox of tropes to further the novel's autofictional aspects. The story begins as follows: "Say they join his family […] on Sanibel Island, off the Gulf Coast of Florida, for the winter holidays. It's dark when they arrive…" (74). What I would like to draw attention to is the opening word, 'say'. Beginning a story with an adverb which functions as another way of saying 'for example', 'perhaps', or 'approximately', is most puzzling. It implies that the following story is hypothetical; not rooted

in facts, but rather made up; fictionalized. Juxtaposed against this hypothetical opening is the definite and rooted-in-reality contraction 'it's' in the following sentence: 'it *is* dark when they arrive'. Now the reader has been moved from a timeless, hypothetical state of uncertainty to a present moment of stated factuality from one sentence to the next. This is Lerner using swift grammatical shifts to make the reader aware that what they are reading is a form of fiction that still has a strong connection to, or at least strong pull towards, reality; a fiction that is simultaneously hypothetical and definite, belonging as much to the indeterminate future of the 'say' as it does to the presets reader's present 'is', attempting to charge said present with future potentiality.

Having settled in at the rented beach house, 'the author' sits down with his father, who asks him if he has "'…been able to do any writing lately?'", and to which 'the author' replies: "'Just this'" (75). Here, 'the author' not only acknowledges the fictionality of the story being told to the reader as a narrator, but directly as a character to another character within the narrative. This is a prime example of Lerner using metafiction's ability to break the fourth wall[7] to underline the novel's autofictional inclinations. By so blatantly stating the fictional nature of the story, he is concomitantly revealing the puppeteer mastery of 'the author' and, consequently, himself. This short exchange, which has no follow-up comments by 'the author' or questions posed by the father, takes place as the father plays the chords of "The Golden Vanity" on his guitar:

> [As a child, 'the author'] used to cry at the end of 'The Golden Vanity,' when the boy who has managed to sink an enemy ship is left to drown in the ocean by a double-crossing captain, so his dad would improvise additional stanzas for the ballad in which the boy was rescued by a benevolent sea turtle and deposited safely on an island (75)

[7] 'Breaking the fourth wall' is an idiom from the world of theatre, where the imaginary wall (or, 'one-way mirror') that separates the audience from the actors is in effect removed by having one or more of the characters acknowledge or address the audience directly, or otherwise make references that allude to the play's fictionality.

“The Golden Vanity”, also known as “The Golden Willow Tree” or “The Sweet Trinity”, is a folksong known for having multiple lyrical variations, extensions and endings (Mainly Norfolk 2022), and Lerner uses this song and the father’s version of the song to draw attention to how fiction is not rigidly determined (making ‘the author’ cry), but rather plastic and perceptible to artistic creativity that can alter its trajectory in ways that have real-life effects (keeping him from crying).

‘The author’ is then tasked with putting his nephews, Cyrus and Theo, to bed by telling them a bedtime story: “He tells the boys to listen for the waves and then to imagine that this bunk bed is a ship at sea in search of the world’s largest and most vicious shark” (76). As ‘the author’ asks his nephews to immerse themselves in the story’s setting, the narration itself moves from a distant third person; ‘he tells the boys’, to effectively being in the style of a close and palpable first-person narration; ‘this bunk bed is a ship’. While not strictly being authorial intrusion by addressing the reader directly, it nevertheless presents how narratological techniques, such as perspective, is used to address and draw the reader into a fictional universe. The effect on the nephews is immediate: “What does viscous mean, Cyrus stops sucking [his thumb] long enough to ask” (76). As anyone who has been around a child who is in their thumb-sucking stage of life can attest to, being able to entice said child’s attention enough for them to give the self-pacification a rest is an attest to the distraction’s potency. ‘The author’ continues setting the stage for his bedtime story: “We’re sailing out to sea to capture this shark and so we have to look very carefully in the moonlight for its fin. Its dorsal fin, Cyrus contributes from his bunk. That’s right, its dorsal fin, the author whispers…” (76). Not only is the story enticing enough for Cyrus to stop sucking on his thumb, but it also allows for his own knowledge and imagination to contribute to the ongoing narrative. Lerner is highlighting stories’ ability to immerse and captivate its audience and their imagination, and consequently to the prospect of collective creation. We can all recognize the feeling of transitioning from our daily lives into a fictionalized world, with all that entails, and how we add details and attributes to environments, plot and characters that are, in print, not actually there. I believe, as a result, it also speaks to the tradition of storytelling itself; how oral traditions, folksongs and other forms of stories are collaborative by the nature of being passed on over time and shared by so many generations of people; that stories too collectively evolve over time in keeping with their desired effect or aim.

There are many reasons to tell a story; to entertain, move, convince, persuade and so forth. What these reasons have in common is that they aim at having an effect on the recipient; on the outside world. The idea of shared and evolved stories having real-world effect is a recurring theme Lerner brings up explicitly throughout *10:04*, and which will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 4 of this thesis. As 'the author' progresses through his bedtime story, however, a different theme emerges: "I see it, the author quietly exclaims, but then he encounters a problem with his tense. He doesn't know how to continue the story in the present, at least not in a way that would put the boys to sleep as opposed to enlisting their participation in a kind of game" (76). This is metafictional commentary on artistic narrative choices and their effects on the stories' recipients. How a fictional story is told, including its tense and point of view, can influence the story's real-life effects. Similar to how the father used his artistic creativity to alter the ending of "The Golden Vanity", 'the author' is trying to shape the future outcome through fiction. 'The author' was able to garner the children's attention by telling the story in an engaging present tense style; incorporating their shared surroundings and their participatory commentary into the narrative, but in doing so, they became overly aware and involved, hindering his desired outcome. After taking "four deep, deliberate breaths" (76), 'the author' reshapes the narrative to a distant third-person point of view in the past tense:

> Now that we've spotted the shark, the author resumes, let's put down the anchor of our boat and I'll tell you all about him […] There once was a shark named Sam […] he saved a family whose ship was sinking [and] led the family to a sunken treasure, although Theo was already asleep by then (76)

Not only does 'the author' manage to shift the point of view and tense to a more fittingly passive narrative style, but he also takes parts of the ending of the version of "The Golden Vanity" that his father created for him (an animal saving someone from drowning), reshaping it and incorporating it into his own story. Much like how stories evolve over time, 'the author' recognizes and utilizes a part of a story from his past in new ways to influence the future. The soothing nature of the improved stanzas of the past breathing new life in a present new story, still pregnant with the same future-oriented real-life effect of putting someone at ease. 'The author' is

exemplifying the use of recontextualization, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

As the vacation story comes to an end, the whole family, excluding his now sleeping nephews and Hannah, who is still getting ready after taking a shower, head on down to the beach to watch the sun set. As 'the author' approaches the rest of the group, his brother asks him: "'Where's Ari? Did she go to bed already or is she coming?'" (77). We now have a fictional character asking the protagonist if Lerner's significant other, Ariana Mangual Figueroa, will be joining them. The brother is addressing the author of 'the author', reversing the metafictional trope of pointing inwards towards itself and instead putting a mirror up to Lerner for the reader to see: "They heard what could have been the slamming of a screen door in the distance, and his brother said, 'That must be her.' But the author said, 'She isn't in the story.' He thought his speech sounded a little slurred, his voice issuing from far away" (77). Akin to the phenomena of 'déjà vu' in *The Matrix*-movies, the metafictional trope reversal creates a glitch in the reality of the fiction itself, briefly exposing its fictionality to those residing within it. The metafictional overload caused by this reversal allows for a significant autoficional event to take place, as 'the author' suddenly feels disconnected from his immediate surroundings and Lerner channels through him and replies, stating that they are all part of a work of fiction, not reality; 'She isn't in the story'. As when 'the author' revealed to his father that their reality was merely a fictionalized event, there occurs no existential dread in the characters. However, this time, a question is posed; "'Why not?'" (78). When questioned as to why Ariana is not part of the story, the point of view shifts from third to first-person: "It took him a long time to say he didn't know how to explain it, that if he knew how to explain it she would be walking toward them now, not Hannah. I've divided myself into two people. A cut across worlds" (78). Not only does Lerner's metafictionally forced intrusion allow for him to speak through 'the author', but he is also no longer bound by the perspective of the original story, nor does he need to mark his response with quotation marks. He is replying not only to the fictional characters, but to the reader as well, telling them exactly what he has done, which is to split himself off from his historical self into an autofictional self, placing this version of himself in this hypothetical story and working as an interlocutor between the two worlds.

The original story

Throughout most of the narrative, Ben is not writing what will become *10:04* as we know it, but a different story in which 'the author' is fabricating letter and e-mail correspondences with other authors and poets, both alive and dead. When Ben receives an e-mail from his mentor, Natali, that her husband, Bernard, is in the hospital from breaking a vertebra in his neck, he is reminded of a party he attended at their house when he was a young student of literature. During this flashback, Ben recalls observing the following: "[Bernard] was telling the story, pausing every few minutes to stir the fire he was sitting beside, of a French author who, hard up for money, had fabricated letters to himself from famous interlocutors, then attempted to sell them to a university library" (37). Although Ben does not express it at the time, as the narrative evolves, we come to understand that this is where he got the idea for the original story from. Ben wanted to include fabricating correspondences in his short story as well, but after his publisher, his agent, his parents and, finally, Alex advised against it, he edited it out. While we as readers do not have access to Ben's (and, possibly, Lerner's) original story in full, *10:04* is littered with references to parts of what could have been and under which circumstances these sections of the original story were written. In this excerpt, Ben is writing a correspondence draft to e-mail his agent:

> The author could go back later and make sure he wasn't overusing Creeley's signature words. I'd reread the one or two matter-of-fact messages we had actually exchanged, would look again at his *Selected Letters* […] As he worried about the growth of a tumor, as I worried about the dilation of my aorta, the letters would accumulate, expanding the story into a novel (128)

The back-and-forth blending of the third person 'author' and the 'I' of Ben, the two both having to make sure they are not overusing words used by the dead poet Robert Creeley, their sharing of worry at their respective medical conditions, is a nod to the interconnectivity between the world of fiction and the actual world. Although grammatically separated as subject and object, the two are co-constructing the fabricated letter exchange (i.e. a work of fiction) with Creeley, creating yet another metafictional layer aimed at interconnecting two similar but different worlds and temporalities. Lerner does not claim, however, that exploring and exposing the relationship

between reality and fiction is or will be an easy or risk-free task. Towards the end of the novel, Ben decides to abandon the original story in favor of writing *10:04* as we, the readers, know it:

> I highlighted the rest of the letter in blue and hit delete. Somehow destroying the fabricated correspondence made it seem real […] Abandoning the book about forging my archive left me feeling as though I actually possessed one, as though I were protecting my past from the exposure of publication (212)

Here, Lerner confronts, through Ben's metafictional contemplation and abrogating action, one of the consequences that autofiction could have (or potentially already have had) on his own lived life. The fictionalized correspondences felt real, or at least real enough, for Ben to worry about his actual, non-fictional personhood and how said personhood might be perceived if the fabricated letters were to be released to the public; how the fiction of his past could project itself into his real-life future. In similar fashion to how Lerner uses "The Golden Vanity" to force introspective discussion on autofiction's effect on reality, the inclusion of the original story works, regardless of its basis in Lerner's actual process of writing *10:04*, as metacommentary on how a potential future (the book on faking correspondences) can, and in this case does, divert into a different future (*10:04* as we know it). The implementation of the original story implores the reader to cogitate what could have been, both in terms of how the original story, if published, would have affected Ben and Lerner's lives, but also in how reading this completely different story would have affected their life. The original story is thusly not only a commentary on futurity, but also a claim on the determinacy of futurity, or, rather, the lack thereof. By having Ben delete his original idea for the novel, it simultaneously lends Ben agency in shaping his future. While it was an action based on the fear of readers and critics alike conflating fictionalized events in print with reality as it was, it is nonetheless an indication of the possibility of enacting real-world change; that the potentiality of a different future can be made possible through artistic agency.

The new story

As the narrative begins coming to an end, Ben stands in the Texan desert looking at the 'Marfa lights', revealing explicitly that the story that evolved from "The Golden Vanity" into the original story about literary fraudulence, finally turned into *10:04*:

> Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now,
> a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them;
> I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past,
> but into an actual present alive with multiple futures (194)

Even if I did just state that it is expressed explicitly, meaning that it implies unquestionability, Lerner does not even let this be a certainty. By yet again beginning with a hypothetical 'say', Lerner is playing with the relationship between fact and fiction whilst discussing said relationship. A metafictional double-dipping, forcing the reader to consider if the story about literary fraudulence was even something Lerner was in fact working on, and not just another metafictional plot point used as a tool to further the autofictional thematization of the relationship between reality and fiction. Whichever is the case, there is still a lot to untangle in this excerpt. What would strike most readers as peculiar, is the authorial intrusion. Lerner, through Ben, is addressing the reader directly; 'the book you're reading now'. Just before this excerpt, the reader was still following Ben functioning as a seemingly normal first-person narrator, describing his thoughts, actions and surroundings. Now, the second-person, outside reader 'you', has been inscribed and embedded into the fiction. Albeit constricted to one-way communication by the nature of being in print in a novel, the sudden reaching out to the reader is a fourth wall-breaking, metafictional tool used by Lerner to establish a direct connection between the world of fiction and the world of the reader. It is jolting the reader out from an otherwise entrancing style of writing which would normally have the effect of immersion, into one of awareness of the fictionality of what they have just read and their own connection to it in the present moment. I will return to this particular section of the quotation in chapter 5 to show how Lerner utilizes a grammatical loophole in the second person 'you' to address a larger collective.

From directly addressing the reader, Ben goes on to explain that he wanted to create a novel that is 'like a poem', which is 'neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them'. During his residency in Marfa, Ben spends a large portion of his time writing a poem instead of working on his novel. As he starts writing he poem, he philosophizes on why he prefers poetry to prose: "The poem […] conflated fact and fiction, and it occurred to me […] that part of what I loved about poetry was how the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction didn't obtain, [and] what possibilities of feeling [are] opened up in the present tense of reading" (171). I am postulating that Lerner is conveying, in metafictional fashion, that factual vagueness, ironically enough, can contribute to impregnating fiction with an aura of reality that enables a connection with the real world. By that, I mean that when the conflation between fact and fiction becomes overwrought, as is objectively the case with *10:04*, it will, by the nature of its excessively expressed auto- and metafictional inclinations, necessitate the reader to examine their subjective relationship with the work as it is being experienced. It is metafictional commentary on the phenomenology of reading, and it posits that the creative amalgamation of fact and fiction has the ability to reach out from its written past and touch the present reader in ways that have the potential of altering their future orientation. The consistency of reminding the reader of the work's fictionality and precarious relationship to truth and the outside world working as a catalyst for readerly introspection, mirroring the genre's own defining characteristics and aims. If we return to the excerpt of Ben in the desert, he echoes this point in his plans for what came to be *10:04*: 'I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures'. The aim of *10:04* is not autofiction-induced authorial navel-gazing, nor ridicule of metafiction's inability to connect to something outside of itself, but to present to the reader, in part through copious use of auto- and metafictional conventions and the intricate breaking or playful contortion of said conventions, the idea that there exists important future potentialities in the reader's present moment. Lerner uses his explicitly open and revealing take on metafiction to further the doubling effect of autofiction, and in doing so, is able to move from a more self-contained, introspective form of discussion on the relationship between fact and fiction, to a discussion that urges the reader to consider their role in said relationship; how they are active agents in the co-construction of fictionalized worlds and how these worlds and their stories may have or might influence their lives and their world. By openly showing the reader how stories are or can be constructed,

deconstructed, reconstructed, and repurposed, Lerner is using metafiction's ability to expose the cogs in the literary machinery to shed light on the idea that real-world change can occur through language and narrative.

3. Narrative composition

Generally speaking, when we are to read a novel, we expect development of the main character(s) in a narrative that, for the most part, moves towards the future and a resolution. In *10:04*, however, we follow the development of the novel itself, while the main story moves both forwards and backwards in time, interjected with smaller stories and anecdotes, even revisiting and literally repeating the same situations, stories and utterances again: "'How exactly will you expand the story?' […] 'How exactly will you expand the story?' (4, 158). These identical quotes are taken from the opening paragraph and a little past the halfway point of the narrative, when Lerner reintroduces the story of Ben and the agent discussing his future novel over dinner. The dinner scene has now been stretched out and expanded upon from its synoptical form at the beginning of the narrative to an elaborative, multi-paged conversation about the state of the publishing industry and an exchange of possible ideas for Ben's future book:

> 'What [the publishing houses are] buying […] is in part the idea that your next book is going to be a little more . . . mainstream' […] what I heard was: 'Develop a clear, geometrical plot; describe faces, even those at the next table; make sure the protagonist undergoes a dramatic transformation.' What if only his aorta undergoes change, I wondered. Or his neoplasm. What if everything at the end of the book is the same, only a little different? (155-6)

Again, the reader is treated to Lerner's auto- and metafictional commentary, this time on the reluctance to conform to the publisher's wishes and desires, but more so than that, we are given a preliminary explanation as to why *10:04* is structured and told the way that it is. What happens when the same situations, stories and utterances are revisited in a slightly altered state? How does our personal history, or a newfound knowledge of the factual past, our contextual surroundings or even our mood in time of experiencing something again, change our perception of the world, art and temporality? In this chapter, I will analyze how the narrative composition of *10:04* is based around the concept of doubling in the form of overlapping narrative levels, repetition and recontextualization, and show how these doubled elements are used to both rigidify the novel's experimental structure and, more importantly, to present and exemplify the

novel's theory of collective interconnectivity through present moment temporal and artistic experientiality.

Narrative confusion and metadiegetic levels

In more ways than one, *10:04* is an exceedingly experimental form of narrative. Lerner himself stated that while there is a plot "like in any other book", *10:04* is "more about trying to capture some of the contradictions of contemporary experience" (*Librairie Mollat* 2016), and, as a consequence of him being a poet, he is "more interested in pattern [and] how a patterning of events and a patterning of language relate, as opposed to the big dramatic transformations" (*The Quietus* 2015). One of the difficulties one faces as a reader of *10:04*, is that there are not too many plot-based anchor points to cling onto. In a first readthrough, it is perhaps not too strange or uncommon for a reader to question what the novel is ultimately about on the surface-level. The reader is never situated in any part of the story for long enough to get comfortable before being whisked away to something new. I believe that exploring how and why *10:04* is told the way that it is can prove fruitful when trying to understand what the novel poses about the relationship between storytelling and collective interconnectivity.

From its myriads of stories within stories, to its mixture of genres, to its interplay between multiple actual and fictional layers and said layers' temporalities, the reader is constantly thrown in any which temporal and narratological direction and through any which dimension of reality the narrator(s) and Lerner see fit. What this confusing form of storytelling demands is to be held in place by something structurally rigid. I pose that Lerner uses, in part, thematic linkage between the main narrative told on the diegetic level and metanarratives told on the metadiegetic level (and sometimes meta-metadiegetic level)[8] as structural scaffolding to keep its otherwise scattered plotting in check.

[8] "…the metanarrative is a narrative within the narrative, the metadiegesis is the universe of this second narrative, as the diegesis (according to a now widespread usage) designates the universe of the narrative […] Naturally, the eventual third degree will be a meta-metanarrative, with its meta-metadiegesis, etc." (Genette 1980:228).

From Ben and 'the author' to almost everyone they interact with, they all have stories to tell, some of which are long and intricate enough to almost make one forget from where they originated. These can be stories that have been told to the teller of the story, who then relates the story to either Ben or 'the author', who finally tells the story to us, the readers. That means that the narrative moves not only from the main diegetic level to the metadiegetic level, but all the way down to the meta-metadiegetic level. This is on display when Ben works his shift at the local co-op and his co-worker, Noor, tells him the story of how her mother had told her that her father was not her biological father: "Your father, my mom said to me, Noor said, although not exactly in those words, was not your biological father" (102). Here, Lerner exposes the chain of senders and receivers in the storytelling timeline. The exclusion of quotation marks further adding to the narratological confusion as Lerner presents, in a metafictional manner, the artistic transformations which can occur as the chain expands; 'although not exactly in those words'. Regardless of this transformation, at the core of each of these different diegetic levels lies a kernel of thematic meaning that remains intact. Similar to how "The Golden Vanity" contains many of the same themes as *10:04* as a whole does, these multi-leveled diegetic stories contain echoes of the themes of the stories that have come before them or work as a means of foreshadowing forthcoming themes; they have both analeptic and proleptic thematic functionality. In the case of the story of Noor, the themes are arguably false personal narratives and fatherhood. I will return to the theme of false narratives in chapter 5. For the time being, however, I find it sufficient to exemplify how Lerner uses Noor's (meta-)metadiegetic story's theme of fatherhood to mirror Ben's personal narrative on the diegetic level. As Noor tries to tell Ben her story, they are interrupted: "…a voice came over the PA asking if dried mangoes were out of stock — 'are we out of dried mangoes?'— or could somebody from food processing bring some up" (101). This, I argue, is a metafictional nod to the experience of being interrupted in the middle of being captivated by a story. The disruption has the unfortunate effect of making what only seconds ago felt so alive and on-going, feel illusory and distant in the now present awareness of the comparatively dull moment of factual reality. The reader, anxiously awaiting Noor to finish her story, is instead constrained to returning to the main diegetic level and reading a mundane account of Ben "[making] a kind of pouch out of [his] apron" for the mangoes, taking them upstairs and "fight[ing his] way to the bulk section" to dispose of the fruits. The purpose this interruption serves, is twofold. As just laid forth, it is a form of comedic metacommentary on

the experience of captivating narratives versus monotonous reality, but it also serves the purpose of linking the theme of Noor's story to that of Ben's: "I didn't get cell phone service in the basement, and now my phone vibrated in my back pocket, indicating I'd received a text, a one-word query from Alex: 'Results?'" (101). The reader is brought from the (meta-)metadiegetic level of Noor's story, to the diegetic level of Ben's present, to internal analepsis (Ben delivering his sperm sample) and potential prolepsis[9] (the prospect of Ben having a child with Alex and becoming a father) on the same level. Through the incorporation of metadiegetic levels, Lerner is able to accentuate his themes through doubling, in part to solidify the themes themselves; to make them apparent to the reader, but also to try to show how we are interconnected through stories, as Noor's newfound knowledge of her past directly reflects and weighs in on Ben's thoughts, worries and desires on the question of what role he will play in Alex's child's life in the future.

Intratextual repetition and experientiality

When reading through *10:04*, there is a constant stream of readerly déjà vu moments, as particular words, snippets of text or phrases from earlier on in the narrative are repeated in different contexts. I refer to this type of repetition as intratextual, as it refers to and repeats from text found within its own discourse. Since this form of repetition is used so frequently by Lerner throughout *10:04*, it seems a hopeless task to attempt to analyze all its occurrences, but I nevertheless deem it important to analyze a handful of these repetitions to show how they function as both structural and thematic devices, as well as a way for Lerner to comment on of how we experience sameness differently depending on prior or newfound knowledge and the context in which that which is to be experienced is being experienced. What I mean by that, is that Lerner is interested in how our present moment of experiencing is affected in large part by our past and our predictions of the future, and vice versa, and how new information or contextual change regarding our personal or collective history has the power to change how we think or feel about our past, present and potential future. A way of exhibiting this change, the novel suggests,

[9] For Genette, prolepses are only prolepses to the degree in which what is foreshadowed eventually happens within the story (1980:40). In this case, the information given to the reader creates merely an open-ended reflection on what *might* happen, hence my use of the term 'potential prolepsis'.

is through the recycling of repeated words and phrases, so that what was once deemed either relevant or irrelevant to our conception of temporal experience and history, be that personal or collective, is now considered either more or less substantive than before.

In the beginning of the novel, Lerner utilizes intratextual repetition with short intervals. I argue that he does so to familiarize the reader with the structural device to make the reader susceptible to noticing repetitive referentiality on a larger scale, like the link between the two storms, as the narrative progresses and grows more complex:

…the doctors […] were themselves ideally proportioned in their white coats, with flawless symmetrical, high-boned faces that […] glowed with almost parodic health even in hospital light, a dusky gold (6)

I glanced at Bernard's daughter furtively; in the firelight, she was dusky gold (37)

…[Alena] stubbed the cigarette out against the brick, a little shower of embers… (26)

'The little shower of embers,' I texted Alena, then regretted it (32)

In the first quotation of the first quote pairing, Ben feels uncomfortable as he is being examined for signs of Marfan syndrome by a trio of young and beautiful female doctors. In the second quotation, he is observing, in a flashback, his mentor Bernard's 'thought-to-be' daughter. In both cases, the women are described as having a 'dusky gold' quality to their outward appearance. When the reader later reads about Ben's observation of Bernard's 'daughter' in a flashback, they come to learn that he became deeply enamored with her, but that he never met or saw her again. All he has left from their brief exchange is "an echo of desire" (38). Since the flashback occurs later in the narrative, the reader realizes, through use of repetitive description, that Ben must have been reminded of Bernard's 'daughter' while being examined by the trio of doctors, adding to the reasons why he felt so powerless, so "infantilized" (6), in the situation; the intratextual repetition happens anachronistically. As a result, the intratextual repetition highlights the narrative's play on the theme of temporal interconnectivity; on how past experiences affect the present experience for the person experiencing, as well as showing how knowledge of the experiencer's past helps the observing party, the reader, in understanding why the experiencer

experienced a situation the way they did. It is a way for Lerner to infuse the topic of temporal experience and newfound knowledge with an aspect of contextual awareness and interpersonal empathy.

In the second quote pairing, however, the repetitions happen chronologically in the narrative timeline. In the first quotation, Ben is observing Alena, his sexual partner whom he is uncertain thinks of him as boyfriend material, after having intercourse. In the second quotation, he is drunkenly texting her before falling to sleep after a less than successful interaction with her at an art opening the same night. In the first instance, the reader is unaware of the precariousness of their relationship, as Ben states that "most of [his] consciousness [was] still overwhelmed by her physical proximity, every atom belonging to her as well belonged to [him]" (26); the knowledge of their recent intimate exchange tints the description of Alena's putting out of the cigarette as somewhat poetic in essence as it plays on one of the opening lines of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855)[10] [11]: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (13). In the second instance, the reader now has knowledge of the shakiness of their relational foundation, as Alena wants them to arrive at the opening separately, as well as her not reciprocating Ben's friendly wave upon seeing her at the gallery. Now, the description, sent by text message and probably perceived by Alena as somewhat or completely random, feels needy and tragic. While this intratextual repetition also calls attention to the cause-effect of temporal knowledge, it is perhaps more focused on the importance of context. In the first instance the description is an inner, personal monologue, lending it an aura of aesthetic and emotional authenticity, while in the latter the same observation is hard to discern from the nonsense ramblings of a romantically rejected drunk. What I find particularly interesting about these initial intratextual repetitions is how they are focused on establishing Ben's personality and insecurities around women. This tells me that Lerner uses the introduction of this narratological device to

[10] During Ben's residency in Marfa, he reads "The Library of America edition of Whitman" (167). I will consequently be referring to the earliest versions of each Whitman poem referenced in *10:04,* as those are the ones in full print in the Library of America publication.

[11] Whitman renamed this poem many times; "I Celebrate Myself" in 1855, "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" in 1856, "Walt Whitman" in 1860 and finally to "Song of Myself" in 1881. In my analysis, I will refer to it as "Song of Myself", as it is the norm among Whitman scholars as well as those who refer to the poem when discussing it in relation to *10:04.*

develop the main character simultaneously as establishing the themes of temporal and contextual experience.

As the novel progresses, the thematic weight of these intratextual repetitions shift more and more from Ben's strictly personal problems to both smaller and larger collective issues. The repetitions are often characterized by an interest in the ontological sensation of experientiality, both for the reader and the characters within a narrative, and especially on how the experience of the present is always shaped by our past experiences and our conception of what the future has in store for us. As with the examples of the introductory form of intratextual repetition, I will present two quote pairings to exemplify how Lerner uses the same narratological tool to call attention to the themes of false narratives and climate change respectfully, as these are two of the themes that will be analyzed more thoroughly in the following chapters of this thesis:

'I want to tell you something, but I want you to promise you won't be mad' (124)
'I keep waiting from Emma to say to me, 'I want to tell you something, but I want you to promise you won't be mad'' (205)

The first quotation is taken from Ben retelling a story Alex's stepfather, Rick, had told him about a relationship he was in in college. Rick's girlfriend at the time, Ashley, had pretended to have cancer, faking her chemotherapy treatment by pulling out her own hair and making herself throw up after meals. As a reader, Ashely's divulgation of the truth following this quotation is sure to invoke a feeling of absurdity and understandable moral outrage, even if, as Ben at least outwardly presents as factual to the person whom he is telling the story to, Ashley had told Rick that "[the] lie described [her] life better than the truth [until] it became a kind of truth" (125). In the latter quotation, Rick is telling Ben how hard it has been on him and Alex that Alex's mother, Emma, is actually dying of cancer, expressing how he wants it to be, as it was with his college girlfriend, a lie: "…sometimes, I start to think to myself: she could be faking, I start to suspect […] I don't really believe it, but it's like this embodied memory of Ashley" (205). The emotional gravitas of the same phrase has been shifted from moral outrage towards something more akin to

sadness or empathy as the context and knowledge of Rick's past clashes with his present state of worry and false hope, and his eventual future as a widower.

> …the agent and I were walking south along [the aerial greenway] in the unseasonable warmth… (3)
>
> You can say it's all a hoax and walk out into the unseasonable warmth… (206)

Throughout the entirety of *10:04*, the term or variations of the term 'unseasonable warmth' is scattered (3, 66, 153, 164, 206, 221, 231)[12]. In the first instance, on the opening page, it is unlikely to be considered a key theme for the novel, as the narration rather focuses on Ben and the agent's surroundings and the octopus-based meal the two shared while discussing Ben's future novel. At the end of the narrative, on the other hand, through copious intratextual repetition, the term is impossible to overlook or consider happenstance. From the two storms, to Roberto's[13] fear of a *Waterworld*-like future, to the water-damaged art in the 'Institute for Totaled Art', the term gradually stands out more and more, and is eventually read as an ever-present, looming dread of potential climate-based global extinction. This makes the term 'unseasonable warmth' have a proleptic quality, as "[it] can be extremely compressed […] [using only] one or a couple of words that only later appear as especially meaningful" (Lothe 2011:90)[14]. Personally, when I re-read the novel, I was struck by how I had overlooked the significance of this foreboding intratextual repetition early on in the narrative during my first read-through. It was as if what was once a trivial, descriptive set of words was now imbued with new meaning. Although anecdotal, the fact that my second experience of the novel was differentiated, from the very first page, by the repeated chant 'unseasonable warmth', I believe, speaks volumes of its effectiveness as a narrative device used thematically to showcase how we experience sameness differently depending on new knowledge about the past (we now know that

[12] These intratextual repetitions are also noted by Stephanie Bernard (2021:11), Alison Gibbons (2021:146), and Caleb Klaces (2021:1115).

[13] The Hispanic child Ben is tutoring and mentoring throughout the narrative.

[14] Translated by me. Original: "Men denne narrasjonen kan vere ekstremt komprimert [...] eitt eller nokre få ord som seinare framstår som spesielt meiningsberande, få[r] ein proleptisk kvalitet".

the novel is interested in discussing climate change) and awareness of future potentiality (if we can still turn the climatic trend around, or not).

Lastly, I would like to pose that the storms, one at the beginning of the narrative and one towards the end, function as two monumental narrative structures that try to contain Lerner's experimental play with storytelling through intratextual repetition. The storms are versions of hurricane Irene and hurricane Sandy, both reaching New York City roughly one year apart, framing the main narrative in historical time between 2011 and 2012. As with the different diegetic levels discussed above, the storms share thematic similarities, but are also different in one key regard: they have some of the same events take place again, only slightly altered. This includes Ben and Alex getting ready for the approaching storm and the two of them projecting movies onto the wall in Alex's apartment. Let us look at how Lerner, through Ben's narration, introduces the two storms to the reader:

> An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York. The mayor took unprecedented steps: he divided the city into zones and mandated evacuations from the lower-lying ones; he announced the subway system would shut down… (16)

> An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York […] Soon the mayor would divide the city into zones, mandate evacuations from the lower-lying ones, and shut down the entire subway system (213)

These slightly varied repetitions have, as I see it, two main functions. Firstly, as mentioned above, they serve a structural function, as the recurring event rigidifies and suspends the experimental looseness of the novel's overall narratological construction. Secondly, they serve a mirroring function. Similar to how a poet might repeat the first stanza of their poem as the last stanza, either in part or as a whole, with or without variation, the intratextual repetition forces the reader to look for changes in expression and meaning between the two instances. The diptych mirroring begs for comparative analysis, and if we turn to the quotations above, the change that stands out is the use of tense. In the first instance, the mayor has already taken precautionary

steps to keep the citizens of New York City safe, while, in the latter instance, the mayor has yet to do so, but it is either assumed or predicted that they will. What was once a unique and violent atmospheric experience is now a routine in the mind of the narrator, emphasized further by omission of the word 'unprecedented' in the second instance; from a 'once in a lifetime' event to an annual occurrence[15]. Through intratextual repetition with slight variation, Lerner uses the storms to simultaneously make a comment on our reaction (or lack thereof) to the catastrophic effect of a changing climate and to rigidify the narrative structure. Viewed as such, Lerner uses the storms as the towers of a bridge, holding the narrative suspended between a chiasm of structural and thematic mirroring, where everything is as it was, only a little bit different.

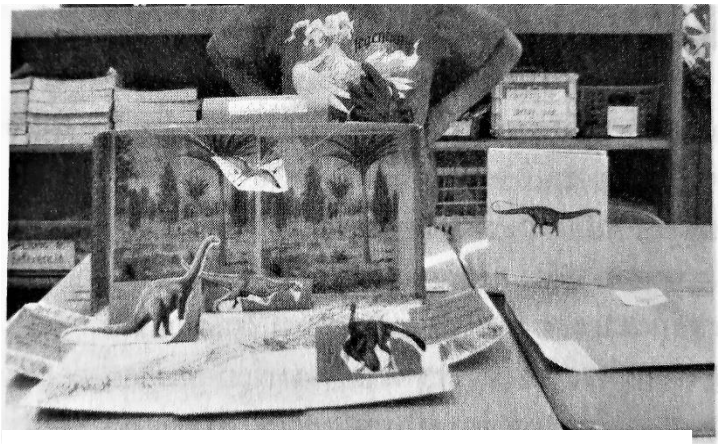
The plasticity of the novel; heteroglossia through form and recontextualization

In an interview with *Foyles*, Lerner expressed his appreciation for the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin and his celebration of the "heteroglossia of the novel"; how the novel can "[incorporate] these different kinds of languages" into a single body of work, whereas the poem was considered, by Bakhtin, as univocal in its limited 'lyrical-I' expression (*Foyles* 2016). Lerner goes on to challenge this theory in light of modern literary trends, stating that what he considers univocal is "a lot of contemporary fiction", where "even if there is dialogue, it feels like it's in one very managed voice", whilst it is contemporary poets who are now "experimenting with poetry as a really heteroglot space […] showing the way that we're all tissues of different kinds of discourse" (*Foyles* 2016). When Bakhtin formulated his theory on the novel in the 1930s, he stated that "[the] generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and [that] we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities" (1981:3). What has happened since the days of Bakhtin, is that the Realistic novel, with its formulaic narrative structure, has grown ever more prevalent as the dominant novelistic form, calcifying the novel's skeleton in a rather

[15] While Bernard also notes that "The mayor's precautions are 'unprecedented,' suggesting the spectacle of a storm bigger than New York has ever experienced" (15) and makes a point of the notional change from a 'once in a lifetime' to an annual occurrence (16), she does not note the intratextual repetitive descriptions of the mayors (planned) actions nor, as a consequence, the omission of the word "unprecedented" in the second instance; an omission I find even further illustrates the evolution of Ben's (and the collective's) trivializing reaction to climate change. Gibbons recognizes the intratextual repetition "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York" (16, 213), but does not note the mayor's repeated plans nor, consequently, the variance between the two instances (2021:142).

unimaginative pose. In many ways, *10:04* works as an opposing force to this dominance and stagnation, as Lerner wants to explore a return to Bakhtin's ideal of the novel as an experimental, hybrid and plastic genre which embraces and incorporates a multiplicity of other genres and discourses to "reformulat[e] and re-accentuat[e] them" (Bakhtin 1981:5). For Lerner, then, the novel needed to become once again "a form [which] could assimilate all of these other kinds of writing […] and other arts" (*Foyles* 2016).

In *10:04*, the re-hybridization of the novel is realized through the infusion of different forms of writing and media, from prose to poetry, speeches, letters, texts, e-mails, transcripts of wax cylinder recordings, art criticisms and various forms of visual media in print. I argue that Lerner uses genre hybridization to further the doubling effect of his auto- and metafictional endeavors and to scrutinize and explore his themes and theories in as many ways as possible, and that he does so using two different forms of genre hybridization. The first category includes the incorporation of genres and discourses that are produced by Lerner himself and reside solely within the confines of the narrative, such as text messages, e-mails, letters, art criticism, the speech Ben holds at Columbia's School of the Arts or the photograph of what is outwardly presented as Roberto and his shoebox diorama. The other category, however, includes discourses from various genres produced by someone other than Lerner, such as the reprinting of William Bronk's "Midsummer" (1955) or Ronald Reagan's speech after the 1986 *Challenger* disaster, but also shorter fragments of text, like quotes from Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856)[16] (168, 188, 193, 240) or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) (30-1), as well as visual media like the photograph of the Cydonia region of Mars, taken by the NASA



Picture 2: Photograph of "Roberto" (Lerner 2014)

[16] First published under the name "Sun-Down Poem" in 1856. Whitman renamed the poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in 1860. I will refer to the poem as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as it is the norm among Whitman scholars as well as those who refer to the poem when discussing its relevancy in *10:04*.

Viking 1 orbiter. The title of the book itself is one such reference, as it refers to the time displayed on the clocktower in *Back to the Future* (1985), when lightning strikes the belltower in the past, allowing Marty McFly to return to the future. I will refer to these latter forms of genre hybridizations as extratextual, as they originate outside of *10:04*s discourse. Lerner uses these two different plays on form and discourse to turn his novel into an experimental, heteroglot space in which the novel's auto- and metafictional aspects and themes are further emphasized and elaborated upon through different forms of communication. I deem it useful, as the novel is permeated with both forms of genre hybridization, which play key parts in my later analyses, to exemplify how they function in conjunction with one another.

To exemplify how the two categories work together, I would like to turn to Ben and Reagan's speeches, where the latter is incorporated into the former in chapter 3 of the novel. Although they are both speeches found inside the novel, the first is fictionally produced and performed in full by one of the novel's characters and is only made available to those who read *10:04*. It is consequently an experimentation with the novelistic form. Bakhtin argued that the novel was able to "reformulat[e] and re-accentuat[e]" other genres by parodying them "precisely in their role as genres" by "[exposing] the conventionality of their forms and their language" (1981:5). In *10:04*, the speech form functions as a way for Lerner, through Ben, to directly address the reader. As there is no actual audience, the reader becomes the recipient of the directed speech. When Ben asks the 'audience' "by show of hands, to indicate if you watched the *Challenger* disaster live" (110), he is in effect asking the reader to consider if they watched the disaster unfold in real time; it has a metafictional, fourth wall-breaking function. As it points to an event that took place in the real world from a fictional world, it also has an autofictional aspect. The speech itself is an origin story of how and why Ben became a writer, which he attributes to Reagan's speech after the *Challenger* disaster and his later accrued knowledge of how the speech was produced. The speech form makes it possible for Lerner, through Ben, to explain to the reader why the novel contains so many extratextual references, such as Reagan's speech. In the speech, Ben tells the story of how Reagan's speech was written by Peggy Noonan, who had quoted the poet John Gillespie Magee[17], who had found the phrases in a poem by

[17] Ben notes that the repurposed quotes are "'slipped the surly bonds of earth' and 'touch the face of God'" (113).

Cuthbert Hicks and so forth, making a quote from the past, through copious artistic alterations in new contexts over spans of space and time, find new meaning in a present moment: “I knew everybody in my family hated Reagan, but I could tell that even my parents were moved by the speech” (111). When Ben states that he finds the plagiarism “less scandalous than beautiful”; that he was fascinated by how these recycled and repurposed words could “circulate among bodies and temporalities, to transcend the contingencies of its authorship” (113-4), I argue that it is Lerner making a case for the desired effect of incorporating extratextual references into his own work; to make his novel a space in which different discourses with various spatiotemporal origins can come together in new contexts to create new meaning. Through use of the speech form, Lerner can comment directly on his narratological choice while maintaining the alluring guise of fictionalization: it presents itself as a speech, but functions as metacommentary. Reagan’s speech, which was written by people in the real world and spoken by the historical Reagan at another point in time and space, only later to be transcribed by Lerner and repurposed, mostly in fragments, is Lerner’s direct exemplification of how spatiotemporally different discourses can create a heteroglot space in which the past is intermingled and recycled in the present to serve new means in new contexts. This is a form of recontextualization. I use the term recontextualization rather than intertextuality, as the former entails the author’s intent to “transfer-and-transform […] something from one discourse/text-in-context [...] to another" (Linell 1998:154), rather than being an inherent characteristic of any text to be “constructed as a mosaic of quotations [and] the absorption and transformation of another [text]” (Kristeva 1980:66). It is used and it functions as a narratological and conceptual tool, not a characteristic of text as is. These direct extratextual references function similarly to the intratextual repetitions discussed above, as they use (re)contextualization as the basis for charging a (fragment of) discourse with new meaning. That does not, however, entail that recontextualization always packs a meaningful punch, as when Ben tries to repurpose a line from Reagan’s speech to convince Roberto that humanity is able to turn the global climate trend around: “’A young future scientist like you should have some faith in our ability to fix things,’ in our ability to colonize the moon. ‘The future doesn’t belong to the faint-hearted; it belongs to the brave’ […] We sat there smiling anxiously at one another…” (223-4). Rather, as Ben claims in his speech and echoes in the last paragraph of the novel (239), repurposed and recontextualized discourses, such as Reagan’s speech and the crude jokes that reappeared in the aftermath of the *Challenger* disaster

(jokes which reemerge with variation whenever similar disasters occur; "like cicadas emerging from underground" (115)) can be considered "bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility [...] a way of organizing meaning and time that belongs to nobody but courses through us all" (116). They are prototypes for what a proper future collectivity might one day become, a future in which we are interconnected through language: "…prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world…" (116), making "poets […] the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (113), which is another extratextual reference, this time to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "In Defense of Poetry" (1840)[18]. In *10:04*, the heteroglot space is made up of recycled, often fragmented and recontextualized discourses, where a sense of collectivity is brought about through a shared and ever-evolving language that transcends spatiotemporally into an undetermined future. Lerner has expressed an interest and desire to address "a social body"; the collective, and although he admits that he has not "figured out how to do that" (*Foyles* 2016), I pose that he is indeed trying to represent the potential of establishing said connection by letting these other texts, forms and genres from our collective history be expressed anew and clash with his own fiction's present moments, which in turn is any present and future reader's present moment. Bakhtin wrote that the classical literary genres, like the epic, were unable to connect with the present readers' present (and potential future), as these genres' worlds were always "projected […] into a valorized past of beginnings and past times [and that this] past is distanced, finished and closed like a circle" (1981:19). What the novel enables, according to Bakhtin, as opposed to the epic's lack of "openendedness", is to make the reader connect to a tangible past by, in part, incorporating and altering (through parody) other genres as to create a "dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born…"; a perpetuality that "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (1981:7, 365). The novel, Bakthin poses, can make such spatiotemporal connections because of its plasticity, as "only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process." (1981:7). In *10:04,* the experimentation with form and the recontextualization of extratextual references are means to re-plasticize the novel and, in doing so, creating a sense of a shared and ever evolving past that affects our present

[18] This reference was brought to my attention by Arne De Boever (2018:153).

experience in a way that enables us to be, as Ben puts it when he heard first heard Reagan's speech, "pulled into the future" (112).

The incorporation of printed images will be discussed in the following chapter, as it plays a larger role in the symbolism of 'double exposure'.

4. Double exposure

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lerner utilizes narrative tools that are based on the principle of doubling, such as the overarching chiasmic narrative structure of the two storms, intratextual repetitions and recontextualization, to suspend its arguably loose plot in place and to highlight some of the novel's themes through its form. Lerner also thematizes doubling in several symbolic ways, and I find it advantageous for my analysis of *10:04* to categorize and analyze visual and narrative instances of these kinds of symbolic double exposures to further the weight that the novel puts on overlapping temporal realities and future potentiality. I use the term 'double exposure' as I find it represents the achieved effect of its implementation. The term comes from the field of analog photography and is a technique that involves shooting two (or more) pictures on the same frame of a film roll, producing an image that portrays both (or all) shots simultaneously; an overlapping representation of different points in space and time.

If we now return to the opening scene of the novel, the aspects of space and time are put into play as Ben states that he "should have [told]" his agent that he would "project [himself] into several futures simultaneously" (4); a hindsight past tense commentary from the future Ben, now that he knows that his novel will not be the novel he envisioned at the time of the meeting. The use of the verb 'project', as in 'projection', is of importance and needs to be noted: It has a spatiotemporal quality, as that which is to be projected is transported from one place to another through space and time; it is forwarded; cast. It also connotes a visual feature, as it is related to the concept of film projection, which copies and projects from one source onto another. This visual, light-casting technology is referenced to when Ben and Alex watch movies during both storms, as well as in their viewing of Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010). The projected image is not a perfect reproduction of the original media, but rather spectrally lacking or distorted to some degree; blurred, undersaturated, corroded over time, obstructed by specs of dust or damages to the lens or, as is the case during both storms, overlain and obstructed by the outside world:

> The shadows of the trees bending in the increasing wind outside [Alex's] window moved over the projected image on the white wall, became part of the movie […] how easily worlds are crossed, I said to myself… (22)

> Branches scraped against the windows, casting their shadows in the 1980s, the 1950s… (230)

In other words, that which has been projected is similar, but different to that which it is projecting and projected from. The temporal aspect also comes into play as that which is projected was created and cast in advance of its projection, like a small-scale version of the light emitted from a star reaching earth hundreds of thousands of years after it was cast, which is a symbolism that is expressed throughout the novel both explicitly, by Ben and other characters, and implicitly, by the novel's constant references to the *Challenger* disaster, the moon landing of 1969 and various pop-cultural sci-fi references, such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and *Star Trek* (1966-1969). In *10:04*, the concept of the slightly altered projected copy, which has been projected through time and space and is experienced differently in a present moment, is symbolic of, and synonymous with, potential for future change.

In this chapter, I will analyze how the novel uses the concept of double exposure to symbolize the potentiality of spatiotemporal and reality-defying interpersonal connectivity through language and visual media. I will begin my analysis by returning to the novel's autofictional aspects, in which the symbolism of double exposure is used to further accentuate the real-life effects of (auto)fictionalization through the portrayal of overlapping and connected realities, which by extension implies that artistic expression carries with it a certain form of interpersonal responsibility. I will then present and analyze a different kind of double exposure, where the thematization of experientiality and interconnectivity comes from shared visual experiences within the narrative through parallel gazing, the inclusion of printed visual media and use of the ekphrastic form. This analysis actualizes a discussion on how the novel's ideas on potential futures through present moment experientiality of overlapping temporalities are linked to Walter Benjamin's historic theory of 'the messianic now', which in turn is linked to the paradoxical stories within *10:04* that conceptualize events happening, yet not occurring, as well as instances where the narrative seems to self-oscillate spatiotemporally through metaphors on projections and reflections, which thematizes collective future potentiality by portraying

narratives, peoples and histories as overlapping and coming together as one. The experience of such spatiotemporal self-oscillations, the novel suggests, can enable us to break free from our conception of the future as rigidified and instead allow us to re-experience moments in our collective historic past where we had the possibility of changing the future's trajectory, which leads to a realization that charges the present moment with future-oriented agency.

Overlapping temporal realities and the morals of fictionalization

Throughout the novel**,** Lerner uses textual references to visual media such as photography, film, painting and even Silly Putty newspaper transfers as metaphorical vessels to explore the possibility of several realities and temporal spaces existing and corresponding simultaneously. What these visual technologies do is capturing spatiotemporal moments to be observed in the future. Their implementation into the narrative of *10:04* is meant to symbolize the interconnectivity between different temporalities and realities, as well as the transition from reality to art, effectively functioning as moral metacommentary on the autofictional expression of the novel itself. I find the Marfa party story helpful in trying to grasp how this double exposure symbolism is used to comment on autofiction and its (potential) future real-life effects. In this scene, Ben arrives at a house party to see the intern of the Berlin-based sculptor, Monika, standing in the gravel driveway of the house. The intern, "whose name nobody had used" (181) during dinner, is greeted by a Ben who hugs him "as if he were an old friend [he] was thrilled to see after an interval of years", which surprises Ben himself as it was the "kind of humor totally out of character for [him]", making him wonder "[h]ow many out-of-character things" he needs to do "before the world [will] rearranged itself around [him]…" (182). The metaphor of the world rearranging itself around Ben or another character is repeated throughout the novel and represents a momentarily felt potential for future change. This idea will be elaborated on and discussed in chapter 6. Here, however, it suffices to say that it is used to signify that a small change in Ben's experience of his own personality has occurred. Later in the evening, Ben considers snorting a line of cocaine to sober up; to feel "centered, back in control, and probably a little euphoric" (182). The sensible part of his conscience convinces him not to do it, as he has a cardiac condition, and while he "decided not to do it, [he only] decided not to do it after [he] was

already looking up from the glass top of the table, having insufflated a small line" (185). Ben's (unconscious) desire to change character to experience 'the world rearranging itself' is metafictional commentary on the autofictional aspect of *10:04* itself; Lerner lending his name and, at least to some extent, his privacy as a historical person to Ben. The powder he insufflated was in fact the dissociative drug ketamine, and the experience of disconnecting from his present self presents itself to the reader, metafictionally speaking, as Ben sees himself "from the outside, in the third person, in a separate window" (185). The apprehension of observing oneself in third person is beckoning back to the narrative style of "The Golden Vanity"; a narrative style where the author and character are separated in space and time through perspective, and the window being a reference to an earlier part of the novel where the fourth wall is broken and the reader is addressed directly: "(you can drag the 'pegman' icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighborhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate window now)" (163). The drug is disassociating and blurring the lines between Ben, 'the author' and Lerner; the sense of self begins to dissolve as the question of "why was I outside of myself" becomes something that no longer belongs to Ben, now "just another thing there in the courtyard from which [his] consciousness was turning away" (185), finally leading to complete ego death: "…and then I was gone, wasn't anything at all […] The last vestige of my personality was my terror […] so I clung to it desperately, climbed it like a rope ladder back into my body" (186). As discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, a consequential feature of autofictional writing is that the works are, or at least can be, perceived by readers as autobiographical; the historical and narrative selves fusing together. As autofictional (as well as biographical) writing can be perceived as a form of confessional writing, the vulnerability of the stories they tell have the potential of having real-life consequences, despite being fictious, which is the fear I suggest Lerner is exploring here; a fear that pulls the soaring ghost back into Ben; into a singular self. While Ben only snorted a single line of ketamine and is quick to return to some acceptable form of normality, the intern is "not doing so well"; drooling, his eyes fluttering, trying to push air away from his chest "as if he were bench-pressing something" (186). Later, after Ben has spent the remainder of his evening taking care of the intern, the intern tells him what he experienced: "'I was sitting there in the chair. I could feel the chair. But it wasn't pressing against my back, it was pressing against the front of my chest. Pressing hard. But I knew it was behind me. I can't explain. My back and chest had become the same thing. No front or back" (189). This, I would

argue, is metafictional commentary which expresses an autofictional concern; a form of existential and claustrophobic fear caused by trying to make the real and fictional worlds interconnect. The idea that even though the worlds are separate they become like two sides of the same coin; a diptych where there is no whole without the other panel. The intern expands on this idea by describing the experience as using Silly Putty to copy printed ink from one source to another: "I thought of it and then that's what you were, everybody out back, just these images of yourselves against this flattened stuff" (189); from individuals with potential futures and sense of free will to predetermined, never-changing characters in a novel; a static reflection of their real-life counterparts. Before Ben lulls the intern to sleep with a story of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge and Kafka's success as an insurance lawyer, the intern makes a final attempt at putting his experience into words:

> 'I knew I'd made that happen because I thought it. I thought it was like Silly Putty and then it was Silly Putty […] I realized that trying not to think about something is like thinking about something, know what I mean? It has the same shape. The shape of the thoughts fill up with the thing if you think it, or it empties if you try not to think it, but either way it's the same shape' (189-190)

I argue that Lerner is using the intern's dissociative ketamine trip to further develop a philosophical and moral metacommentary on the act of artistic literary creation, one in which the creator, in an act of imagination, is conjuring up potential lives in an alternative reality. There is a profound sense of Lerner being aware of the power that resides with the wielding of a pen and trying to come to terms with the effects of his own creative endeavors, both within the artwork and in the real world. When Lerner is applying Silly Putty to his own lived experience and transferring it to a fictitious narrative, it still has the same 'shape' as the lived experience; the same people or events, even if the transfer causes only partial replications with smudges and cracks. It shares the same texture as Alena's *The Picture of Sasha Grey*; a photograph of a porn actress that the artist "distressed" and "networked with fine cracks, making it appear like a painting from the past" (27); a real-life person turned into art and consumed as a commodity, as Ben sees a DVD also titled *The Picture of Sasha Grey* among the selectable pornographic films at the fertility treatment center before producing a sperm sample for Alex's insemination (88); an

attempt at creating life and a potential future, which is financed by Ben's transformation of real life people into fictional characters for his novel; another commodity. By exploring the real-life effects of fiction through the Silly-Putty metaphor, Lerner is actualizing the morals of (auto)fictionalization, and, consequently, hints at the idea that there exists interpersonal responsibility in artistic creation.

Parallel gazing, visual media and ekphrasis

Throughout *10:04*, there is a focus on joint visual experientiality, where Ben and another character admire the same scenery, object, or a work of art together. I pose that these situations are incorporated into the narrative to allow Lerner to metacomment on what ideas he likes and dislikes in certain artistic and collective conceptualizations and why, and, in doing so, he gets to comment on what he himself is trying to do with the novel the reader is currently reading. I also argue that Lerner uses the ekphrastic form and the thematization of parallel gazing as a way for the reader to experience art together with Ben and, by extension, Lerner. These are important analytical building blocks in trying to establish Lerner's literary ambition, as it presents a theory on art's potential for spatiotemporal and reality-defying transcendence through collective experientiality.

One of the first occurrences of 'parallel gazing' occurs when Ben and Alex are visiting the Metropolitan Museum, looking at Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* (1879): "…our gazes were parallel, directed in front of us at canvas and not at each other, a condition of our most intimate exchanges; we would work out our views as we coconstructed the literal view before us" (8). The term is echoed at the end of the narrative as well, as the two co-watch a sonogram of their to-be child; "Neither Alex nor I speak, have any questions for the doctor, or take each other's hand, but there is that intimacy of parallel gazes I feel when we stand before a canvas…" (233). There is a paradoxical logic at play here, where the lack of direct eye contact, a base primordial form of social communication, enables, through shared visual experience, a small-scale, intimate and creational communal dimension to make itself felt in Ben (and assumingly Alex). It is their shared experience of observation of a representation of the future (Joan's hand being "pulled into the future" (9) and a live image of their forthcoming child) that enables their

present moment to be co-constructive and future-oriented. The idea of shared visual experience is elaborated upon in an imagined discussion 'the author' has with his doctor regarding a mass-produced, stereotypical painting of a beach scene hanging in the doctor's office:

> 'I understand that the exclusive criterion you or the institution would have for selecting an appropriate imagine would be that it's inoffensive – if not actively calming, at least not agitating […] to prove that you are neither a machine nor an eccentric because it nods blandly to established cultural modes, the medium of painting and the clichéd instance of it. They are images of art, not art. […] But the problem […] is that these images of art only address the sick […] Apart from their depressing flatness, their interchangeability, what I'm saying is: we can't look at them together. They help establish, deepen, the gulf between us, because they address only the sick, face only the diagnosed' (72-73)

Here, the same sentiment as discussed above is expressed through a negative; these forms of art, which lack uniqueness and artistic vision because of their mass-production and uninspiring representation of their subject matter, do not serve any meaningful purpose. They lack any form of interpersonal artistic responsibility. They serve a unilateral, pragmatic function (attempting to calm the patient) that only helps in strengthening the hierarchical socioeconomic and cultural differences between us. Since they do not strive to address us universally, or in any sense collectively, they have no future. We are unable to experience or discuss them together and thusly unable to connect with each other through them or progress beyond them; they are dead-end streets; 'images of art, not art'.

I argue that one of the primary reasons Lerner has chosen to include printed visual media in his novel is related to the idea of Lerner and/or Lerner's protagonist(s) having shared experiences with the reader through visual media, a sentiment which is symbolized in "The Golden Vanity": "[His date] took out her phone and Googled [pareidolia; the term for] when the brain arranges random stimuli into a significant image […] faces in the moon […] and he used the excuse of looking together at the little glowing screen to press more closely against her" (69). The inclusion of a picture of what appears to be a face on the surface of the moon is printed underneath the text so that the reader is also able to see what the characters see, signaling that the desire for closeness is addressed to the reader as well as to the woman 'the author' is out on a

date with. The sharing of visual experiences between Lerner and/or Lerner's characters and the reader is an attempt at bypassing the boundary between reality and fiction, as well as space and time, and establish, even for the briefest of moments, a connection between two spatiotemporally different worlds and realities. This momentary connection is felt and expressed by 'the author' in "The Golden Vanity", when he becomes affixed on a gaslight flame on his walk through Brooklyn Heights:

> …some conspiracy of brickwork and chill air and gaslight gave him the momentary sense of having traveled back in time, or of distinct times being overlaid, temporalities interleaved. No: it was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1912 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them. He felt that anyone who had ever paused before the lamp as he was pausing was briefly coeval with him, that they were all watching the same turbulent point in their respective present tenses. Then he […] imagined that the gaslight cut across worlds and not just years [and that] while they couldn't face each other, [they] could intuit each other's presence by facing the same light, a kind of correspondence (67)

At first, 'the author' believes that the gaslight flame gave him a sense of having travelled back in time; that he, alone, is solely observing an object from the past. This thought is interjected by the negation 'No'; it is not that the object itself is from the past, it is rather that it is an object of continual present tense; a portal of interconnectivity between 'the author' and everyone who has ever looked at the same flame, as it is 'flickering simultaneously in each of those times', making them contemporary to one another; 'coveal'. I claim that this is, in part, the experience Lerner is trying to recreate by incorporating visual media in *10:04*; the 'flickering flame' being the incorporated visual media.

Sometimes, these visual experiences can only be shared between Lerner and the reader, as opposed to a character and the reader, as the image in print is not addressed nor referenced to by any character, but merely implemented in a certain textual context. When Ben has dropped off the child he is tutoring, Roberto, and wanders the halls of the school, running his hands across the construction paper autumnalia on the walls, he is transported back to his own elementary school and the artwork on the walls turn into "letters addressed to Christa McAuliffe

Picture 3: Photograph of Christa McAuliffe (Lerner 2014)

[…] wishing her luck on the *Challenger* mission, which was only a couple of months in the future" (15). McAuliffe was a person who, Ben points out in his speech in chapter 3 of the novel, was "selected in part to represent 'ordinary Americans'" (110), and who was part of a shared American elementary school curricula related to the mission. She became symbolic of that particular moment in American collective historic memory; everyone knew who she was and what she represented; hope and future prospect. Ben's story of his experience of having travelled back in time is interrupted by the inclusion of an excerpt of Reagan's speech, which took place after the *Challenger* disaster, and which in turn is split in half by a photograph of McAuliffe training for the mission. The photograph of McAuliffe is the visual representation of that collectively felt hope and prospect of a brighter future. The printing of the photograph is intended to have the same effect that the 'flickering flame' had on 'the author'; to connect Lerner with the reader and any potential future readers through parallel gazing and shared collective historic memory; an attempt at establishing a connection between the fiction of the novel and reality of the reader by bridging the gap between space and time through a joint visual experience. Like how the flame flickered continually for 'the author', Ben describes the model replica of the *Challenger* shuttle that he and his childhood friend "coconstructed" at school as "perpetually disintegrating" (15). Lerner stated, in an interview with *Diacritik*, that the placement of an image in relation to a text "can change its valances and significances", which can "remind us of how deeply context-dependent images are" (2016). In my interpretation, the placement of the image as a splitting of Reagan's speech represents, symbolically speaking, a cut across time, where past future hope (the *Challenger* mission succeeding) still resides within its non-occurrence (the speech addressing the nation of the mission's failure); the idea that while the desired future did not occur, the recognition of its possibility, its potentiality, of having had occurred may drive future futures to succeed in ways that it did not, akin to the idea that there is future potential to be found in bad forms of collectivity, a conceptualization I presented and discussed in the previous chapter.

There are also instances where there is no printed visual media for the reader to look at, where, instead, Ben is experiencing a work of art, and to which, through Ben's observations and thoughts, the reader is invited to parallel gaze 'through' him. This exercise in verbal description of art is known as ekphrasis, a rhetorical form that Lerner has expressed admiration for: "[The] novels that have meant the most to me, always involve some kind of ekphrastic element. [The novel is] a great form for thinking about how we interact with artworks and what the social possibilities are of interact[ing] with artworks […] Having other artworks in the novel [became] a technical solution for the story I want[ed] to tell" (*Diacritik* 2016). Within *10:04*, ekphrases function as a way for Lerner's character to parallel gaze with the reader and future readers through Ben by weaving art criticism in with the narrative to create a time, space and reality-defying connection, as well as to further highlight the themes that Lerner deem important. Ekphrasis is, in my estimation, an especially potent form when it comes to works of art that require, or at least desire, the observer to experience the artwork in space and time, such as a sculpture or a movie, as opposed to a painting or photograph. This is because it allows for the experientiality of the observation to be communicated through a language that plays off mental processes and physical sensations as they occur in relation to the observer's orientation and interaction with the artwork in space and time. I will exemplify my assessment by looking at two instances of ekphrasis in *10:04*: The John Chamberlain sculptures and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010).

When Ben first arrives in Marfa, he falls asleep as soon as he gets situated in his residency house, only to wake up around midnight. He decides to walk around the small city's downtown area at night: "An interesting building across the street attracted my attention and I crossed to take a closer look […] I walked around the side of the building, along the railroad tracks, and, stepping over various desert shrubs, approached one of the side windows to look in" (164-5). Here, Lerner is situating his character in time (midnight) and space (Marfa, outside of a window of a building), setting the scene for his ekphrasis through descriptions of his observations and interactions with the surroundings. From there, Ben begins his verbal description of the artwork: "At first I saw nothing through the glass, then slowly made out hulking shapes, shapes that further resolved into what looked like giant flowers of crushed metal or perpetual explosions. I cupped my hands around my eyes and held my forehead to the cool

window…" (165). We, as readers, are in essence looking in through the window from Ben's perspective and co-experience the making out the shapes, like an adjusting of the aperture and focus ring on a camera lens. The description of the glass as 'cool' against Ben's forehead an emphasizer of his spatiotemporal orientation and an invitation to imagine the same bodily sensation. Ben then begins to contemplate on the difference of his experience of the artwork due to his and the artwork's relation and orientation to one another:

> I'd seen a few of [Chamberlain's] sculptures in New York, had been indifferent, but they were powerful now […] Maybe I liked his sculpture more when I couldn't get close to it, had to see it from a fixed position through a pane of glass, so that I had to project myself into the encounter with its three-dimensionality. I stepped back a little and regarded his work through my own faint reflection in the window (165)

In this ekphrasis, Lerner is pointing to the concept of recontextualization discussed in the previous chapter, as the same object is now experienced differently as a consequence of where it is situated in space and time. Ben's realization of his newfound appreciation for the artwork as a result of not being able to get closer to it, being bound to 'see it from a fixed position through a pane of glass', is a metafictional nod to Lerner's ekphrastic exercise, where the reader is equally unable to 'get close to' the artwork and having to observe it through a different lens ('pane of glass'); through Ben's eyes. The last sentence of the quote, I pose, is both auto- and metacommentary on the shared experientiality that ekphrases in *10:04* attempt to produce; the stepping away from the glass blends the artwork with the reflection of Ben, revealing him as the rhetorician and medium of the ekphrasis, which symbolically represents Lerner and his novel, showing whom the reader is parallel gazing with in an attempt to establish a connection across reality, space and time through fiction.

Let us turn to Ben's experience of Marclay's *The Clock*, a "twenty-four-hour montage of thousands of scenes from movies and a few from TV edited together so as to be shown in real-time; each scene indicates the time with a shot of a timepiece or its mention in dialogue; time in and outside of the film is synchronized" (52). Here, as with the Chamberlain sculpture, the reader

is subject to a blending of art criticism and narrative, as Ben's focus shifts between describing the artwork objectively and subjectively through thoughts and feelings in the present moment of experiencing, while at the same time incorporating descriptions of his surroundings and events that occurred prior to the present experience, which are not, strictly speaking, related to the artwork:

> When we found our seats it was 11:37; the tension of imminent midnight was palpable, the twenty-three and a half hours of film that preceded us building inexorably to that climax. (I wanted to arrive by 10:04 to see lightning strike the courthouse clock tower in *Back to the Future*, allowing Marty to return to 1985, but Alex couldn't get a train from her mother's in time) (52)

The focus on temporality within the artwork and the relationship between reality and fiction are mirrored in the reference to *Back to the Future* and in Ben's feelings about having missed the scene he was looking forward to the most; Ben's past and present reality is affecting his experience of the artwork (i.e. the fiction). Even though Ben tries to describe the *The Clock* objectively and subjectively solely as a work of art; "I would […] come to love how, as you spend time with the video, you develop a sense of something like the circadian clock of genre: the hour of 5:00 to 6:00 pm […] was dominated by actors leaving work […] Marclay had formed a supragenre that made visible our collective, unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day" (53), his surroundings and own actions nevertheless play a major role in his experience and interpretation:

> At some point in the second hour of watching with Alex, I noticed she had drifted off, and I surreptitiously checked the time on my phone. Half an hour or so later, I did it again, realizing only then that the gesture was absurd: I was looking away from a clock to a clock […] part of why I looked at my phone was because […] the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time […] that distance […] between art and life, fantasy and reality […] hadn't been collapsed for me at all (53-4)

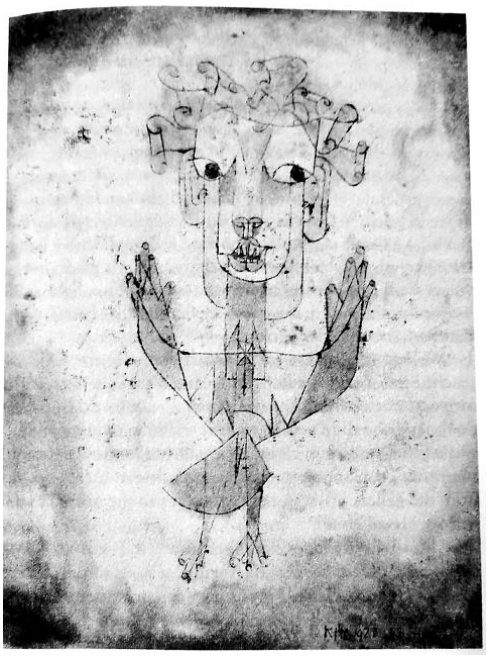
In this ekphrasis, the thematic emphasis is on how our perception and interpretation of art is a consequence of our past and our present moment of experiencing; metacommentary which states that what has and will happen to us, be that physically, mentally or emotionally, before and during our confrontation and interaction with an artwork will inevitably shape our conception of its intended and actual effect on us. If Ben had been able to arrive in time to see the scene he was looking forward to, or if Alex had not fallen asleep, perhaps he would not have felt or thought the way that he did; that he would not have had the same experience or evaluative conclusion. In Ben's experience, *The Clock* failed to produce the feeling that it intended to produce, "underlining precisely the difference between reality and its representation that it [wanted] to overcome." (De Boever 2018:169). For Ben, however, *The Clock*'s failure of collapsing his sense of real time with fictional time is similar to the failure of the *Challenger* mission in that it signifies potentiality: "When I looked at my watch to see a unit of measure identical to the one displayed on the screen, I was indicating that a distance remained between art and the mundane […] I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism…" (54). It is the experience of the artwork's failing that inspires Ben to write a work of fiction that highlights potentiality through "a series of [autofictional] transpositions: I would shift my medical problem to another part of the body […] displace Alex's oral surgery. I would change names: Alex would become Liza […] Alena would become Hannah" (54); a novel that tries to thematize potentiality by highlighting the slight differentiation between art and life, rather than trying to merge them perfectly. Read as such, Ben's ekphrasis of *The Clock* functions as a way for Lerner to address the reader in a metafictional manner, to comment on his own inspiration and on his own narrative choices:

> When the hour [of midnight] arrived […] Big Ben, which I would come to learn appears frequently in the video, exploded […] But then, a minute later, a young girl awakes from a nightmare and […] you see Big Ben ticking away again outside their window, no sign of damage. The entire preceding twenty-four hours might have been […] a storm that never happened, just one of many ways *The Clock* can be integrated into an overarching narrative. Indeed, it was a […] challenge for me to resist the will to integration […] in part due to Marclay's use of repetition" (52-3)

Ben interprets Big Ben's clocktower exploding at midnight in *V for Vendetta* (2005), only to be depicted as fully intact as the loop begins anew at 12:01am, as symbolizing the potential of non-occurrences, which then leads to metafictional commentary on Ben's (and arguably Lerner's) literary intentions and narratological justifications; the inspiration to use the repetitive and overarching composition of *The Clock* to show, in narrative form, 'how many different days could be built out of a day'; on the present moment potential for future change. In Ben's interpretation of the *The Clock*, Lerner uses the ekphrastic form to open up a time, space and reality-defying communicative channel; to create a connection between himself, his character and the reader that permits him to describe and express the inspiration behind his use of doubling in *10:04*; an ekphrasis within an ekphrasis.

The messianic now and the potential political power of the individual

To elaborate on the concept of potentiality through non-occurrences, and to place said concept in a theoretical framework, I would like to examine Ben's experience of the first storm and the aftermath of its failed arrival. While preparing for the first storm, Ben experiences feeling stoned in the aisles of Whole Foods as a result of the storm approaching, disrupting his and everyone else's daily routines; a situation that causes all of the items on the shelves to seem "a little changed, a little charged" (18). He returns with Alex to her apartment. On the refrigerator door hangs a picture of Alex's family and Ben, and he states that "[e]verything in the photograph was as it had been, only different, as if the image were newly indeterminate, flickering between temporalities" (21). The two friends have dinner illuminated by candlelight, and, later, the projection of *Back to the Future* "flicker on [Alex's] sleeping body" as she holds his arm against her chest while they "[wait] for the hurricane" (23). The following morning, Ben wakes up to the storm not having hit the city as hard and disastrously as anticipated, and he finds that the evening he shared with Alex "wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased. Because those moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained; they'd faded from the photograph" (24). The photograph of the past on the refrigerator door, in a moment of immediate present in the absence of routine, became a portal into which potential futures, one in which Ben is incorporated into Alex's family as more than Alex's friend, made themselves present as 'newly indeterminate, flickering between



Picture 4: Paul Klee. *Angelus Novus* (1920) (Lerner 2014)

temporalities'. *Back to the Future* projecting onto Alex's body further emphasizing the familial and relational aspect of the temporal possibilities that took place during the storm, as Marty McFly, in the past, needs to make sure that his mother falls in love with his father for the wanted future to occur and be made available to him. On the opposite page is a printing of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), a work owned by Walter Benjamin and to which he, in his essay titled "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), explicated in this manner: "The storm irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned" (1968:IX[19]), which is also quoted underneath the printing (25) and echoed with and without variations throughout *10:04*. In this section of Benjamin's essay, Benjamin shares his interpretational, artistic and philosophical ekphrasis of the Angel of History, and sees progress ('the storm') as one continual destructive past event "piling wreckage and hurl[ing] it in front of [the angel's] feet" (IX). While the Angel of History "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (IX), he is unable to stop the catastrophic trajectory or turn around to face the future. Benjamin's essay was written under dire historical and personal circumstances and is a highly condensed and concentrated expression of his previous writings, which unconventionally and uncompromisingly combines Marxist theory and Jewish theological and philosophical ideas. To elaborate on the connection between Benjamin's theses and *10:04*, we need to examine Benjamin's idea of 'homogenous time' versus 'messianic time'. In Benjamin's history theory, homogenous time (factual, measurable time) is essentially empty; it is a capitalist mode of conceptualizing time that is chiefly characterized by the renewal of past commodities, so that every temporal moment is experienced quantitively; it is all the same, making the moment-to-moment present, and consequentially the past and future, lack meaning. Messianic time, however, is to recognize and

[19] Theses number reference. All future quotations taken from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" are from *Illuminations* (1968), translated by Harry Zohn.

experience time in an immediate moment ('jetztzeit') as qualitatively different from another moment by spotting and establishing connections between points in time which are non-linear to one another: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now […] a past charged with the time of the now which [is] blasted out of the continuum of history" (XIV): The messianic now is a revolt against capitalist homogenous time; a time in which the experience of the present is solely ruled by axiomatic presuppositions, inhibiting the imagination of alternative futures. Thusly, one could argue, a way for the Angel of History to break free from his experience of time as nothing but an continuous piling up of destruction, would be for him to conceptualize historical time not as "the beads of a rosary" (homogenous), but as "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one […] as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized […] establish[ing] a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (Addendum A, V). If we now return to *10:04*, we can see how Benjamin's theory is mirrored in Ben's experience of the anticipation of the storm and its failed arrival. When Ben experiences the items on the shelves of the supermarket as "a little changed, a little charged" (18), he becomes especially affixed on a can of instant coffee:

> [I] held it like the marvel that it was […] It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura – The majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close (19)

The immediate present moment brought on by the potential danger of the storm makes the commodity's capitalist past history and future potentiality visible to Ben, as words closely related to Marxist economic theory ('social relations', 'produced', 'labor', 'commodity') are intermingled with words with religious and ancient (and hence non-capitalist) connotations ('glow', 'aura', 'majesty'), which, as Arne De Boever points out, "marks […] a rupture of [commodity] fetishization, a becoming visible of the object's conditions of production beyond

the alienation produced by their projection" (2018:156)[20]. In Benjamin's sixth thesis, he states that to "articulate the past historically […] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [The threat] of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (VI). The danger posed by the approaching storm puts Ben into a state of hyperawareness (the messianic now), which enables him to see, in the commodity itself, the ruling capitalist destruction, which keeps piling on wreckage continuously in homogenous time, being 'charged' (or, 'shot through') with messianic potential; labor and produce as a form of global and social interconnectivity rather than a means of profit; a "transformation from 'self' to 'other' or 'collective'", as Ralph Clare puts it (2018:23). How then, does Alex fit into the equation? She too is characterized in a similarly religious or supernatural fashion: "I noted to myself a difference in her appearance, [an] unspecifiable radiance" (18). Ben and Alex's shared meal is also described in messianic language; "our meal had the feel of a last supper", and in qualitative fashion; "[it] tasted better than it was" (21). A possible explanation for the thematic overlap is found when Ben has an imaginary discussion and is questioned by his potential future daughter: "'Why reproduce if you believe the world is ending?' 'Because the world is always ending for each of us and if one begins to withdraw from the possibilities of experience, then no one would take any of the risks involved with love. And love has to be harnessed by the political. Ultimately what's ending is a mode'" (94)[21]. Henrik Torjusen argues that the 'mode' Ben is referring to is literature's narrative mode, in that the comment is related to how the novel is formed (2020:112). I argue that the mode is rather an ontological mode; a way of being in the immediate present (the messianic now), where even the interpersonal, and romantic, can be moments of messianic insight which has the potential to lead to political and collective change. This sentiment is expressed by Ben when he houses an Occupy Wall Street protester and considers how his "bourgeois household" (47) and his desire for a child clashes with his own anti-capitalist values. The hypocrisy he feels

[20] De Boever also notes that the use of the words 'glow' and 'aura' references Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), where Benjamin "argues that artworks lose their 'aura' of uniqueness—a certain glow, to be sure—when they become mechanically reproducible" (De Boever 2018:156). Benjamin's idea is undoubtedly present in other scenes as well, like when 'the author' imagines having a discussion with his doctor about the mass-produced beach painting hanging in his office, or when Ben visits Alena's 'Institute of Totaled Art'.

[21] Ben repeats, with variation, the same sentiment later in the narrative: "'I'm going to write a novel that dissolves into a poem about how the small-scale transformations of the erotic must be harnessed by the political" (158). Lerner also repeated the same sentiment with yet another variation in an interview with *Believer Magazine*: "The libidinal has to be harnessed by the political" (2014).

in that present moment leads to an ontological revelation: “What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostasizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and coconstruct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit” (47). Pieter Vermeulen argues, and I concur, that Lerner’s inclusion of Benjamin’s Angel symbolizes “the novel’s decidedly political concern with different ways of imagining and anticipating the future” by “neutralizing more customary ways of articulating present and future”, which distinguishes it from more traditional readings of Benjamin’s Angel of Time, in which the angel “is usually cast as an icon of an ethically attuned, melancholic fidelity to the catastrophes of the past” (2016:2). Even though Ben and Alex did not engage romantically because of the storm, as Allison Gibbons points out, the potential danger of the storm “unlock[ed] an unexpected moment in their present experience, and crucially that unexpected moment had the potential to become actual” (2021:145). It is the mode of recognizing the future potential in the (messianic) present moment that is important to Lerner, as it is the experience of having spotted and made a connection with a moment in time where things could have gone differently that has the potential to work as a catalyst for meaningful future-oriented agency. This way of thinking enables the individual to have a say in the trajectory of the future, both for themselves and others.

Happened, but never occurred

The mode of recognizing future potential in the (messianic) present moment is represented in *10:04* as stories which thematize the disconnect between false experienced past and the revelation of the factual past in a present moment. The novel is riddled with stories about the stories we tell ourselves about how we came to be the individuals and collectives we perceive ourselves to be, and the effect of having what we thought were facts about our lives be turned into fictions. The doubling within these stories, of events happening and simultaneously not having occurred, symbolize the potential for both personal and collective future-oriented agency in that they portray the false (fictional) events as co-existencing with their factual (real) actualizations, showing how future change is not a dramatic revolution away, but rather approximate and palpable in the present moment.

Lerner, in an interview with *Bookforum* on the writing process of *10:04*, expressed that he "knew pretty early on that [he] was interested in the weird status in our lives of things we thought were facts that turn out to be fictions. [The ways in which the stories are not] real […] but they're not nothing. They're fictions with real effects" (2014). One year later, Lerner elaborated on this idea in his interview with *The Quietus*: "We don't experience reality, we [organize] it through a fiction – that's what we experience, and I'm interested in a novel at a moment where the fictions we've been telling ourselves, personally, politically, whatever, feel fragile. It's not like I have solutions [but] it's about representing that moment of contradiction" (2015). A representation of just such a moment occurs when Ben tells the reader the story of how he fell in love with a girl he believed to be Bernard's daughter. The reader is treated to a romanticized, if somewhat sensualized, description of the first time he laid eyes on her: "I turned to face her and was, as they say, stunned—large gray-blue eyes, a full mouth, long and jet-black hair with a few strands of silver in it, and an immediately apparent poise and intelligence for which no catalog of features could account" (35-36). Carefully observing her throughout the duration of Bernard's party, Ben reacts to the sound of her laughter and her movement around the house with the clichéd feeling of 'falling' in love, albeit presented in Ben's nerdy, tragicomic style of narration: "…I felt as if I were falling, a sensation akin to the myoclonic twitch that, just as you are drifting to sleep, wakes you violently […] I was convinced it was the shudder of fate" (36). As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, Bernard's daughter has the same "dusky gold" (6, 37) complexion as the beautiful doctors who examine him at Mount Sinai Hospital earlier in the novel, which happens later in the narrative timeline, shedding new light on the insecurity Ben felt and expressed in that situation. Ben even finds a portrait of the daughter, which he characterizes exaltedly as "vaguely reminiscent of Modiglian in its elongation" (36) and imagines it as a work produced by her loving father. In the time that passes after the party, he dreams of "exploring Paris hand in hand" with Bernard's daughter and recounts her giving him his first and only "nocturnal emission" (38). When Ben finally manages to summon the courage to ask Bernard for her name and he responds by telling him he does not have a daughter, Ben feels "the world rearrang[ing] itself around [him], that there had been a death" (38). Again, we see this metaphor of the world rearranging itself used as a way of expressing the experience of change. After months of going to receptions to look for her, seeing her "in passing cars, disappearing around corners" (38) and imagining becoming part of his mentor Bernard's utmost

inner circle, the woman whom he had become deeply obsessed with never really existed, at least not as the person he had envisioned; her portrait merely something Bernard had found "at a garage sale in Michigan" (38). Ben meeting this woman, their short interaction and his head-over-heels reaction to her being was a factual event that took place in his past, but the envisioned future narrative he concocted for himself, which still makes him see "their daughter's face" and feel "the echo of desire" (38) when calling her 'parents' fifteen years later is nothing more than a fabric of his imagination; a flickering between reality and fiction that constituted a fiction with real-life effects. It is the same effect one of Bernard's students feel after having moved to New York City to study under Bernard. The student, who was "a distant relation or family friend" (40) of the poet William Bronk, had been given the impression that Bernard was close friends with the poet. Trying to reminisce with Bernard about the man behind the poetry on several occasions, he comes to realize that, in fact, the two had met "just once, and neither had said much", to which Ben imagines Bernard seeing "the world rearrange itself around the student" (40). It is an exploration of the disconnect between the experienced past as factual and the newfound awareness of its fictional nature that ultimately brings us to a new present moment with an, more so than before, uncertain and fluctuating future.

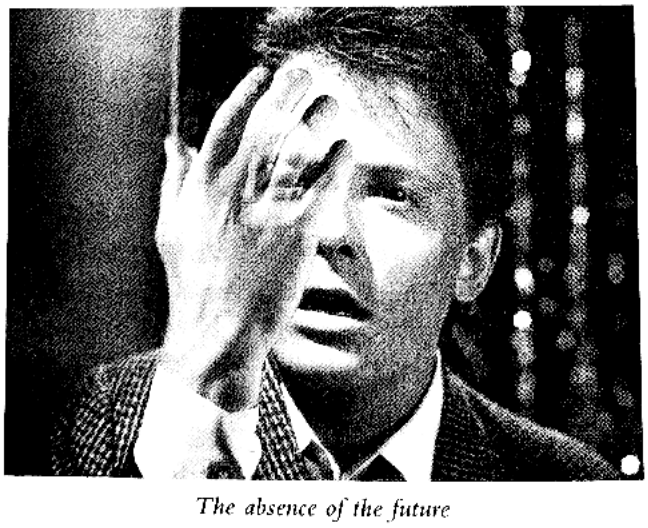
In one of the most memorable and powerful stories embedded inside the novel, Noor, Ben's fellow co-op worker, tells the story of her recently deceased Lebanese father and how her life had revolved around her half-Lebanese ancestry:

> 'I grew up going [to the mosque] a lot and developed a sense of difference from most of the kids I knew […] I was active in Middle Eastern political causes and majored in Middle Eastern studies at BU. I was involved with the BU Arab Student Association […] I'd been offered this fellowship at the American University in Cairo […] and I was also planning to visit Lebanon' (99-100)

Noor's whole life; her past, present and future, all linked to her identity as the daughter of a refugee of war. She was a Muslim minority woman of color spending her time and energy on championing her heritage and cultural identity in America. Six months after her dad had died,

her mother starts dating a new man named Stephen; "'some physicist at MIT'" (100). Just before Noor is about to embark on her journey to Cairo, her mother tells her that Stephen is in fact her biological father: "'I put my hands on the table on either side of my plate and […] my hands […] started to pale […] it was like I could see my skin whitening a little, felt color draining from my body'" (104). Even Ben begins to question if his perception of Noor has changed from the initial conversation they shared regarding Lebanese food to the end of her story: "Noor was olive-skinned. Did she look different to me now than earlier in our shift?" (104). Noor ends up not travelling to Cairo or Lebanon and claims that her right to have an Arabic name and care about the cause of 'her' people, the language, food and music "'changed, is still in the process of changing, whether or not it should'" (105). She elaborates on the experience through an analogous story in which a friend of hers, who had been wronged by his brother, had finally built up the confidence to call him up to tell him how he felt. After having poured his heart out to his brother over the phone, Noor's friend realized that the call had been disconnected at the exact moment he had started the confrontation: "…'now he felt even more confused, more alone, because he'd had this intense experience of finally confronting his brother, and that experience changed him a little, was a major event in his life, but it never really happened […] It happened but it didn't happen. It's not nothing but it never occurred'" (107). Lerner is exploring, on one hand, the existential weight we put on our own narratives; how they simultaneously confine us by narrowing down and cementing a predetermined future path, but also how the narratives, being potentially more fictious than factual, are fragile and plastic; susceptible to change. As Clare argues, these stories aim at reversing our sense of "linear time and our general understanding of causality, with the result that the past is redeemed and freedom delivered" (2018:15); a messianic conceptualization of time. Gibbons relates the doubling effect of these kinds of stories to Gary Saul Morson's idea of 'sideshadowing', where "two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible […] a simultaneity not in time but of times [where] we do not see contradictory actualities, but one possible that was actualized and, at the same moment, another that could have been but was not" (Morson 1994:118 in Gibbons 2021:143). While Noor's story is existentially tragic, it nevertheless carries with it a charge of potentiality (it is 'shot through with chips of Messianic time') which in other false narratives could prove to have positive outcomes, as "all these other possibilities which have been nullified by the actual (but in which the actual itself has to have its origin), exists

virtually in the messianic future", as William Large puts it (2011:92). So, when Noor wrongfully states that her "hands seemed to fade" (105) rather than pale, Lerner is conjuring not only Marty McFly's hand in *Back to the Future*, as Marty "disrupts the prehistory of his family"; erasing his own existence, but also the hand of Joan of Arc in Jules Bastien-Lepage's painting, as she is, Ben claims, being "pulled into the future" (9).



Picture 5: Image from *Back to the Future* (Lerner 2014)

Picture 6: Jules Bastien-Lepage. *Joan of Arc* (detail) (Lerner 2014)

Lerner also uses the paradoxical nature of these kinds of stories to explore the responsibility and limits of his own artistic endeavors and fiction in general. In chapter 2, or "The Golden Vanity", 'the author' discusses with Liza (Alex), if he should choose IV sedation ('twilight sedation') or local anesthetic when removing his wisdom teeth. In *10:04*'s opening chapter, Alex is the one getting her wisdom teeth removed, and Ben and Alex share a similar discussion on the drug of choice in both narrative realities. In both instances, Alex and 'the author' comment on the effect of choosing IV sedation:

[Alex:] 'Apparently if you do the IV sedation it induces amnesia […] The difference isn't really in how much pain you experience but in whether you remember it' (51)

[The author:] He learned from the internet that the difference between twilight sedation and local anesthesia was not primarily a difference in the amount of pain but in the memory of it (62-63)

'The author' states that taking the IV sedation would be like "'dividing myself into two people […] It's a fork in the road: the person who experienced the procedure and the person who didn't'" (64). The meta- and autofictional depth of this metaphor plays itself out by 'the author' contemplating the effect of doubling the self: "'It's like leaving a version of myself alone with the pain, abandoning him […] And what kind of precedent am I establishing, exactly, if I deal with a difficult experience by inducing amnesia?'" (64). When Lerner creates these alternative versions of himself in fiction, exposing their soft underbellies in confessional scenes through actions, thoughts and feelings, only to abandon them within the works once the i's have been dotted and the t's have been crossed, is it a form of shying away from the real-life pain that would come with expressing such sides (or 'versions') of yourself as yourself? To what extent are the realities of fiction able to cross into our reality? Is "abolishing the memory of pain […] the same thing as abolishing pain" (64)? The author ends up removing his wisdom teeth under the effect of IV sedation, further obscuring any clear-cut answer to these questions that arise in the reader as the two friends sit in a taxi after the procedure, and 'the author' has a euphoric vision:

…it occurred to him with the force of revelation: I won't remember this. This is the most beautiful view of the city I have ever seen […] I've never felt so close to Liza, and I won't remember it […] glowing with the aura of imminent disappearance, it really was the most beautiful view, experience […] That he would form no memory of what he observed and could not record it in any language lent it a fullness, made it briefly identical to itself, and he was deeply moved to think this experience of presence depended upon its obliteration […] I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza's hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remembered it, which means it never happened (81-81)

The flickering between first and third person narration; between the experiencing 'author' and the actual author of "The Golden Vanity" (be that Lerner or Ben), brings forth a paradoxical clash between 'the author' thinking he will not remember the experience, lending it an ultimate and perhaps messianic present tense beauty, and the fact that it is written down, which either turns the fact that it happened into mere fiction or destroys the beauty of the experience. If something is experienced, is it real despite not being remembered; not having occurred to you in your future current present tense self? This story is a form of reversal from the other stories of false narratives, where the fact that it happened becomes the fiction of nothing having happened at all; exemplification of the potentiality found in non-occurrences through the actualization of a non-occurrence as an occurrence.

Projections, reflections and oscillations of collective potentiality

While I did touch on Lerner's use of 'projection' in the introduction to this chapter, I do feel that it requires more attention, especially as it functions similarly to the other visual aids and metaphors I have discussed in this chapter. Lerner uses metaphors of 'projections' and 'reflections'; representations of the slightly altered copy, as another means of thematizing future potentiality. While Lerner sometimes uses these visual representations to signify potential individual futures, like when Ben is on his way to deliver his sperm sample; "Before I pressed the up button on the elevator, I saw my reflection in the shiny metal doors and said to myself […] 'Take the elevator back down and leave this building and never return; you don't have to do this'" (86), I will be focusing on instances where these visual representations take on a collective dimension.

As 'the author' walks side-by-side with Liza (Alex) from the Grand Army Plaza to the Long Meadow of Prospect Park, he comments on their surroundings and his experience of observing them. As they start their walk in the inner city, 'the author' notes that the "unusual heat felt summery, but the light was distinctively autumnal, and the confusion of seasons was reflected in the clothing around them […] it reminded him of a doubly exposed photograph […] two temporalities collapsed into a single image" (63). The change in climate, an undoubtedly collective issue, is 'reflected' in their surroundings, creating a visual inner image ('doubly

exposed photograph'), which 'the author' attributes to an overlap, or 'collapse', in time. The two stop to watch out over a lake and a couple of girls dancing in Prospect Park: "The softening sky was reflected in the water […] Everything suddenly complied, corresponded: the pink paper streamer in a girl's hand echoing the rose streak of cloud that was echoed in the water. He felt the world rearrange itself around him" (65). The felt potential for change; 'the world rearranging itself around him', is initiated by the description of the lake's reflection; its rippled, slightly altered and mirrored representation of the real world. The reflection then spreads and amalgamates into the real world as the girl's pink paper streamer is 'echoing' in the cloud, which is then repeatedly 'echoed' in the water; in the diffracted reflection. It is a coming together, a blurring of the boundaries, between two worlds which are almost identical, yet slightly different. The metaphoric usage of water reflection from this scene is repeated later in the narrative, when Ben walks home after having finished his shift at the co-op with Noor: "I found a bench and looked at the magnificent bridge's necklace lights in the sky and reflected in the water and imagined a future surge crashing over the iron guardrail" (107-108). Here, the fear of climate change is paired with the cityscape's reflection in the water. Instead of powerlessness and defeatism at the thought of a manmade natural disaster, Ben feels, as he looks to Manhattan and its reflection from Brooklyn Bridge Park, a sense of collective potential:

> …there was an incommensurability of scale […] that was the expression, the material signature, of a collective person who did not yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts […] were nevertheless addressed […] I resolved to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility […] the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all of its moments, including those that from our present present happened but never occurred (108-9)

From seeing the city skyline doubled in the reflection on the water, a feeling of awe grabs hold of Ben and he is inspired to attempt, through his art, to address a future communal body; a second person plural 'you'. Torjusen argues that Ben's "personality is a wave of potentiality, which temporarily stagnates, but which relieves itself in encounters with utopian openings, like when the narrator walks around New York, and the sight of the city's 'incommensurability of

scale' between the architectural inhumane and the humane creates an opening in reality" (2020:113)[22]. The city, then, can be viewed as being a product, or symbol, of the same 'murderous stupidity of […] organization of time and space and fuel and labor' as the can of instant coffee; it is indicative of the same capitalist progress that 'irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned'. The city in *10:04* is a physical manifestation, a monumental representation, of our collective indifference to our destructive ecological footprint, but it is equally, for Ben (and Lerner), symbolic of the potential for a different future, as it is another 'bad form of collectivity'. The inevitably doomed city and its 'however refracted' reflection; its almost identical mirrored copy, simultaneously being made visible is symbolic of momentarily available potential (the 'image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized' in 'a moment of danger') where the 'present present' ('jetztzeit', or 'the messianic now') enables a connection to a point in time where that which did not occur is 'citable in all of its moments'; is available to be beheld and comprehended as the past's potential. Read as such, Lerner utilizes the metaphor of the refracted reflections to visually represent these brief moments in time where we can discern points in our past where we were able to break free from our predetermined path and imagine a different route, which is meant to inspire us to imagine future potential and act on these imagined alternatives in our present moment. Ben attempts to act on his experience as he looks across the water, to the city and its reflection: "…as I projected myself into the future…" (109) and the fourth wall is broken through direct reader reference: "You might have seen me sitting there on the bench that midnight" (109). The use of the second person pronoun 'you', which will be discussed in the following chapter in relation to Whitman (the poet behind the poem Ben is alluding to here), signals an attempt at addressing the collective, as it can refer to both the individual reader and the second person plural; the communal body, which are both situated in the future of the character and author.

[22] Translated by me. Original: "...personligheden [er] en bølge af potentialitet, som midlertidigt stivner, men som løses op igen og igen i mødet med utopiske åbninger, som da fortælleren går rundt i New York, og synet af byens 'incommensurability of scale' mellem det arkitektonisk umenneskelige og menneskelige skaber en åbning i virkeligheden".

Another instance of reflection and projection occurs after Ben leaves the party in Marfa and is picked up by a character who Ben refers to as ‘Creeley’. Together, they travel into the desert to observe the Marfa Lights:

> …Creeley was driving […] he was going to see the Marfa Lights, and he asked […] if I would care to honor him with my company. Thus the author found himself, his body still a little heavy with traces of a veterinary dissociative anesthetic, driving nine miles out on Route 67 so as to catch a glimpse of the famous ‘ghost lights’ with a man on whom he’d overlaid the image of a phantom (192)

I would like to draw attention to how Lerner introduces the idea of the slightly altered copy through the dual doubling of Ben and Creeley. Ben, who is still under the influence of ketamine, is referred to both in the first (‘I’) and third person, through his autofictional alter ego (‘the author’). Creeley is not the poet Robert Creeley, but another Marfa resident artist who bears a slight resemblance to the real Creeley, and who just so happens to have been allotted the same resident house that the real Creeley died in in 2005. Ben also ironically comments on the plan to watch the ‘ghost lights’ with ‘the man whom he’d overlaid the image of a phantom’; ‘ghost’ and ‘phantom’ being synonymous nouns that connote semi-transparency and the paranormal, seemingly belonging as much to the real world as another realm. Together, Ben and Creeley’s (mis)representations symbolize double exposure; overlaps in realms of reality as well as space and time, signaling Lerner’s desire to reach beyond these boundaries and establish a connection with someone on the other side. Ben and Creeley experiences the Marfa Lights in a kind of shared ekphrastic effort, emphasized using the plural subject ‘we’: “After about twenty minutes in the dark, we arrived at the viewing center, a platform faintly illuminated by red lights […] We shivered on the platform and looked into the westward distance” (192). The visual aspect is central in both the description of the location and in their parallel gazing off into the distance. Ben proceeds to give a historical account of the visual phenomena, adding to the ekphrastic form: “What people report, have reported for at least a hundred years, are brightly glowing spheres, the size of a basketball, that float above the ground, or sometimes high in the air. They are usually white, tallow, orange, or red, but some people have seen green or blue” (192). While Ben does not experience the phenomena for himself, he tells us that these multicolored glowing

spheres are often mistaken for “ghosts, UFOs, or ignis fatuus”, while they are more likely a result of “atmospheric reflections of automobile headlights and campfires” (192). In Ben’s Marfa poem, which he continues working on shortly after his trip into the desert with Creeley, he shares his interpretation of other people’s supernatural interpretations of the Marfa Lights, taking into consideration his knowledge of their more plausible origin:

> Some say the glowing spheres near Route 67
> are paranormal, others dismiss them as
> atmospheric tricks: static, swamp gas, reflections
> of headlights and small fires, but why dismiss
> what misapprehension can establish, our own
> illumination returned to us as alien, as sign?
> They’ve built a concrete viewing platform
> […]
> Tonight I see no spheres, but project myself
> and then gaze back, an important trick because
> the goal is to be on both sides of the poem
> shuttling between the you and I
> (193)

This is where the connection between projection and reflection is made with the novel’s aim of highlighting the collective interconnectivity between reality and fiction, as well as space and time, as Ben, even though he was unable to spot any spheres, “loved the idea of them—the idea that our worldly light could be reflected back to us and mistaken for supernatural” (193). Like false narratives, where facts turn out to be fictions or events that we thought happened, did not happen, or did not happen the way we remember them, the mistaking of the spheres as being of supernatural origin (fiction) rather than the result of collective projections and reflections (reality) is a mirrored example, or reversal, of fiction’s potential for confusing and blurring the boundary between itself and reality. Here, it is reality which is mistaken for fiction. It is especially the collective aspect that fascinates Ben (and conceivably Lerner), which is expressed both explicitly by Ben, but also in the use of voices in the poem. The poem shifting between collective voices (‘Some’, ‘others’, ‘our’, ‘They’), the lyrical ‘I’ and the second person (arguably

also plural) 'you', signify the communicative potential of the Marfa Lights; the ability not only to address a collective, but, in turn, to be addressed by the collective through that which is perceived not to be real; in the realities of the fictional. The lyrical 'I' simultaneously projecting themself as the emitter of the light (the real mistaken as fictional) and as the receiver of the same light, 'to be on both sides of the poem', hints at the possibility (or at least desire) of a poet (or writer) to be both an observer of the collective which they are part of and to translate and transform that collective voice into a singular voice; to '[shuttle] between the you and I'; to let the collective speak through oneself. To 'be on both sides of the poem' via self-projection is a reference to Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is" (213)[23]; a critical line of poetry for both Ben and Lerner as it is a literary expression of simultaneously experiencing and expressing the collective. The ambivalence of the wordplay, or borderline pun, of the 'you and I' being equally referential to Lerner's own autofictional mode of writing and the addressing of a communal, second person plural, is characteristic of Lerner's style of writing. We see the same play on words between Ben's residency in Marfa and his Marfan diagnosis, as well as in between the references to *Back to the Future*, Roberto's dinosaur book *To the Future* and Benjamin's Angel of Time having his 'back to the future'[24]. These plays on words function similarly to the refracted reflections, as the familiar, or known, is recontextualized through slight variations and repetitions, aimed at giving rise to potential new meanings in new context for present and future readers.

There are instances in the novel where the intermingling and overlapping of realities, spaces and temporalities turn extreme, creating what I can only describe as a self-oscillating effect. I relate the effect to that of self-oscillation in music production, which occurs when an audio signal is fed into a delay circuit's feedback path at a level which exceeds the circuit's ability to rid itself of signals stored in the feedback path, creating a self-perpetuating signal which is made up from a chaotic clashing of old and new signals (past and present), which in turn generate new frequencies, harmonies and resonances (future potential). One of the earlier instances of this spatiotemporal self-oscillation occurs during the retelling of Ben and his agent's

[23] This line was removed from the poem in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, never to return.

[24] This last wordplay, or pun, was drawn to my attention by Vermeulen (2016:2), and is also mentioned by De Boever (2018:168).

meeting. When discussing options for what his second novel might become, Ben expresses, but not really, his ideal of addressing a collective: "'I think of my audience as a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence', I wanted to say" (157). It is post hoc metacommentary on what Ben (or Lerner) should have said; a present moment (which is, in reality, a past moment) 'note to self' of what should have been done in the past and will eventually have been done in the future. Ben's imagined, time travelling comment is interrupted by a waiter shaking a bottle of sake and Ben overhearing a conversation between two people at the adjacent table. Ben taking in his surroundings and intermingling them with what is being discussed or addressed is a recurring element in the beginning of these moments of spatiotemporal self-oscillation and is, in my estimation, meant to signal Ben's hyperawareness in the present moment. Ben then interrupts these descriptions of his surroundings with this rather peculiar statement: "'I can't see my audience because of the tungsten lights'" (157). 'The tungsten lights' is a reference to intratextual repetitions from the first and second storm, when Ben observes news reporters covering the event:

> …a reporter bathed in tungsten light was talking to a camera about a run on flashlights, canned food, bottled water. Children were darting back and forth behind her, stopping now and then to wave (18)

> A reporter was filming a segment nearby and I walked within range of the camera and tungsten lights and waved; maybe you saw me (235)

In the first instance, which is the only reference to tungsten lights that the reader is currently aware of and can draw a link to, Ben is observing some children trying to get into the camera's field of view and wave. It is only when the reader reaches the end of the novel that Ben's utterance during the meeting makes sense; it has a proleptic referential functionality; it is a projection into the future which is first mistaken for a reference to the past. Ben could not see the collective he was addressing by waving at the camera because he was blinded by the lights, which is obviously some sort of ironic metacommentary, as he would not have been able to see them even without the lights, as what he was communicating through is, like a novel, a one-way communicative technology: a camera. The way Lerner attempts to bypass this communicative limitation is through metafictional direct reader reference; 'maybe you saw me'. From Ben's, at

the time, seemingly random comment during the meeting, the agent then asks him: "'Do you have any other ideas?'" (157). After a swift return to the neighboring table's conversation regarding a marriage on Turtle Beach and a sighting of Jay-Z, the spatiotemporal self-oscillation kicks in as Ben describes an idea for his next novel:

> 'A beautiful young half-Lebanese conceptual artist and sexual athlete committed to radical Arab politics is told by her mother, who is dying of breast cancer, that she's been lied to about her paternity: her real father turns out to be a conservative professor of Jewish studies at Harvard. […] Wanting her own child, she selects a Lebanese sperm donor in an effort to project into the future the past she never had […] or maybe something more sci-fi: an author changes into an octopus. He travels back and forth in time. On a decommissioned train' (157)

Here, the stories of Noor, Alena, Alex's cancer-ridden mother (or potentially a reference to Adam's lie about his mother having died from cancer in Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011)), Ben and Alex and their IUI treatment, the octopus metaphor (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and Alex's father's train ride home to his dying mother, are all intermingled and hyperlinked in a sort of heteroglot, narratological cacophony that is meant to symbolize collective interconnectivity and future potential; a state where the past (our stories) is continually fed into a present moment (Ben in the time of the meeting), creating something new out of the old for the future, similar to effect of an overloaded audio delay circuit. The spatiotemporal self-oscillation is a hyperbolic intratextual recontextualization, where instead of past references from the reality of the reader being recontextualized, it is the fictitious past of the narrative itself which is intermingled to create new meaning in a new context. However, the fact that Ben's proposed story has such a random premise and is stripped of the emotional impact of the stories which make up the proposed story (which the reader has already read and responded to), I would argue, makes it meaningless and is instead intended as a playful (if slightly ironic) exemplification of bad forms of collectivity, which, as Lerner suggests, have an inherent future potential quality to them. This interpretation is strengthened by Ben's proposed story being directly followed up by references to past collective tragedies, which Ben already has described as examples of bad forms of collectivity, namely September 11th 2001 and the *Challenger* disaster, as well as potential future collective tragedies; the prospect of devastating superstorms:

"For a second all I heard was the desperation, the hysterical energy of passengers on a doomed liner […] Seventy-three seconds into takeoff, my aorta dissected, producing high cirrus clouds, sign of an imminent tropical depression" (158). The personal tragedies of Ben and all the people he has met and spoken to up until this point in the narrative are juxtaposed against these national and global tragedies, making them linked and in some sense equal, which is underlined by Ben's comment to the agent shortly after: "'I'm going to write a novel that dissolves into a poem about how the small-scale transformations of the erotic [the personal] must be harnessed by the political [the collective]" (158). The chapter then ends by Ben explaining that he will travel to Marfa, which is where he writes the poem about, amongst other things, the Marfa Lights and their symbolic collective potential.

On the very last pages of *10:04*, the final one of these spatiotemporal self-oscillations take place, as Ben and Alex make their way through New York during the blackout caused by the storm. It starts building up from a description of the cityscape and its reflection, which signals an overlap of temporalities and realities: "Brooklyn was illuminated across the river, sparkling in a different era" (238). From here, the grammatical tense shifts swiftly from past tense to present tense, and finally, to future tense, as a reference to Reagan's speech is made:

> The fireworks celebrating the completion of the [Brooklyn] bridge exploded above us in 1883, spidering out across the page. The moon is high in the sky and you can see its light on the water. I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America: In Brooklyn we will catch the B63 and take it up Atlantic (239)

The shift to future tense is a hypothetical proleptic tool used by Lerner to express the potentiality felt by Ben in his hyperaware state in the present moment, where interconnectivity between the past, which is signaled by scattered intratextual references to earlier points in the novel[25], and the

[25] Intertextual references leading up to the spatiotemporal self-oscillation: "strike-anywhere matches" is referencing Alena smoking her after-sex cigarette on the fire escape, "instant coffee" is referencing the red can of coffee during the first storm, "'do it all'" is referencing Ben trying to drunkenly seduce Alex. "I'm quoting now, like John Gillespie Magee" is an indirect reference to Reagan's speech. The skyline reminding Ben of "cardboard cutouts" is a

present gives him a sense of sensing a collective future, a future which is very much like the present:

> Everything will be as it had been. Then, even though it would sound improbable in fiction, the woman [on the bus] will turn to Alex and say: Are you expecting? She will explain there is a certain glow […] The sonar pings will prove to be the ringtone of a teenager in the seat behind me (239)

As in the meeting between Ben and his agent, Ben's surroundings; his reality, is blending into a potential future; his fiction, signaling the establishing of a connection, accented by the metacommentary; 'even though it would sound improbable in fiction'. Vermeulen argues that the metacommentary suggests that the future "is less the triumphant transformation of the present than a continuation of an already fully meaningful present", as the shift into future tense does not dramatically shift the reality of the fiction into the bizarre or improbable, but rather into a future described in "seemingly trivial detail" (2016:17). Leonid Bilmes, however, attributes the comment to "the fact that the narrative has itself switched to a future tense, which is a tense improbable in fiction, in light of fiction's inherent belatedness" (2018:26). While I do believe there is merit to both interpretations, I am more interested in how it relates to Lerner's project of addressing a future collective, which is what the metacommentary is in effect doing. It is pointing to its own fictionality in a moment of future projection, signaling not 'fiction's inherent belatedness', but rather that fiction has future-oriented potential; to reach beyond its present conception, which is always the past for anyone but the author in time of writing, and to project itself from its created point in the past to the reader's present, which, in theory, extends for as long as there are readers of the work, in effect making it a continual, future projection. It is an attempt at being a point in the past that is a 'charged with the time of the now which [is] blasted out of the continuum of history', to quote Benjamin. The metacommentary is like Ben waving at the camera in that Lerner does not know who his future readers are, he is 'blinded by the tungsten lights' of temporal reality; in the inability to see what the future holds, but that this fact

reference to the dinosaur diorama he made with Roberto, and "spidering out across the page" is a reference to Ben's student Calvin's description of John O'Brien's poetry.

does not entail that one should not attempt to create said connection. This concept of attempting to accomplish something even though it is highly improbable or even impossible, plays into the relationship between irony and sincerity in *10:04*, which I will return to in the following chapter. Returning to the descriptions of Ben's surroundings in this future projection, I argue that they can also be read as a connection between the collective and the personal, as the surroundings are made up of impressions produced by the collective (people on the bus), which are then incorporated into Ben's personal story of becoming a father. The temporal and spatial dimensions come not only from the use of future tense, but also in the intermingling of the past and present in this seemingly future moment, as the previously told story of Alex's checkup at the hospital blends into the future projection of them being on the bus later that same day, signaled by Ben mistaking the teenager's ringtone for 'sonar pings'; a reference to Ben being in the hospital examination room and switching between watching a sonogram of their future child and images of the approaching storm on TV (233). Ben even comments on how the ringtone and "everything else" he will hear that night "will sound like Whitman, the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding" (239), again referencing Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"[26]. I will return to the role of Whitman in the novel in the following chapter, but sufficed to say, Ben is fascinated by Whitman's project of becoming a transpersonal medium for the collective, and here, this project is linked and intertwined with Lerner's project of imagining not only issuing a collective voice, but the ability to do so through and across time, like in the referenced poem, when the lyrical 'I' addresses those who, in the future, will see what he saw on the ferry: "And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in / my meditations, than you might suppose" (1856:211). The spatiotemporal self-oscillation follows through all the way to the end of the novel, and as the novel ends, the reader is returned from the future tense; Ben's future projection, to the present tense through another reference to reflections and another use of fourth wall-breaking metacommentary:

[26] "…myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme, / The similitudes of the past and those of the future" (Whitman 1856:211).

> Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is" (239-40)

The reflection of Ben and Alex overlaps, or is doubly exposed, with the view of the city. This doubling, which symbolically blurs the boundaries between the personal with the collective, is what drags Ben out of his future projection and back to the past; the remembrance of him and Alex crossing the Brooklyn Bridge in the dark with their fellow citizens, a moment in which Ben felt "a strange energy crackling among us; part parade, part flight, part protest […] our faceless presences […] flickering, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme" (238); the Whitmanian feeling of being one with the collective. This return to the past, which should be Ben's reality; his historical factuality, is then fictionalized: 'I will begin to remember our walk in the third person'. Unlike how 'the author' of "The Golden Vanity" could not believe the taxi ride home from his dental operation occurred since he could remember it and put it into words, Ben's remembrance of the factual past as fiction is meant to celebrate the actualization of having captured the feeling of collectivity in a present moment in written form; in fiction. The grammatical tense then shifts again, from future to present, using the contrasting coordinating conjunction 'but', leading into a recontextualized intratextual repetition; 'at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence', referencing John Keats' letters[27], which functions as fourth wall-breaking metacommentary. Bilmes argues, and I concur, that this shift into the present tense "becomes a kind of authorial disclosure" (2018:27-8); a place where Lerner can have his final say, signaled by the 'I' 'looking back at the city', like Rastignac at the end of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1835). It should come as no surprise, then, that instead of issuing his own voice through Ben, the final line of *10:04* is a blending of extratextual references and form, as the beginning of Reagan's speech after the *Challenger* disaster and a slightly altered snippet of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" are combined: 'I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is'. The use of the forward slash between the two references

[27] Ben: "I love how in Keats's letters, for instance, he's always describing his bodily position at the time of writing…" (212).

indicating that the novel has finally dissolved into a poem; the re-hybridization of the novel as symbol of Ben and Lerner having achieved, or at least having finally made an attempt at achieving, what they authorially and artistically set out to do. By intermingling Reagan's speech, which addressed a collective tragedy (reality) by recontextualizing the poetry (fictions) of the past in a present moment to create new meaning, and Whitman's poem, which expresses felt and reciprocal collectivity that defies space and time, and which attempts to bridge the gap between poet and reader[28], Lerner gets to expresses, by example, his own ambition of addressing a communal body through an overlap, or double exposure, in referential language and form.

[28] "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt; / Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd" (Whitman 1856:213).

5. Embodying the collective

By now, it should be clear that *10:04* is a book which focuses heavily on collective future potentiality, but I have yet to elaborate on how collective experientiality is actualized in the narrative. As discussed in relation to Bakhtin and the concept of heteroglossia, the novel as a genre is highly conducive to individual experience in that it generally focuses on the expression of one character's consciousness. Even in novels that follow several characters from their point of view, their experiences are nevertheless expressed on individual levels. The question in relation to *10:04* then becomes: how does Lerner attempt to bypass this limitation to express a sense of collectivity? Again, the opening paragraph of the novel can function as springboard into an analysis, as it conveys both explicitly and inexplicitly how Lerner plans on trying to accomplish such a task:

> …the agent and I were walking […] after an outrageously expensive celebratory meal in Chelsea that included baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death. We had ingested the impossibly tender things entire […] I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me: the ability to perceive polarized light; a conflation of taste and touch as salt was rubbed into the suction cups; a terror localized in my extremities, bypassing the brain completely […] 'How exactly will you expand the story?' she'd ask […]'I should have said […] I'll work my way [to becoming] a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid' (3-4)

After having devoured the baby octopuses, Ben starts feeling like an octopus who has undergone the same culinary preparations as the octopuses he has just consumed. His body and mind are overtaken by 'an alien intelligence'; an 'other'. I claim that Lerner uses Ben's embodiment of the octopus as a metaphor for his ability to sense collectivity. In the very last sentence of the opening paragraph, Ben also mentions that he 'should have said' that he will work his way to becoming a 'would-be Whitman', which is another form of embodiment: the embodiment of an ideal. Like how Ben, 'the author' and Lerner's autofictional doublings and overlaps are used to establish a connection between reality and fiction, Ben-as-octopus and Ben-as-Whitman(ian) are meant as means of establishing a connection between the individual and the collective. In this chapter, I will explore the octopus metaphor in tandem with the Whitmanian ideal of becoming a

transpersonal literary entity to show how Lerner presents the possibility of sensing and interconnecting with the collective through affective embodiment and the second person plural.

Ben-as-octopus and the inkling of collective proprioception

The octopus metaphor has received quite a bit of attention among scholars and critics alike, but very few of them have linked it to the prospect of felt collectivity. The most recurring interpretation of the octopus is that the consumption of the baby octopuses from the opening (and later revisited) scene is symbolic of the ongoing climate crisis (Bernard 2021:10, De Bryun 2017:963, Torjusen 2020:110) and a barbaric and failed neoliberal economic model (Clare 2018:22, DeBryun: 2017:960, O'Dell 2019:452, Torjusen 2020:110). While Gibbons acknowledges the "embodied attributions" that accompany Ben's consumption of the baby octopuses and links the experience to "empathic projection and vicarious experience" (2018:79), and Clare couples the same experience to an affective present moment which allows Ben to "gain a sense of a collective larger than the self" (2018:21), Ben's ability to sense the collective is never directly related to Ben-as-octopus past this opening scene. In other words, there has yet to be written an examination of Ben-as-octopus and the metaphor's implied implications in relation to the novel's emphasis on felt collectivity. I argue that this is an important analysis to make, as the octopus metaphor contributes to understanding the relationship between Ben's individual experientiality and his affect for the collective and its futurity.

Immediately after the opening scene, the reader is transported in time and space to Ben in the hospital. Despite this spatiotemporal transferal, the new scene still carries with it one element from the opening scene; the octopus: "A giant octopus was painted on the wall of the room […] an octopus and starfish and various gill-bearing aquatic craniate animals—for this was the pediatric wing and the sea scene was intended to calm and distract the children from needles and small hammers testing reflex amplitude" (4). Ben is there because his doctor "had discovered incidentally an entirely asymptomatic and potentially aneurysmal dilation of [his] aortic root" (4) and he needs to be examined to determine whether or not he falls on the diagnostic spectrum for Marfan syndrome; "a genetic disorder of the connective tissue that typically produces the long-limbed and flexible" (4). The trio of 'impossibly beautiful' doctors then begin examining Ben:

They asked me to stand and proceeded to calculate the length of my arms and the curvature of my chest and spine and the arch of my feet, to perform so many measurements according to a nosological program mysterious to me that I felt as if my limbs had multiplied (6)

In the opening scene, the octopus-embodiment was used to express Ben's full-body experience. This time, however, the embodiment is implied through a hypothetical; 'as if', and it is no longer the whole octopus, but its tentacles, that Ben's embodied experience is narrowed down to. An octopus has eight tentacles, and each of these tentacles have their own 'mini brain', almost as if each tentacle has its own thoughts and can function on its own accord. Therefore, the octopus has poor proprioception; it has a poor sense of how its body is integrated as a whole in any given space[29]. The human equivalent of this phenomenon can be observed in infants, who are unable to make their arms, hands and fingers coordinate sufficiently as to consistently align and interlock. Ben's lack of proprioception is represented diagnostically in *10:04* and "The Golden Vanity" as Ben's agnosia and 'the author's' astereognosis[30], respectively:

[Ben:] An increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be familiar tools and becomes an alien artifact, thereby estranging the hand itself… (13-4)

['The author':] The story would involve a series of transpositions: I would […] replace astereognosis with another disorder (54)

[29] The idea that these tentacular brains are not connected to the octopus' main brain or each other has been challenged in recent years, as has the extent of the octopus' proprioceptive capabilities: "[Dr. Gutnick's] new research […] suggests that the arms and the brain are more connected than previously though [which] rules out the idea that each arm could be learning [a] task independently—the learning occurs in the brain and then the information is made available to each arm" (Ellenby 2020). For the sake of literary analysis, I will let this fact turned into fiction stay fiction and carry on as if the octopus has poor proprioception, as was the general assumption in 2014, when *10:04* was published.

[30] "Tactile agnosia refers to the inability to recognize objects by touch […] Astereognosis is the inability to identify the size and shape of objects by touch, for example, a triangle or square" (Physiopedia 2022).

As Ben is being examined in the hospital, his metaphoric metamorphosis into an octopus is represented as a conflation between the octopus' and his own subject and object pronouns and possessive adjectives, slowly transitioning from the former to the latter:

> **It** can taste what it touches, but has poor proprioception, the brain unable to determine the position of **its** body in the current, particularly **my** arms, and the privileging of flexibility over proprioceptive inputs means **it** lacks stereognosis, the capacity to form a mental image of the overall shape of what **I** touch: **it** can detect local texture variations, but cannot integrate that information into a larger picture, cannot read the realistic fiction the world appears to be. What **I** mean is that **my** parts were coming to possess a terrible neurological autonomy not only spatial but temporal, **my** future collapsing in upon **me**… (6-7, my emphasis)

Ben links the lack of proprioceptive ability to his inability to 'read the realistic fiction the world appears to be', hinting at the novel's autofictional interplay, which I have already discussed in previous chapters, and which will become ever more integral to the reader as the narrative unfolds, suggesting that there is a potential connection between the world of fiction and the real world. The temporal aspect is also brought into the fold by Ben stating that the proprioceptive experience is not exclusively spatial, but that it also makes him feel as if his 'future is collapsing'. The final link, between subjective and collective consciousnesses, comes from the conflation of subject and object pronouns and possessive adjectives, which is meant to represent an overlap between Ben and the octopus, symbolizing an affective integration of an 'other', which in turn is to represent a collective entity, which on several occasions throughout the narrative is referred to by Ben as 'the communal body'.

I argue that Ben-as-octopus functions as a metaphor for his inability and, as the narrative progresses, growing ability to affectively experience the communal body through embodiment. The communal body in *10:04* can be conceptualized as the body of the octopus, i.e. head and central brain, as well as the octopus' tentacles, which stand for the individuals that make up the collective, which are neither interconnected with each other nor with the central brain. Ben functions as one of these tentacles, and he is interchangeably capable or incapable of perceiving and experiencing a connection and integration with the rest of the octopus, i.e. the communal

body. His ability and inability to establish a connection with the communal body is symbolized by his 'connective tissue' disorder, which is another borderline pun from Lerner. Due to the lack of neurological links between each tentacle and the central brain, an octopus' full-body communicative integration is impossible. This is mirrored in Ben's experience at the start of the narrative, as he feels as if his 'parts were coming to possess a terrible neurological autonomy'; each of his limbs disconnected from his central brain, which symbolizes that he is currently unable to make a connection with the communal body. But what if the octopus (i.e. Ben) had a different way of understanding itself: if it could somehow change its perception of itself as divided or scattered and instead conceptualize itself as a cohesive whole? The idea that, while we humans may be bad at collective proprioception, there might be a way to transgress this limitation through an ontological shift; a way of being in the world that enables us to interconnect with a larger social community. When Ben experiences agnosia, which is characterized by having poor to no proprioceptive capabilities, he describes the ordeal as "a condition brought up by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration…" (14). By transferring this description to the Ben-as-octopus embodiment and, from there, onto the conceptualization of a collective entity; the communal body, it can be stated that a way of experiencing collectivity comes from a present moment in which different temporalities and realities clash and intermingle. This chain of interpretations, I pose, is reflected in Ben's ketamine experience, when his sense of time, space and selfhood dissolves: "Why was time slowing? […] that question, felt [like] it was the last link between me and my body [...] I told my arm to move the cigarette to my lips, watched it do so, but had no sense of the arm of lips as mine, had no proprioception" (186). The undoubtedly scary drug experience is shared between Ben and the intern, and, as pointed out earlier in this thesis, Ben spends the remainder of the night taking care of the intern, showing how a small-scale collective trauma which resulted in a sense of spatiotemporal collapse can trigger an affective response towards those whom the experience is shared with.

As I have laid forth in the previous chapter, these spatiotemporal and reality-defying instances in *10:04* are linked to sudden moments in time; in messianic nows, where present moment hyperawareness at the prospect of danger (like the approaching storms) ushers forth a feeling of spatiotemporal overlap which in turn can enable us to sense and see potentially

different version of the world and its future (like Ben sensing in a can of instant coffee a form of global and social interconnectivity (potential future world) rather than a means for profit (actualized present world)). I argue that, in *10:04*, the ontological state in which to operate as to experience a sense of collectivity is the very same state I have discussed in previous chapters, and that is to conceptualize the present moment as distinctively different from previous present moments, and that these moments are, in part, made available in the presence of collective danger and trauma. This links Ben's cardiac condition; his individual existential dread, and his octopoid sensation to the prospect of collective extinction and potential proprioception. Ben's first expressed feeling of agnosia occurs during a conversation with Roberto, who worries about a potential second ice age and a bad dream he had the night before regarding that same topic:

> I was […] cutting out […] various dinosaurs [for] the diorama, no doubt anachronistically […] 'When all the skyscrapers freeze they're going to fall down like September eleventh' […] 'I don't think there will be another ice age,' I lied, cutting out another extinct animal […] 'What happens in my bad dream is the buildings all freeze up after global warming makes an ice age and all the prisons crack open too and then all the killers get out through the cracks and come after us' […] Roberto, like me, tended to figure the global apocalyptically (12-14)

Disastrous events of the past; the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction and September 11th 2001, is intermingled with the prospect of a potential devastating future where everything freezes over and murderers chase innocent children through a post-apocalyptic New York City. These are the events that are presented to the reader leading into Ben feeling as if his hand is disconnected from the rest of his body. It is important to note that this bodily sensation occurs as Ben is cutting out dinosaur shapes in paper and that the dinosaur cutouts are placed into the diorama 'anachronistically'; as temporally overlapping or collapsing, as what directly follows Ben and Roberto's conversation is Ben walking through Roberto's school and being transported back in time to his own elementary school, an event which occurs as Ben drags his "hand along the construction paper autumnalia: foliage changing its Crayola, horns of plenty, turkeys whose bodies were formed by tracing multifingered extremities" (14). Ben using his recently estranged hand and proceeding to run it across 'multifingered extremities' is alluding to the octopus and,

consequently by the novel-specific connotation, to the prospect of interconnecting with the communal body. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, it is during this flashback that Ben first references Reagan's speech addressing the *Challenger* disaster; a collectively felt tragedy, which, Ben poses, can be considered as belonging to the category of "bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility" (116). These bad forms of collectivity, the novel suggests, occur during times of present moment collective distress, where the potentiality of danger looms and uncertainty is high. These present moments are chiefly represented in *10:04* as the two approaching storms, and during each of these storms Ben comments on how the potentiality of disaster seemingly brings people together. Here, during the first storm:

> Because every conversation you overheard in line or on the street or train began to share a theme, it was soon one common conversation you could join […] I found myself swapping surge level predictions with a Hasidic Jew and a West Indian nurse in purple scrubs […] a mariachi band […] struck up 'Toda Una Vida'[31] […] It was hard to tell if they played particularly well or if we the passengers were, in the glow of our increasing sociability, particularly disposed to appreciate them, or music generally (17)

Ben's contemplation of the collective potentiality of the storm is characterized by the same descriptive word as the can of instant coffee; 'glow', and the sense of a collective present moment hyperawareness is brought on by the prospect of the approaching storm; of danger. Leading up to Ben's insight into this collective interconnected potentiality, New York City is described as a uniting force, like a communal body, and the storm is described in octopoid fashion, which is then finally linked to Ben-as-octopus through his Marfan diagnosis; a diagnosis which 'the author' in "The Golden Vanity" described as an autofictional replacement diagnosis for astereognosis; a synonym for tactile agnosia:

[31] "Toda Una Vida" ("An Entire Life") is a 1943 song written by Osvaldo Farrés about sticking together through "anxiety, anguish and desperation" (LyricTranslate 2022).

> I mean the city was becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single centered eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled. There were myriad apps to track it, the Doppler color-coded to indicate the intensity of precipitation, the same technology they'd utilize to measure the velocity of blood flow through my arteries (17)

As discussed in the chapter on *10:04*'s narrative construction, events, ideas, thoughts, extratextual quotes and character utterances that are presented during the first storm are often intratextually repeated, with or without variation, during the second storm. When the second storm approaches, Ben again notes how the potential of devastation seemingly brings people together: "'Here we go again,' a neighbor said to me, smiling, when he passed me on the street; he only seemed to acknowledge my presence when our world was threatening to end" (213). Ben's ironic commentary suggests to the reader that this form of felt collectivity is not its realization proper, but rather a placeholder for its future potential form; for a fully connected and genuine collective experience. The octopoid description of the storm is intratextually repeated with variation during the second storm as well, as Ben and Alex watch a news report covering the event while Alex is getting a sonographic reading of her baby in the womb: "We watched […] the coverage of the storm we kept failing to experience. They spliced Doppler images of the swirling tentacular mass with footage of it reaching landfall…" (232). The description of the storm is then intermingled with the description of their future child in utero:

> On the flat-screen hung high up on the wall, we see the image of the coming storm, its limbs moving in real time, the brain visible in its translucent skull […] Confirming a heartbeat lowers the risk, although the chances the creature will never make landfall remain significant […] As the doctor measures the diameter of the child's head, I can't avoid thinking of the baby octopuses (233)

The reference to the baby octopuses that were consumed at the novel's beginning symbolize the dangers of our present moment ecological and economic failings, failings that might prove to be our demise. De Bruyn argues, and I concur, that this octopoid descriptive overlap between the future child and the present storm signals "anticipation for a future life underwater" (2017:963). Ben expressed this dismal post-apocalyptic outlook earlier in the narrative when he was

contemplating taking over Bernard and Natali's literary archive and publishing business, where Ben's connective tissue disorder, Marfan syndrome, is used as a link to the octopus metaphor: "Bernard and Natali were both succumbing to biological time; they had asked me and my aorta to conduct their writing into the future, a future I increasingly imagined as underwater…" (40). The final octopoid overlap, during Alex's sonographic examination, between the future baby and the present storm, is part of a paragraph which starts off in the same hypothetical fashion as the trip to Sanibel Island in "The Golden Vanity": "Say that, from a small swivel chair beside the plastic reclining one, I watch as the doctor covers Alex's stomach and the sonographic wand with clear gel" (233). I conclude that this hypothetical future projection, in conjunction with the octopoid descriptive overlap between the baby and the storm, is simultaneously hopeful and pessimistic at the prospect of individual-to-collective interconnectivity and integration through shared fear of the apocalyptic or traumatic. The overlap conveys that while there possibly can exist a future subject who has the ability to harness proprioception proper; who is able to interconnect to a larger collective, this potential future collective interconnectivity is tainted bittersweet and ever more improbable as it might already be too late to save the communal body from the trajectory of its own self-destructive tendencies unless we can find a way to experience collectivity that does not rely on imagined apocalyptic projections which are the result of the ever-growing actualization of their implications.

Ben-as-Whitman(ian) and the second person plural

As I laid forth in the chapter on narrative construction, a rather large portion of *10:04* is comprised of Ben listening to and taking in other people's stories. This is linked to the Whitmanian ideal that permeates the entire narrative. Whitman was the poet of democracy; of coming together; of how we are all part of the same project. An early indication of Whitman's importance in the novel past the opening scene comes after Ben has had intercourse with Alena and paraphrases a snippet of Whitman's "Song of Myself": "…every atom belonging to her as well belonged to me, all senses fused into a general supersensitivity…" (26). The identification of self as belonging to someone outside oneself, as well as the term 'supersensitivity' (or, if you will: hyperawareness) is related to the Whitmanian ideal as well as the octopus metaphor and the

concept of the communal body. That there exists some overlap between Whitman and the octopus in *10:04* has been confirmed by Lerner[32], and is something I consider worthwhile to analyze in relation to Ben's desire for future collective proprioception. Shortly after Ben has linked his intimate interconnectivity with Alena to Whitman's poetry, he leaves to meet up with his friend, Sharon, before heading to Alena's art opening: "Kissing Sharon hello at the café, I felt static as my lips brushed across her cheek, as if Alena and Sharon were coming into contact through me" (27). Ben is beginning to sense the inkling of his collective proprioceptive capability, and as he and Sharon make their way from the café to Alena's art opening, his sense of embodied collectivity reaches a new high point:

> I could feel the trains moving underground. I could feel, at least imagined that I felt, Sharon's pulse in her biceps, slightly faster than my own, as we walked […] Overhead the stars occluded by light pollution were presences like words projected through time and I was aware that the water surrounded the city, and that the water moved; I was aware of the delicacy of the bridges and tunnels spanning it, and of the traffic through those arteries, as though some cortical reorganization now allowed me to take the infrastructure personally, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body (28)

Here, Ben's ability to sense the collective surpasses the strictly sentient and is expanded to encompass the city itself, and the link between the octopus metaphor and future collectivity is stated more or less explicitly; 'a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body'. The 'flickering' alludes to the 'flickering flame' that 'the author' observes in "The Golden Vanity', and to which he feels himself interconnected to everyone who has ever stood and observed the same gas lamp, specifically mentioning people from the year 1883 (67); the year that the Brooklyn Bridge was completed, an important symbol of technological and communal progress for Whitman; "notably his fervent belief that technological progress presages even greater human and spiritual advancement" (Geffen 1984:2). Ben feels the 'delicacy of the bridges' in 'the water that surround[s] the city' as if 'some cortical reorganization' has taken place; an ontological shift

[32] "Whitman and the octopus are probably related figures in my book" (*Believer Magazine* 2014).

which allows him to ‘take the infrastructure personally’. The references to bridges, water and arteries relate the Whitmanian to the octopoid and Ben’s Marfan syndrome, and the effect of their intermingling is consequently Ben’s actualization of collective proprioception; his newfound ‘supersensitivity’. When Ben and Sharon arrive at Alena’s art show, Ben elaborates even further on his sense of embodied collectivity:

> I […] experienced softly colliding with so many bodies as a pleasure, not an irritation; it was as if the crowd were a single, sensate organism […] still flush from our coition, my senses and the city vibrating at one frequency […] as if the energy we had generated were now free to circulate more generally, charging everything a little—bodies, streetlights, mixed media (29)

Here, the collective proprioception is described as an energy; a charge, which actualizes the communal body; ‘a single, sensate organism’; an octopus with proprioceptive capabilities. This is the same charge that Ben experienced during the first storm which made him see the can of instant coffee as “the marvel that it was” (19). One of the things that Ben states is charged by Ben and Alena’s co-generated energy is ‘mixed media’, which is not only referencing Alena’s art, but, I argue, the key artistic expressive form in *10:04*, which blends extratextual high and low cultural references and recontextualizes them into the overarching themes of the narrative through visual media, poetry, art criticism and the likes to create an experience of spatiotemporal collapse; of worlds, times and peoples existing simultaneously.

Whitman’s literary ambition of becoming a transpersonal space for the collective is presented directly to the reader of *10:04* during Ben’s Marfa residency, where he reads Whitman’s “bizarre memoir” (168); *Specimen Days* (1882):

> …because [Whitman] wants to be less a historical person than a marker for democratic personhood [he] can’t really write a memoir full of life’s particularities. If he were to reveal the specific genesis and texture of his personality, if he presented a picture of irreducible individuality, he would lose his ability to be ‘Walt Whitman, a cosmos’—his ‘I’ would belong to an empirical person rather than constituting a pronoun in which the readers of the future could

> participate […] he has to be nobody in particular in order to be a democratic everyman, has to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a textual commons for the future in which he projects himself (168)

The ’future in which [Whitman] projects himself’ is referencing “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, where the lyrical ‘I’ senses and addresses a future collective: “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; / I project myself…” (192). In the poem, Whitman interchangeably switches between the lyrical ‘I’, the second person plural ‘you’ and the first-person plurals ‘we’ and ‘us’. He also spends as little time as possible in the present moment, the fifth line of the poem reading as follows: “And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose” (191). As Vermeulen points out in his analysis, Lerner’s novel is full of both the particularities of Ben’s personal life and of the present world (2016:16). These particularities make Ben an ‘empirical person” (to the extent which an autofictional character can be identified and defined as an empirical person) which should, following Whitmanian logic, make Ben unable to become a transpersonal literary entity in which a collective’s voice could be united and channeled. Vermeulen argues convincingly that what Lerner is doing is exchanging the facelessness of Whitman’s lyrical ‘I’ with “a ’textual commons’ in the present” so as to ground the reader in a “present alive with multiple futures” rather than “invest[ing] too much in a future that empties out the present” the way Whitman does in his poetry (2016:16-7). During the novel’s fourth chapter; Ben’s Marfa residency, Ben spends a lot of his time criticizing Whitman, like when he quotes Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in his own poem: “’Washes and razors for foofoos— / for me freckles and a bristling beard,’/ a big part of reading him is embarrassment” (175). But, despite mocking Whitman for thinking he can relate to and project what the very lowest people on the social ladder might experience or feel by simply growing a beard[33], Ben is simultaneously letting his own facial hair grow freely: “Again I would find myself standing razor in hand as the sun set, and again I would decide not to shave, wondering how long it would take me to […] obscure my face” (170). This double standard is related to Ben’s imagined, host hoc statement in

[33] “Foofoo” was, in Whitman’s days, New York slang for “outsider” or “loafer” (Crain 2010:93, Lawson 2006:103), the latter being a term Ben directly comments on in relation to Whitman’s self-projection: “Whitman is always ‘loafing,’ always taking his ease, as if leisure were a condition of poetic receptivity” (168).

the opening scene of *10:04*: "I should have said […] 'I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid'" (4). Lerner has himself stated that he, and by extension, Ben, thinks of literature as a "weird mix of impossibly high ambition and total frivolity", so that while Ben realizes that "[t]here are all kinds of problems with [Whitman's] bid for universality" and that he cannot possibly achieve the Whitmanian "fantasy of dissolving himself into a moment of collective possibility", he still takes seriously the ambition of the Whitmanian ideal, showing how "irony is often a moment in sincerity" (*Believer Magazine* 2014, *Diacritik* 2016), similar to the idea that non-occurrences and fiction are still imbued with future potentialities despite not being real, as I laid forth and discussed in the previous chapter. Ben's embodiment of the Whitmanian ideal is on display shortly after his refusal to shave off his beard, when he takes care of the intern during the party: "'You're going to be okay […] The worst is over. I am with you,' I quoted, 'and I know how it is.' He started to cry […] The whole scene was ridiculous, but his fear, and so my sympathy, were genuine" (188). Here, Ben uses recontextualization of Whitman's own words as means of comforting the worried intern, showing how irony (the ridiculousness of the situation) still carries with it the potentiality of its sincere counterpart (genuine fear and genuine sympathy). What I find interesting about this scene, is how Ben narrows down Whitman's second person plural addressee; the collective, to the second person singular; the intern. This is, of course, the same thing Lerner is doing throughout the novel by directly addressing the reader. After Ben has soothed the intern to sleep and accompanied Creeley into the desert to observe the Marfa Lights, he contemplates his relationship with Whitman and his literary ambitions:

> I'd been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream, but standing there with Creeley […] looking at the ghost of ghost lights, we made, if not a pact, a kind of peace. Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story […] into an actual present alive with multiple futures (194)

The second person plural ‘you’; the “’you all’ that English famously lacks” (Bernhard 2021:19), is constantly hinted at by Ben in these moments of metafictional, fourth wall-breaking address. However, these direct reader references are also instances of doubling, where the second person ‘you’ is both singular in the sense that the novel is being read by an individual and plural in the sense that it addresses all readers of *10:04*; the collective disguised as the personal. As Lerner himself explained in his interview with *Foyles* when discussing his thoughts around the second person plural, such pronouns can “sometimes be spaces of incredible intimacy, and sometimes spaces of great distance” (2016). In *10:04*, the conflation of singular and plural second person ‘you’ addresses; between the personal and collective, is a grammatical loophole of ambivalence that Lerner utilizes to address the collective through the reader, as when Ben and Alex are walking through the pitch-dark New York City streets:

> We saw a bright glow to the east among the dark towers of the Financial District […] Later we would learn it was Goldman Sachs […] an image I’d use for the cover of my book—not the one I was contracted to write about fraudulence, but the one I’ve written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction (236-237)

The ’you’ is presented as singular; this novel as a gift to you personally, but in reality Lerner is, of course, addressing a collective comprised of all of his readers, both present and future. It is a collectively addressed ‘you’ that is disentangled from Whitman’s catalogue technique, which lists and details all the kinds of people who fall under the umbrella of the ‘you’. When a reader closes their copy of *10:04* to have a look at the cover, they are, following the novel’s own logic, doing so together with everyone who has, is and will read the same book; a spatiotemporally transcendent, parallel-gazing collective event brought on by Whitman’s second person plural made contextually indistinguishable from its singular counterpart.

In conclusion, both these forms of embodiment utilize doubling of the selves to move closer to a sense of multiplicity; of sensing and interconnecting with the collective. The Ben-as-octopus metaphorical embodiment is used to establish the concept of collective proprioception and to convey its potential experienced actualization, whilst Ben-as-Whitman(ian) functions as a

small-scale practical exemplification of how this sense of collective proprioception can potentially be actualized and experienced through language, and by extension, art.

6. Art's ability to portray the 'the world to come'

In *10:04,* there is an emphasis on the importance of the present moment, as it will one day become the future's past, showing how the time for change is always now, as a connection to the past (the factual/the occurrence) can make us realize what could have been (the fictional/the non-occurrence), inspiring us to act towards a better future in the present. Throughout my analysis, I have argued that the term 'future potentiality' is used to convey that Ben (and by autoficitonal extension Lerner) yearns to move towards a better world with fewer socioeconomic differences and a lower probability of man-made extinction. The question, then, becomes: How and when is this future going to manifest itself? In this chapter, I argue that the novel's epigraph of 'the world to come' is repeated throughout the narrative to bring attention to our shared ecological and financial problems, and to posit that works of art which simultaneously make visible both the interconnectivity and remaining distance between itself and reality, like *10:04* does, can enable us to imagine different futures, making such works of art important tools in the project of altering the future's trajectory for the better.

'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different'

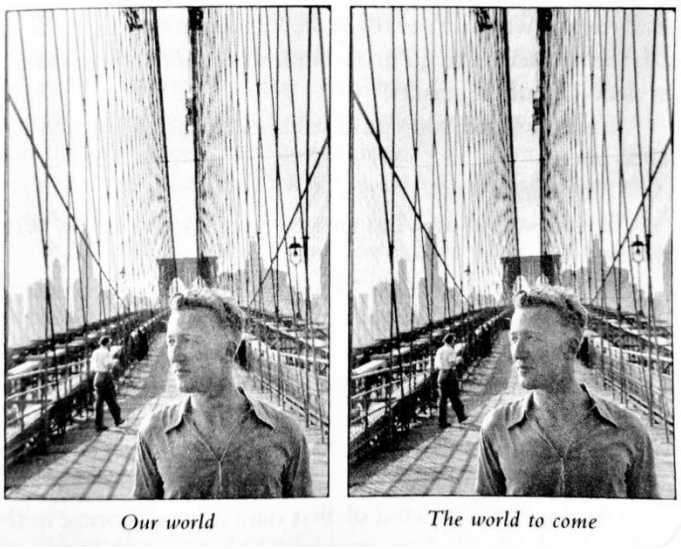
The novel's epigraph introduces the idea that there exists a potential future world that is only slightly different from our present one:

> The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there.
> Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

Lerner discloses in the acknowledgements of *10:04* that the parable he used as an epigraph was found in Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* (1990, translated into English in 1993 by Michael Hardt). In the chapter where the parable is found, Agamben philosophically meditates

on a potential future community "where everything is perfect […] the messianic world" (2007:53, 52). Agamben attributes the Hasidic story to Walter Benjamin (who had heard it from Gershom Scholem), which was later retold to Ernst Bloch, who transcribed it into a new story in which a rabbi states that "in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything" (Agamben 2007:52). From Agamben's historic review of the parable, we recognize Lerner's narratological style of taking narratives of the past, reshaping and recontextualizing them to serve new meanings in new present moments, which again is actualized by the parable's incorporation into the narrative of *10:04*. After explaining the origin of Benjamin's parable, Agamben states that the minuscule changes in the parable "[do] not refer to the state of things, but to their sense and their limits. It does not take place in things, but at their periphery" (53). He links this peripheral description of 'the world to come' to Thomas Aquinas' treatise on halos and asks us to consider the function of these golden rings floating above the heads of those chosen by God; his angles and his saints. The halo is not essential to the perfection of the angel or saint, as they are in that moment of receiving a halo already perfect: "The halo is not a [what], a property or an essence that is added to beatitude: It is an absolutely inessential supplement […] something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges" (54). Readers of *10:04* recognize this descriptor, 'glow', and its variance, 'aura', from Ben's sense of a hidden future collective potential in a can of instant coffee. Agamben argues that the halo can be considered a "zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable" (55), meaning that the messianic world of Benjamin's parable must not be conceptualized as belonging to the future, but virtually already here in the present moment: "It is immanent, not imminent" (Clare 2018:12). Lerner has stated that such a reading of the epigraph's inclusion in *10:04* is in line with his own thinking, as "[the epigraph is] a way of saying: there's a sense in which community is already here. It's already here in the Marfa Lights and the circuits of global capital […] and even if those are deeply perverted forms of interconnectedness they nevertheless have a utopian glimmer" (*Believer Magazine* 2014). This conceptualization of a better futurity as immanent in the present moment is sensed by Ben when he looks towards Manhattan and his community; "What I felt when I tried to take in the skyline […] was a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied" (109), or when he states that he remembers his and Alex's walk across the Brooklyn Bridge "in the third person,

as if [he] had somehow watched [him]self walking"; in a moment of overlap between reality and fiction, and two identical copies of a Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph are printed next to each other below the text with the captions "Our world" and "The world to come" (135). As Torjusen argues, Benjamin's parable's incorporation into *10:04* is meant to show how movement towards the utopian is not a major event away, but rather something that is brought closer to actualization by an almost imperceivable shift, which in of its own can change the world (2020:103)[34]. As with other important extratextual influences in *10:04*, Benjamin's parable, which several of my fellow academics have even argued functions as the novel's "refrain" (Vermeulen 2016:10, Clare 2018:12, Effe 2021:738, Gibbons 2021:144), is both implicitly and explicitly alluded to throughout the narrative in different contexts. One such variation of these allusions to the epigraph is the metaphor of the world rearranging itself around Ben or other people when what they thought to be the factual past (reality) turns out to be false (fiction); when what happened did not occur. What these moments signal, as previously discussed, is that fictional events have in effect co-existed with their real counterparts and become real in that sense, because the kernel of past potential has been residing within the non-occurrence of an occurrence, which can make us feel more possibility than determinism in the present moment of comprehending that thing could have gone very differently; in sensing that the future's trajectory could have been altered, because the event's fictional past, meaning the narrative we have believed in up until this present point, *did* have real-life effects. This is one of the many ways the parable links Benjamin's historical and theological conceptualization of the messianic now, where interconnectivity between the past and the present is used to inspire future-oriented agency in the immediate now, to Agamben's reading of Benjamin's parable, which suggests that a better future



Picture 7: Henri Cartier-Bresson. *Photograph of Claude Roy on the Brooklyn Bridge* (1947) (Lerner 2014)

[34] Similar conclusions are also to be found in Clare (2018:12-3) and Effe (2021:738).

is not only palpable in the present moment, but that it is only an adjustment, not an upheaval, away. As many of my fellow scholars have argued, the references to 'the world to come' in *10:04* encompass certain themes surrounding ecology and finance. Although I will not go into a lengthy discussion on how these themes are realized through repetitions of the novel's epigraph, as that has already been thoroughly examined by other academics, I do consider them important in giving an overview of how the themes are interconnected with the idea that future change can be brought about through art that either purposefully or accidentally makes visible its own fictionality, which is in line with my own academic inquiry and analysis. I will consequently give two examples of such thematic-oriented allusions to the epigraph before turning the focus towards how the novel recontextualizes the doubling expressed within the epigraph to comment on art and literature's ability to make us aware of momentary breaks in our notion of predetermined futurity which can inspire us to remedy our personal and collective past failures by imagining a better future in the present moment.

Ecological futurity

> Everything in the photograph was as is had been, only different,
> as if the image were newly indeterminate, flickering between temporalities (21)

This reference to the epigraph occurs during the first storm, when Ben, in imagining a dramatic and disastrous ecological event, is able to perceive a future in which he and Alex become romantically engaged; a projection into (what he considers) a better future world. Such instances of hyperawareness, the novel suggests, where one experiences the actual present moment (the messianic now) through a connection between the present moment (Ben in Alex's apartment) and the past (the photographs of Ben, Alex and her family), can generate a sense of messianic insight, which in turn can lead to political and collective change, as even "the small-scale transformations of the erotic must be harnessed by the political" (158). Ecological futurity in *10:04* is, as previously discussed, in large part actualized through the intratextual repetition

variations on the term ‘unseasonable warmth’ and the two approaching storms that bookend the narrative, but it is also linked to the themes of personal responsibility for the collective, finance and art.

In Stephanie Bernard’s ecocritical analysis, she argues that *10:04* is “an early example of a text narrated by a protagonist living in chronic crisis as a result of his own climate change awareness” (2021:1). This chronic crisis, a form of hyperawareness with negative connotations, is brough on by an anthropogenic climate change epoch called the Anthropocene; the period of man-caused ecological impact which, in our present moment, “exceeds the spatial and temporal scale of any individual human” (5). The enormity of spatiotemporal scale makes it hard for the individual to not feel apathetic towards the idea that he or she can or will make an ecological difference; at the prospect of having a meaningful impact on collective futurity from an individual present moment. While Lerner does not come up with a revolutionary solution to this problem, he does try to address its problematic nature of the Anthropocene mindset by having Ben consider how his lifestyle affects the planet and the people who will suffer more and sooner than himself as the climate crisis worsens. This concern is expressed as a play on events simultaneously happening and not happening after the second storm; “…another historic storm had failed to arrive […] Except it had arrived, just not for us […] newborn babies and patients recovering from heart surgery were […] rushed uptown, where the storm had never happened […] who knew how many of the homeless had perished?” (230-1). A similarly collective mindset is expressed when Ben takes Roberto to the American Museum of Natural History, and he realizes that he has never had so much responsibility for another human being. As a consequence, he verges on a panic attack, and the reader is again subject to the octopus metaphor and the concept of collective potentiality: “…tremors and numbness in my hands, the feeling that they belonged to someone else or were autonomous […] a dozen proprioceptive breakdowns” (147-8). Lerner then takes the themes of responsibility and collective proprioception and pair them with the sense spatiotemporal collapse at the prospect of apocalyptic disaster, which is compressed it into a description of Roberto running forwards and backwards through geological time periods to see representations of different now-extinct dinosaurs, “occasionally reversing the evolutionary course by sprinting back to see a highlight” (149). During their trip, Ben begins to question his maturity and if he could take care of a child of his own. When Ben goes to the

bathroom, Roberto playfully hides around a corner to scare him, and Ben lashes out at Roberto for not staying put. Again, Ben takes a relativist look at how his privileged life comes at the expense of those less fortunate and more likely to suffer from his culture's ecological failings: "All over the world people were tending their children ingeniously in the midst of surpassing extremities, seeing them through tsunamis […] but I was at a total loss as to how one could both be responsible for a child at a museum and empty one's bladder" (150). Feeling bad for yelling at Roberto, he buys him a $60 T-rex puzzle, justifying the purchase by stating that he did it "because [he] would make strong six figures and the city would soon be underwater" (153), spatiotemporally interconnecting, in ironic fashion, the ongoing ecological crisis (the city underwater) with finance and art (the advance for the book he will write in the future), showing how the these themes are all tightly interdependent both within the fictional narrative and in the real world.

Financial futurity

> *Everything will be as it is now, just a little different* […] what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly—in the passing commons of a train, in a container of tasteless coffee (19)

Again, the reader is situated in the storm, but Ben's experience of overlapping realities comes from the lack of commercialized goods; "The relative scarcity was strange to behold: in what were typically bright aisles of superabundance, there were now large empty spaces" (18), which in turn lends the can of instant coffee "a certain aura" (19), showing how there exists momentary flashes in our lives where we can see past a commodity's market value and instead appreciate the enormous amount of collective co-operation that went into the making of any man-made object. When Ben has an imaginary discussion with his yet-to-be-conceived daughter, he asks her to consider his and Alex's shared apartment: "'Where did the wood come from and the nail and the paint? Who planted the trees and cut them down and shipped the wood and built the apartment,

who paid for those things and how did the workers learn their skills and where did the money come from, and so on?'" (92). In Ben's projection into the future, he wants to ensure that the future extension of himself; his child, considers not only the monetary value of the apartment, but the co-operative efforts that went into its realization.

The co-op in *10:04*, on the other hand, is a perverted, capitalist-tainted form of such a collective mindset, where the Whitmanian collective 'we' comes not from a genuine sense of collectivity, but from instructions given at the corporate level; "…at orientation they taught you to utilize the first-person plural while talking about the co-op" (96). Torjusen, who places *10:04*'s narrative in the aftermath of the 2007-2009 financial crisis, argues that while the co-op markets itself as fighting against the neoliberal, capitalist norms of modern western society by creating a community of likeminded people who work voluntarily (in exchange for being able to shop there), and who focus on selling sustainable produce and helping out in the community by setting up soup kitchens and donating to homeless shelters, it is in fact only a false sense of community which brings with it new collective problems (2020:108-9). One such collective problem makes itself apparent when Ben overhears a co-worker talking about taking her son out of public school since the other children are out of control as a result of coming from homes where they are fed junk food and drink high-fructose beverages, contributing to a new form of "biopolitical vocabulary for expressing racial and class anxiety [where] instead of claiming brown or black people were biologically inferior, you claimed that they were—for reasons you sympathize with, reasons that weren't really their fault—compromised by the food and drink they ingested; all those artificial dyes had darkened them on the inside" (97). Torjusen poses, and I concur, that Lerner's anti-capitalist inclinations clash with him becoming a best-selling author, and that his self-awareness of *10:04*'s inevitable circulation in the capitalist market economy is thematized within the novel itself in Ben's desire to revolt against said market. No place in the novel is this more explicitly expressed than when Ben visits Alena's "Institute of Totaled Art", where she and a friend plan on displaying damaged art that has been deemed as having zero value by insurance companies; "removed from the market, relegated to this strange limbo" (130). Some of these artworks have sustained water-damage, linking them to the ongoing ecological crisis, making them bi-products of a bad form of collectivity and tainting their seeming perfection: "I remembered the jar of instant coffee [from] the night of the storm—to encounter

an object liberated from that [monetizable] logic. What was the word for that liberation? *Apocalypse? Utopia?*" (133). What fascinates Ben in his encounter with these objects is that many of these expensive works of art have been declared as having no monetary value "without undergoing […] any perceivable material transformation—it was the same, only totally different", which makes him feel "a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied" (133); a sense of having come into contact with a future capitalist-free world. Ben's desire to bypass the capitalist economic market; to let his art be free of "the twenty-one grams of the market's soul" (134) and instead circulate freely 'among bodies and temporalities' like the poetry recontextualized within Reagan's speech, is connected to Benjamin's parable, insinuating that art's future potential to transcend the bounds of the market is already here in the present, if only art and our perception of art could undergo a miniscule transformation through reconceptualization. This reconceptualization comes as close to being realized as possible in the narrative by Ben spending part of the advance for his future novel on the book he has been working on with Roberto; *To the Future*. The advance is based on the idea that Ben's future novel "is going to be a little more…mainstream" (155), which, as the reader is aware of, *10:04* is not. I consider this Ben and Lerner's small-scale rebellion against the governing financial system. Breaking from the norms of traditional novelistic conventions is a way of damaging their art, like the art found in Alena's gallery, and, in doing so, hopefully lending the work a certain 'aura' or 'glow' of future publishing potentialities. As Ben opens the box containing copies of *To the Future*, he realizes that he has "never been as happy to receive any of [his] own published volumes" (221), as the copies reside outside the circulation of the publishing market; they have, like the damaged art, no monetizable value. As he makes his way through New York City to show Roberto the books, his "arms and shoulders [ache] from the weight of the little books, as if they had more than material heaviness" (221), as if 'the twenty-one grams of the market's soul' has been replaced by something else, something like the 'aura' he sensed in the container of coffee; that they are the same as other books, only a little bit different. Ben's feeling of having bypassed the capitalist market system, however, is short-lived and tainted by the idea that the money would have been better spent "by Roberto's family in much more practical ways" and Roberto not at all being excited when being presented with the freshly printed and bound books, instead worrying about potential "superstorms" (222). Again, it is not that *10:04* is a book about telling the reader about the specific solutions to the major problems in the world, but rather that it

highlights these problems as themes and expresses an effort and a sense of responsibility in moving *towards* a solution and countering the hopelessness and feeling of lack of agency by depicting and expanding upon present moment momentary flashes in our daily lives in which potentially different futures reveal themselves and are experienced.

Depicting otherworldly co-existence

10:04 suggests that artworks have a special aptitude for portraying and making the observer aware of future potentiality in the present moment, and that this inherent quality should be explored for the betterment of the world. If we loop back to the beginning of this thesis, to the discussion on the novel's autofictional inclinations, we can see that the genre reflects Benjamin's parable and Agamben's reading of said parable. That is not to say that the fictional world of *10:04* is presented as a better world than our real world, or that the characters of Ben or 'the author' are improved versions of Lerner, but rather that they are co-existing, alternative versions of their real-life counterparts. This is made prevalent, in part, by the implementation of "The Golden Vanity" into the world of *10:04.* The short story begins with 'the author' meeting up with a librarian at a café, where he is unable to reciprocate her wave due to carrying a "giant cappuccino" (61). This references the failed interaction between Ben and Alena in the world of *10:04*, which narratively occurred shortly before the transition into "The Golden Vanity". After having explained to the librarian why he could not wave back, she replies: "'You sound like your novel'" (62). These two instances imply that there is an overlapping co-existence not only between the world of *10:04* and "The Golden Vanity", but also between these worlds and the world of Lerner and, consequently, the reader. The overlap between these worlds is meant to show that artistic representation of reality can feed back into the reality it is a representation of, and that these worlds are simultaneously connected and separate, like two sides of the same coin. This is on display shortly after the chapter comprising of "The Golden Vanity" ends by 'the author' leaving the dentist's office after his oral surgery. Returning to the world of *10:04*, as Ben is getting ready to produce his sperm sample for Alex's insemination, he describes his surroundings in the following manner: "In the middle of the room was something like a dentist's chair…" (87). The implication here is that Ben and 'the author' share, like the reader and Lerner, the same ontological terrain even though they are dichotomously separated by reality and the

artistic representation of reality. Similarly, when Ben and Alex are at the hospital at the end of the narrative, getting ready for Alex's sonographic examination, she flips through magazines in the waiting room only to find a copy of *The New Yorker*, "moving her jaw around, probably unconsciously, as if it were sore" (233), as the fictional representation of her real oral surgery feeds back into her world and manifests itself anew.

Allusions to Benjamin's parable are, as stated and discussed above, scattered throughout the narrative, where they are implemented in or around moments of epiphany, where Ben senses potential for future change. The first example of such an occurrence in *10:04* happens when Ben and Alex are visiting the Metropolitan Museum and parallel gaze at the *Joan of Arc* painting:

> The museum placard says that Bastien-Lepage was attacked for his failure to reconcile the ethereality of the angels with the realism of the future saint's body, but that 'failure' is what makes it one of my favorite paintings. It's as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix […] she's being pulled into the future (9)

Even if the reconciliation between the physical (real) and metaphysical (fictional) worlds is not achieved, the 'glitch in the pictorial matrix' makes visible the co-existence of the two worlds, as it is the recognized tension between the worlds which ushers forth Ben's interpretation of Joan of Arc being pulled into the future, not their perfect merger. Similarly, when Ben looks at his phone to check the time while watching *The Clock* and realizes that the artwork's failure to "obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality" is what made him feel "more possibility than determinism", it is because the artwork made him think "how many different days could be built out of a day"; that the installation made him conscious of the future potential of the present moment by showing that a distance still remained between the world of art and the real world, and not because *The Clock* had achieved "the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time" (54). After Ben has realized this, the parable is incorporated into the narrative, only with a slight variation: "*Everything will be as it is now*—the room, the baby, the clothes, the minutes—*just a little different*" (54). What both these ekphrastic scenes convey is that it is not the task of art to

try to replicate life 1:1; to be like life, but rather to, like the halos, be the glow at the edges of life, so as to simultaneously make visible, like the overlapping effect of a doubly exposed photograph, a similar but different concurrent alternative to our reality. This means that art should not separate itself from real life to the extent that it no longer becomes reflective of the recipients' worldly experiences, but also that the fictionality of the artwork; the creativity and imagination, needs to be recognizable *enough* in the moment of experiencing for the process of imagining a different future to take place in the observer. Here, my interpretation of the novel diverges from critics like Theodore Martin, who claims that *10:04* is "a novel that desperately wants to not be a novel […] because it would prefer not to be forced to mark off the formal or aesthetic boundary between literature and 'actual' life." (2015:10). I think the novel's insistence on communicating, through extensive auto- and metafictional means, that it is a work of fiction contradicts this conclusion, as the novel repeatedly suggests that it is the revelation of the remaining slight differentiation between the real world and art's representation of the real world; in art's flickering between reality and fiction, and not their perfect merging, that initiates the conceptualization of future potentiality.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored how doubling as a concept and narratological tool is utilized throughout *10:04*, from its mixture of the autofictional and metafictional genre, its narratological composition, its use symbolism, its metaphorical and idealistic embodiments, all the way to the novel's major themes and the hopeful embedded theories that imply that artistic expression and experientiality can lead to a better collective future. This academic inquiry has been motivated by an interest in trying to figure out to what extent doubling can be used as an interpretational key for unlocking the meaning behind Lerner's second novel. This research paper, it can be said, has followed the logic of the philosophical principle of the hermeneutic circle, which poses that in order "to understand the part, we have to understand the whole, and to understand the whole, we have to understand the part" (Parker 2015:55). To a large degree, I believe my approach has yielded results. By strategically mapping the extensive use of different kinds of doubling in the novel, I have not only been able to analyze parts of *10:04* that have been left out of other analyses, like when 'the author' tells his nephews a bedtime story, but also to locate previously untapped aspects and perspectives for future studies. Examples of such findings include forced autofictional introspection through the incorporation of "The Golden Vanity" into the novel, how Bakhtin's ideal of the novel as an experimental, hybrid and plastic genre is reflected in *10:04*'s genre blending and use of recontextualization to create a spatiotemporally transcendent heteroglot space, how ekphrases are used to establish a connection between Lerner and the reader through parallel gazing, how reflections and projections are used to symbolize a slightly different co-existing reality, how textual self-oscillation is used as a way of portraying spatiotemporal and reality-defying overlap, and how the Ben-as-octopus and Ben-as-Whitman(ian) metaphors relate to the potentiality of affectively sensing and communicating with a larger collective.

There were, of course, things I did not have space or time to explore and elaborate on, or that fell outside of the scope of this thesis. One of these cut discussions were centered around Ben and 'the author' constantly being mocked and questioned by themselves as narrators throughout their respective stories: How 'the author' has an "unfortunate body" (66) or how Ben would rather watch TV than read literature (39). This confessional, self-deprecating style of narration, where 'the author' and Ben's character- and personality flaws become especially

salient, I posed, was meant to usher forth an empathetic response in the reader, leading to a more likeable and trustworthy protagonist, as well as showing a subtle arch in Ben's level of maturity as the narrative progressed. I did ultimately conclude that the discussion was both cynical by nature and did not fall within the focal point of the rest of my analysis. What I would have liked to explore and discuss more thoroughly, however, is Ben's sense of responsibility to the world. Although I have argued that there is indeed a sense of felt responsibility in Ben's character that implies that art has a responsibility to the world, I would have liked to explore how Ben's responsibility is reflected in Ben becoming a father-figure. A child is, in colloquial terms, a symbol of the future itself, and in *10:04* the child is linked to fiction by being created artificially through IUI treatment and the treatment being paid for with the advance Ben got for his future novel; the novel that is *10:04*. The creation of the child thusly becomes interconnected with Ben's ideal of altering the future's trajectory through artistic creation, so that the responsibility he needs to adopt for the child is intertwined with the responsibility he has for his artistic creation's ability to change the world for the better; to help the world sense itself more collectively and in a more spatiotemporally aware fashion. This lack of responsibility, I would go on to argue, is symbolized early on in the narrative by Ben being portrayed as child-like. This is on display when Alex has to accompany him to the pediatric ward at Mount Sanai Hospital at the beginning of the narrative, as Ben has always "proved unable to leave a doctor's office with even the most basic recollection of whatever information had been imparted on [him] there", as he sits "in a red plastic chair designed for a kindergartner" (5-6), or when he is making the dinosaur diorama with Roberto and cuts out dinosaurs "with those awkward elementary school scissors" whilst also sitting in "in a child-sized chair" (12). As the narrative progresses, he becomes more self-aware of his immaturity and lack of responsibility, which is evident when he realizes he has never cooked a meal for another person (47) or when he panics during his and Roberto's trip to the museum (146-148). For any future analyses on the topic of Ben adopting responsibility, I would recommend going into a discussion with Effe, as her article on the autofictional aspects of *10:04* would be an excellent starting point for an inquiry into the importance of responsibility in shaping 'the world to come'.

Where my thesis falls short, in my own estimation, is the scope of the task I set before myself. To map out the excessive use of doubling in a mere 100 pages inevitably made the focal

point of the analysis quite wide and perhaps difficult to follow. A genre-specific or thematic reading of the novel would perhaps have still enabled me to discuss the importance of doubling, although I do believe that I touched upon something important in that the focus on doubling has allowed me to engage in discussion with almost every single one of my fellow academics who have studied *10:04*, showing how both genres and themes are interconnected through conceptual and narratological doubling. What is recurring in these discussions with other scholars and critics, however, is that most of these discussions are initiated by Lerner's use of intra- and extratextual repetition, meaning that I may have been able to engage in similar discussions by narrowing down my inquiry to instead focus on instances of such repetitions as opposed to doubling. I can also see an argument being made for narrowing down my inquiry to stating that Lerner utilizes conceptual and narratological doubling to achieve multiplicity; to mimic a 'containing of multitudes' to put it in Whitmanian terms, but I do believe this approach would still rely quite heavily on doubling as a stepping-stone.

In closing, I would briefly like to reflect on what I have achieved in my exploration of the extensive use of doubling in *10:04*. I have made a contribution to the ongoing scholarly discussion by showing that the novel is hyperlinked through doubling on all levels of analysis: from the novel's genre, to its themes and to its own theoretical claims on art and literature's ability to make us aware of collective future potentiality in the present moment. This, I argue, shows how it is problematic to relate the novel to a specific theme or genre without considering how doubling is used holistically; as a permeating narratological and conceptual tool to interconnect all aspects of Lerner's second novel. In this regard, my thesis supplements the already established academic discussion while still contrasting this body of work by urging future studies to consider just how comprehensively the novel relies on doubling for achieving its desired effects.

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All other pictures are taken from *10:04* (2014).

Appendix: 10:04 chapter summary

As I started work on this thesis, I found it helpful to write and keep this chapter summary at hand. With a novel as scattered and contorted in narrative structure and style as *10:04*, it is easy to lose track of where one finds oneself in the intended timeline. I hope this summary can serve as a guiding hand when reading my analysis.

Chapter 1

Ben and his agent discuss turning his short story published in The New Yorker into a novel. The discussion takes place on the High Lane overlooking Tenth Avenue after a celebratory meal consisting of baby octopuses. Ben intuits sensations akin to that of an octopus being massaged to death. His agent believes he can get a strong advance on the novel. Ben, writing from the future, lays bare the concept of the novel: "'I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously [...] I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid'" (4)

Ben and his best friend, Alex, is at Mount Sinai Hospital. Alex is there to keep track of all the medical information given to Ben that he is unable to remember on his own. Ben has been diagnosed with the genetic heart disorder Marfan and gets evaluated by a group of young, beautiful doctors to confirm his condition. Again, Ben compares his experience to that of an octopus.

The reader is presented some backstory of how Ben and Alex first met and of their relationship, which is non-romantic but deep in terms of confessional and emotional investment. We learn that Alex's mother has been diagnosed with cancer at a late stage. At the Metropolitan Museum, Alex proposes to Ben that he donates sperm to impregnate her. Ben recalls Alex's ex-boyfriend and how much Ben despised him and tried to sabotage their relationship. While Alex tells Ben of her wish to have a child, Ben compares Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* to a scene in *Back to the Future*.

Ben and Roberto, an eight-year old boy Ben has been tutoring, works on a shoe-box diorama to accompany a book they are working on about the scientific confusion surrounding the brontosaurus. Ben recalls their first session when he had given Roberto a granola bar without

knowing he had a nut allergy. Roberto tells Ben about a nightmare he had involving a second ice age, where all the buildings collapsing like the Twin Towers did on September 11th 2001, criminals break out of prison and he and his mother is unable to escape because they do not have the right paperwork. After handing Roberto back to his mother, Ben walks the halls of the school and is transported back to his elementary school in Topeka, where he is preparing for the 1986 *Challenger* shuttle launch. In his flashback, he is working on a diorama of the *Challenger* event with a boy named Daniel, who will later kill himself. Reagan's speech addressed to the schoolchildren of America is quoted.

A storm is closing in on New York City, and Ben observes how everyone is connected by the event as a topic of conversation. Ben and Alex prepare for the storm by stocking up on essential items at Whole Foods, where Ben becomes affixed on a can of instant coffee. The two have dinner and watch *The Third Man.* After Alex falls asleep, Ben watches *Back to the Future* while listening to the radio broadcast of the storm. Ben senses that the world and time of the movie overlap with his present. Ben awkwardly tries to romantically engage with Alex as she is sleeping but stops when he realizes she is awake. They wake up to the storm never having reached the disastrous proportions predicted, causing Ben to feel like the previous night had never really happened.

Ben and Alena leave for Alena's gallery opening after having intercourse. Alena does not want to show up together with Ben as her jealous ex-boyfriend will be there. Ben meets up with his friend Sharon at a nearby café before heading to the gallery. Once Ben arrives at the opening, he feels rejected by Alena when she does not reciprocate his wave. Ben feels a connection with the crowd as their bodies collide when moving around on the gallery floor. Ben and Sharon leave to meet Sharon's husband, Jon. They discuss Ben and Alena's relationship, their voices intermingled with advertising posters, subway speaker system messages and pop songs from a passenger's earbuds.

Ben receives a text message from his mentor Natali that her husband and fellow mentor, Bernard, has broken a vertebra in his neck. Ben contemplates how much of the important and personal information he has received in the last several years has been received per e-mail or text messages. Ben recalls all the help he has gotten from his mentors but quickly sidetracks into a story about falling in love with their daughter and how he is still haunted by the fact that they

never actually had a daughter. Ben spends time trying to find the perfect book to bring Bernard at the hospital, ending up picking a collection of William Bronk poems. Ben tells the story of how Bernard met Bronk once, briefly, but that a student of Bernard's studied under Bernard because he thought the two of them were old friends. Ben, who previously had not enjoyed Bronk's poetry, now finds newfound pleasure and meaning in reading Bronk's "Midsummar". At the hospital, Ben tries to talk about the woman he believed was their daughter but gives up when Bernard does not seem to know what he is talking about.

Ben takes in a protester he was contacted by on Craigslist. Upon trying to cook a meal for the protester, Ben realizes he relies on so many people to cook for him that he does not really know how to cook for others. The two of them discuss the ridiculousness of male behavior, such as sizing up other men to see if you could take them down in a physical altercation, or how men use two hands and bend their knees at urinals as if they are lifting a heavy weight.

Ben and Alex go to see Christian Marclay's *The Clock* which is a 24 hour video loop of clips of movies and TV-shows that show a clock; the time shown in the video synced with real-world time. While in line, Alex tells Ben that she has to get her remaining two wisdom teeth removed and that she cannot recall what sedation she chose when she was young: IV or local anesthetic. Watching *The Clock*, Ben discovers Marclay has formed a supergenre that shows us how we collectively perform and expect certain actions to happen at a certain time of day. Ben does not feel, on the other hand, that fictional time and real-world time is collapsing, as he keeps checking the clock on his phone to see what time it is. It is this action that, Ben believes, made him want to write more fiction, including the fiction that turns into *10:04*. In his future fiction, he plans to change his medical condition, the names of the people he will turn into characters and write in the third person; a version of himself called 'the author'. The book will center around 'the author' faking correspondences with other poets and writers, trying to sell the exchanges to universities. The reader is presented with a section of the first draft of the story, which Ben sends to his agent, who then forwards it to *The New Yorker*. They want him to remove the part about fabricating correspondences. Ben turns down their offer, but reconsiders after discussing their request with Natali, his parents and finally Alex. The chapter ends with Ben reading his own story in the doctor's office while waiting for Alex to finish her wisdom teeth extraction.

Chapter 2

This chapter consists of the short story «The Golden Vanity», as published in *The New Yorker.* 'The author' is meeting a librarian at a coffee shop. Having a hard time carrying his cappuccino, he is unable to reciprocate her wave, leading him to scowl at the situation. Finally reaching their table, 'the author' awkwardly walks the librarian through why he looked upset and could not return her wave. The librarian tells 'the author' he sounds like his novel.

'The author' needs to have his wisdom teeth removed after his dentist discovered cavities in them, and he is trying to decide between IV sedation or local anesthetic. He discusses the options with his friend Liza, who mocks him for considering the IV. Having read on the internet that IV sedation does not remove the pain but rather only makes the patient forget the pain, 'the author' feels that taking the IV would be like dividing himself into two people, leaving someone else to deal with the actual pain.

Josh and Mary have set 'the author' up with a woman named Hannah. He worries that his date with Hannah, like his previous dates, will include his date comparing him with the narrator of his novel. On his way to the date, he stops and admires a gaslight, thinking he is somehow connected to anyone who has ever stopped and looked at the same gaslight. Once Josh and Mary leave 'the author' and Hannah alone, 'the author' tells Hannah that writers must be bad with faces. The two discuss pareidolia; the phenomenon of perceiving random patterns as meaningful; seeing faces on the surface of the moon or animals in clouds.

'The author' discusses his literary archive, or lack thereof, with Dr. Roberts. What 'the author' has are poorly written e-mails of gossip and useless information from his best writer friends along with postcards from other more distinguished authors thanking him for sending them his book. Upon telling Dr. Roberts that he does not want people to see these correspondences even after his death, Dr. Roberts tells him that his condition has not worsened.

Moving back in time, 'the author' tells the story of where he was when he was told there was something wrong with his dental X-rays. He is told to go see a neurologist. In Dr. Walsh's office, 'the author' is informed that they have found a seemingly benign meningioma in his cavernous sinuses. 'The author' spots a bland painting on the wall and imagines discussing it with the neurologist, stating that these kinds of paintings "are images of art, not art" (73). An

imagined Liza is interjected into the imaginary conversation to keep ‘the author’ focused on the medical information. Dr. Walsh tells ‘the author’ they are going to monitor the mass over time for changes.

In a hypothetical story, ‘the author’ brings Hannah on a family trip to Sanibel Island for the winter holiday. His father plays “The Golden Vanity” on guitar and asks if ‘the author’ has written anything recently, to which ‘the author’ replies “'Just this.'” (75). Trying to tell his nephews a bedtime story about the world's biggest shark, ‘the author’ struggles to keep the story going in the first person present tense but is able to maneuver his way to third person past tense. ‘The author’ heads down to the beach with his brother and sister-in-law to share a bottle of wine. The brother asks where Ari (Lerner’s wife) is, and ‘the author’ tells him she is not in this story. He cannot explain why, but if he could it would be Ari approaching them on the beach instead of Hannah.

Liza accompanies ‘the author’ on the day of his wisdom teeth extraction. The IV sedation makes ‘the author’ feel a warm glow that proceeds to affect him in the cab heading home. The beauty of Liza and the view in the water-reflected sunlight as they cross the Brooklyn Bridge makes ‘the author’ emotional; the realization that the drugs will erase the memory of the present moment lends it an “aura of imminent disappearance” so beautiful that it makes ‘the author’ teary-eyed (80). Waking up later in the day and still remembering the ride home, ‘the author’ claims that it means that it never really happened.

Chapter 3

Ben goes to the New York Presbyterian Hospital to deliver his semen sample. He has been worrying about the appointment for a month and was even prescribed anti-anxiety medication by Dr. Andrews. He decides not to take the medication in fear of it somehow causing his sample to be rendered useless. We are treated to a comical, slapstick-style scene in which Ben tries his best to deliver the sample without contaminating it by touching dirty things around him. Once outside the hospital, he has an imagined conversation with his potential future child. The topics they discuss include how she came to exist, his level of involvement as a parent, how much IUI costs

compared to IVF and if he is projecting his artistic ambitions onto her. Ben breaks his anti-anxiety pill in half and throws it to the ground, where one half is eaten by a pigeon.

At the Park Slope Food Coop, Ben is bagging dried mangoes. Ben overhears a woman talking about taking her son out of public school because the other children are out of control because they come from homes where they are fed junk food and drink high-fructose beverages. Standing next to him, also bagging mangoes, is Noor. She tells him the story of how she came to realize her recently deceased Lebanese father was not her biological father, leading her to lose her sense of identity as a Muslim woman of color fighting for the betterment of her people. She compares her experience with a story about her friend who had an emotionally loaded confessional phone call with his brother, only to realize the call had been disconnected, stating that it “had happened but never occurred” (107). After finishing his shift, Ben feels a great sense of interconnectedness and hope for a potentially better future as he looks at the Manhattan skyline.

Ben is holding a speech at Columbia's School of the Arts. The speech is an origin story of Ben becoming a writer. He attributes his interest in writing to Reagan's speech after the *Challenger* disaster; a speech written by Peggy Noonan, who had taken quotes from a poem written by an American pilot, who again had copied lines from other poets before him. The ability of plagiarisms with no apparent origin to transcend time and be made briefly available to everyone is beautiful to Ben. He also recalls a lesser form of the phenomenon in joke cycles in the aftermath of disastrous events. At the dinner hosted by the school, Ben strikes up a conversation a distinguished female writer. He tells her about his plan to write a novel about fabricating a correspondence archive. When Ben tells her that he plans on using his book advance to finance Alex's IUI, the female writer incorporates it into Ben's yet-to-be-written novel, saying that the protagonist in the book is “faking the past to fund the future” (123). Ben tells the story of Alex's father's ex-girlfriend, who faked having cancer. The female author thinks he should put that story in the novel. Drunkenly arriving at Alex's apartment, Ben tries to kiss Alex and tells her he can make her pregnant through conventional means rather than IUI. Alex laughs at his advances and ramblings, telling him to go to bed.

Ben is writing and editing a fabricated letter from Robert Creeley to ‘the author’. Alena and her artist friend, Peter, are working on an art project in which they will display damaged artworks that have been deemed as having no value by insurance companies. Ben visits their “Institute of Totaled Art”; Alena's apartment. He is handed a damaged Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture, which Alena takes from him and shatters onto the floor. Other artworks seem to have no damage to them. Ben loves the idea of artworks that have undergone no noticeable material transformation being deemed as having no value.

Ben meets up with Alex at a bar. She brings up the topic of him having tried to seduce her, and he blames it on being drunk. She tells him he needs to take responsibility for his actions and quotes ‘the author’ character from “The Golden Vanity” back to him, telling him she does not want their real life to end up as notes for a novel. She also warns him about writing about 'medical stuff', as Ben is crazy enough to somehow make it transfer into the real world and becoming real, having his main character of his last novel lying about his mother being dead only for Ben’s real-life mother to be diagnosed with breast cancer halfway through writing the story. Ben tells Alex the story his father had told him when Ben traveled home to Topeka to attend his childhood friend Daniel’s funeral. The same day that Ben's father learned that his mother had died from breast cancer, his to-become first wife, Rachel, called him to tell him that her father had died. Instead of telling Rachel about his own mother's death, he travelled out to Rachel's family for her father's funeral. To get a seat on the train back home, Ben's father told the ticket collector that his mother was dying and that catching this train might be his last chance of seeing her again. Ben's father got so caught up in telling Ben the story that he ended up driving past the exit to Topeka and instead headed towards DC, where he had grown up.

Ben takes Roberto to the American Museum of Natural History. Realizing how he has never had so much responsibility for another human being, Ben verges on a panic attack. He begins to question his maturity and if he could take care of a child of his own. While Ben goes to the bathroom, Roberto playfully hides around a corner to scare him. Ben lashes out at Roberto for not staying put. Feeling bad, Ben buys Roberto an expensive T-Rex puzzle and astronaut ice cream while praising his drawings from the museum.

We return to the opening of the novel where Ben and his agent are eating octopuses and discussing turning his short story into a novel. They discuss how the news of his new novel

might be worth more to the publishing houses than the money it may produce in sales once it is published. His agent suggests he might make a more mainstream book and urges him not to wait long before writing. Ben is soon leaving for a residency in Marfa, Texas, where he will stay in a small house across from where Creeley had died in 2005.

Chapter 4

Ben drives around Marfa at night after having messed up his sleeping pattern by taking a nap immediately after being dropped off at his residental house. Getting out of the car to explore the town streets, he finds himself looking through a gallery window at a selection of John Chamberlain sculptures. He finds the works more powerful to behold now than when he had seen them in New York. He heads home and cooks himself a meal and writes throughout the remainder of the night. Waking up at noon, he feels himself falling out of time, thinking the feeling might be a symptom of a brain tumor. He catches a glimpse of the resident of the house Creeley stayed in and the two wave to one another. Ben feels like he has just waved to Creeley himself. Reading Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days*, Ben considers the strange task Whitman set up for himself by trying to write a biographical account of his life when his project was to "stand for everyone" (168); to be a transpersonal space for other people. After a while, Ben begins working on a poem about his residency, where he is partly himself and partly Whitman. One morning, some construction workers start working on the house he is staying in, and Ben incorporates them into the poem as well. After two weeks of not speaking to anyone, Ben travels into town to check out the local bookstore. Once there, he is approached by a man Ben does not recognize, and he is invited to join the man and a woman named Diane to look at a Donald Judd installation. He reluctantly accepts the offer, realizing Diane is a painter who ran a gallery he had once reviewed. At the Chinati Foundation they meet up with Monika, a sculptor from Berlin, and a Chinati intern. As with the Chamberlain sculptures, Ben appreciates Judd's work to a much larger extent in their natural habitat. The group go to a restaurant for dinner and drinks. After two martinis, Ben offers to pay for everyone's food and devours his steak in record time. They head on over to a house party where Ben observes a man snorting a whole pile of cocaine. In the backyard, Ben and the intern are offered some white powder, which they both accept. Ben soon after realizes the substance was ketamine, and after a small ego death, he spends the rest of his

night taking care of the intern, who insufflated a much larger dosage. On his way home, Ben is picked up by 'Creeley', his resident neighbor, who is out to see the Marfa Lights; atmospheric reflections from the city that have been ascribed to UFOs, ghosts and ignis fatuus. While he is unable to see the lights himself, Ben loves the idea of lights generated by humans being mistaken for something supernatural by the same human beings. He adds his experience of the Marfa Lights to his poem and states that it was at this moment he decided to abandon work on his novel about literary fraudulence and write the book we are reading now.

Chapter 5

Ben tells the story of how he had met up with Alex and her astrophysicist boyfriend, a humorless "professor of something at MIT" (200), for dinner. Ben had spent the evening annoying the boyfriend by pretending he believed the Apollo moon landing was faked by the US government. Jumping forward in time, Ben and Alex are at Alex's parents' place in New Paltz, and Ben continues playing the role of moon landing conspiracy theorist to entertain the group. Alex's mother, Emma, is dying of cancer and hopes that Ben and Alex are not trying to get pregnant because of her condition. Ben and Alex try having sex in the recently installed hot tub, made to ease Alex's mother's pain, but fail to do so. After smoking some cannabis and Ben imagining a woman from the party in Marfa, they are able to complete their first sexual intercourse, albeit awkwardly. Temporalities and realities clash upon climax, as Judd's boxes, Alex's mom's cancer, childhood Alex and the moon landing intermingle in Ben's thoughts. Ben concludes that his and Alex's relationship is strong precisely because their sexual intercourse had not deepened the relationship, only slightly altered it. When Ben goes upstairs to get some water, he notices Alex's father, Rick, on the porch. He is on an online message board reading about other people's experience with having a dying partner. He tells Ben that he cannot stop thinking about Ashley, his college girlfriend who had faked having cancer, and how Emma would be dead to him if she had faked it as well, even though he knows she is actually dying. Ben wonders to himself if he can put the Ashley story in his novel.

Ben is getting his heart sonogrammed. The process makes him feel as if he is pregnant. Ben booked the appointment because he had begun feeling certain alarming symptoms, but Dr. Andrews assures him that they are purely psychosomatic. Ben freaks out when he sees that the

measurement of his aorta has changed since his last visit. The doctor explains to him and Alex that the echocardiograph has a large margin of error. Two days later Ben's sperm is placed in Alex.

Ben tells Alena that he has to break off their sexual relationship to prioritize getting Alex pregnant. They discuss the semantics of the word 'wistful' in relation to their current situation and when Ben senses that their relationship did not mean a whole lot to Alena, he feels unhappy. Travelling in different directions from the subway station near Grand Street, they share a passionate goodbye kiss before Ben walks down the stairs to reach the opposite platform. Once there, he can see that Alena is still waiting on the other side. Ben awkwardly waves at her and walks away from her down the platform. Thinking the wave replaced the goodbye kiss as Alena's last memory of him, Ben tries to remedy the awkwardness by calling her name. Unable to get her attention, he sprints back around to reach her platform. He tells us that he reached her in time, which means it never happened.

We witness the making of a fabricated letter to Ben from William Bronk. In the letter, Bronk thanks Ben for his appreciation of his poem “Midsummer” and tells him to send his regards to Bernard. Ben contemplates what he could add to the letters if he were to include them in his novel, such as John Keats' description of his bodily placement within his surroundings at the time of writing. Ben quickly realizes that a description of his Brooklyn studio apartment would not transfer well to Bronk's large house in Hudson Falls. He deletes the whole fabricated letter.

Another storm is approaching New York, and again the city is preparing for its arrival. Ben is meeting one of his graduate students, Calvin, in his office. In the months leading up to their meeting, Ben has grown weary of Calvin's mental health due to the bizarre nature of the topics he has been wanting to discuss in e-mails. Calvin has also shared concern for Ben's health after reading his piece in *The New Yorker*. On his way to his office, Ben runs into an Occupy Wall Street type of protest and volunteers to help them by organizing food-drives from the co-op. Upon meeting Calvin, Ben senses something is wrong. Ben suspects Adderall abuse or symptoms of Adderall withdrawal as Calvin is not sleeping, writing in dense micro-script on his notepad while spewing conspiratory rants about radiation poisoning, man-made superstorms and cell phone surveillance. When Ben asks Calvin if he would consider talking to a therapist, Calvin

gets upset and leaves Ben's office, forgetting his notepad. Ben looks at Calvin's notepad. The miniaturized letters, vertical strokes and seismographic readouts remind him of poetry.

Ben receives fifty copies of *To the Future*, the four page book he has been working on with Roberto. He realizes he has never been this happy to receive copies of his own works. On his way over to meet Roberto, Ben begins thinking about how the money he has spent on the books might have been better off going directly to Roberto's family or paying for Calvin's inevitable therapy sessions. When he finally shows Roberto the freshly printed copies of their work, Roberto does not share Ben's excitement. Instead, Roberto is concerned with 'superstorms' and a potential future where the lack of fresh water will lead to 'water wars'. Roberto wants to know what their next project will be, trying to convince Ben it should be a movie about the hurricane. Ben tries to divert Roberto's worry by stating that their book shows how science can correct for mistakes and avoid catastrophes. They sit in silence looking at a copy of their book, faint noises of children and traffic issuing from outside. The sounds take Ben back to his elementary classroom in Topeka.

Ben and Roberto's book, *To the Future*, is printed in full. The short book explains how the beloved and often depicted brontosaurus never really existed but was rather the result of a paleontological mistake where the body of an apatosaurus was fitted with the skull of a camarasaurus.

Once more, Ben and Alex are taking shelter from the approaching storm in Alex's apartment, projecting *Back to the Future* onto a wall. Ben feels that the present past of the film and their current present are overlapping. Looking out of the window, Ben realizes this storm too will fail to arrive. The next day he finds out the storm had in fact hit hard in other parts of the city, flooding houses and taking out electrical grids. The two of them head to the co-op to buy groceries to donate to those affected by the storm. Walking around a seemingly untouched, elevated area of Brooklyn, they find it difficult to reconcile the tragedies caused by the storm with their own surroundings; kids playing in the parks and stores fully stocked up on essential items.

A hypothetical story of Ben and Alex taking a cab is presented. They are going to Mount Sinai Hospital for Alex's checkup. As the doctor performs the sonographic examination, Ben

listens to the baby's heartbeat while watching a news report on the storm on the flat-screen television on the wall. As the doctor measures the baby's head size, he thinks of baby octopuses. Failing to hail a cab back to Brooklyn after the examination, Ben and Alex begin walking home. With no electricity, the city becomes alarmingly dark in the fading sunlight. When two men approach them and ask for money, Ben does not know if they are begging or threatening them. Alex gives them some money. In the distance, Ben sees that the Goldman Sachs building still has electricity and is lighting up like a beacon. He decides he will use a photograph of the glowing building as the cover art for this book. Ben goes into a bodega to buy Alex a bottle of water. The clerk wants 10 dollars for the bottle, and Ben notes how prices on essentials goods go up whenever collective tragedy strikes. Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, Ben feels that everyone on the bridge are walking together as one; “part parade, part flight, part protest” (238). They get on a bus in Brooklyn, and Ben imagines a lady asking Alex how far along she is in her pregnancy. Ben tells the reader that everything he hears tonight will sound like Whitman, and that “the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, [are] corresponding” (239). They buy vegetable sushi at a restaurant in Prosper Heights. Ben looks out the window of the restaurant onto Flatbush Avenue and begins remembering their walk home in third person. He tells us that at the time of writing, he looking back on the city from the second person plural, quoting and conjoining Reagan’s and Whitman’s words: ”I know it’s hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is” (240).