Ben Lerner's Novels and the Syntax of Collectivity

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Abstract

Examining Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, *10:04*, and *The Topeka School* (2011-2019), this article reads Lerner's novels as centrally engaged in the (re)imagination of community. In the first two novels, this negotiation of collectivity involves essayistic reflection on poetry as an artistic mode that is strongly attuned to the collective, through the affect elicited by prosody. By contrast, in the third novel, Lerner translates the insights offered by the previous works into a narrative-level syntax that captures the intermental functioning of a community in the titular Topeka.

Keywords

Affect, community, embodiment, form, intersubjectivity, narrative, poetry

Bio

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Introduction

The question of defining and articulating a sense of the collective haunts Ben Lerner's novelistic trilogy, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), *10:04* (2014), and *The Topeka School* (2019).[1] While not a cycle in the strict sense, these are highly cohesive works revolving around a writer named Adam (in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *The Topeka School*) and Ben (in *10:04*). Despite the naming discrepancy, there is a great deal of common ground between these protagonists. The inspiration is autobiographical, and in fact the label "autofiction" has been frequently applied to Lerner's works: systematically, Lerner's works blur the boundary of fiction and autobiography and even incorporate material from Lerner's own poetic and essayistic writing (see, e.g., Effe). *Leaving the Atocha Station* focuses on Adam's experiences while on a fellowship in Madrid, whereas *10:04* is set a few years later, with the protagonist—now back in New York City—struggling to write a second novel after the unexpected success of his first work (clearly, a fictionalized version of *Leaving the Atocha Station*). *The Topeka School* moves back in time to the protagonist's coming of age in Topeka, Kansas, which is Lerner's own hometown, and reconstructs the social backdrop from which his vocation as a writer originated.

Given the elaborate display of Lerner's own fictionalized subjectivity and creativity in these works, the claim that Lerner interrogates the meanings of the collective in this trilogy may appear surprising. Lerner's works, and particularly *10:04*, have been widely read as articulating a "barometric subjectivity," in Ben De Bruyn's phrase, attuned to the intellectual and emotional hesitations that traverse the present. This subjectivity registers the radical uncertainties of a future destabilized by multiple crises (especially, for De Bruyn, the ecological one), as demonstrated most plainly by Lerner's engagement with the dilemmas of parenthood in *10:04*.[2] The protagonist's attunement to planetary crisis evokes the Romantic association between the poet and visionary

insight, which sets the poet apart from the rest of society.[3] Undercutting this association, the autofictional self of Lerner's trilogy foreshadows a retreat into a collective "we" that serves as a radical alternative to the corporate, neoliberal, capitalist subjectivity permeating the protagonist's world. In a similar vein, Pieter Vermeulen reads Lerner's *10:04* alongside Roberto Esposito's critique of juridical and Christian notions of personhood: for Vermeulen, Lerner's novel pursues an interest in the *trans*personal by "implicating the reader in the community the novel enacts" (672). The reader's implication is performed via metafictional devices (including the trilogy's autofictional set-up) that disrupt ontological divides between the supposedly fictional world and reality, the protagonist and the flesh-and-blood author.

Yet the collective envisaged by Lerner goes beyond author-reader dialogue. I will show in this article that Lerner's trilogy addresses the problem of formulating a collective "we" through different configurations of literary genre and style. The trilogy blends essayistic, poetic, and narrative engagements with collectivity, but these forms end up carrying different weights in the course of the three novels. The first two volumes carefully outline a philosophy of poetry through essayistic inserts. This philosophy is based on two uneasily coexisting pillars: a belief in the impossibility of authentic poetic experience and a fascination with the formal patterns of prosody. What Lerner calls poetic "failure" generates an image of collectivity that remains perpetually out of reach in actuality, and yet conceivable as an asymptotic (and politically charged) ideal. This ideal cannot be fully spelled out verbally, but only sensed through the prosodic rhythm of poetry, which is at the same time abstract (because it can't be fully verbalized) and material (because it registers in the body).

The image of the collective that results from this poetic failure marks a step toward meeting the experiential challenges of the present, including those surrounding the climate crisis—a project in which, Lerner implies, literature and the arts should play a central role. Lerner's latest work, *The Topeka School*, represents the writer's most ambitious effort to translate this poetic insight into a narrative form that is aligned with the collective. Here, I will argue, Lerner's thinking on poetry and the collective becomes a novelistic practice: the formal syntax of poetry, that is, finds a direct equivalent in narrative-level patterns, particularly the nonlinear and polyphonic structure of *The Topeka School*. The embodiment of literary form is, again, a key element in this novel; however, the emphasis shifts from the affective form of prosody to that of narrative itself. Building on theorizations in the field of cognitive approaches to narrative (Caracciolo, "Tell-Tale Rhythms"; Kukkonen; Caracciolo and Kukkonen chap.5), I will suggest that readers' imaginative engagement with the nonlinear structure of *The Topeka School* elicits an embodied response that is analogous, in some respects, to the embodiment of prosody: Lerner's arrangement of events, including variations in plot speed and sequence, are perceived by readers (at least incipiently or unconsciously) as shifts in bodily affect. This strategy creates an embodied connection between readers' understanding of the narrative form of the novel and the sense of community that is evoked by the nonlinear plot.

Of course, this analogy between poetic and narrative syntax can never be complete or perfect, but its conceivability allows Lerner (and his readers) to edge closer to an affective, embodied articulation of a collective "we." Certainly, the divide between a small community in Topeka and the scale of planetary crises such as climate change remains significant. But the Topeka experience, refracted through narrative patterns, destabilizes the individualistic mindset that is at the root of the current ecological predicament: in that respect, shared experience provides a blueprint for moving from the novelist's barometric subjectivity to a form of barometric *inter*subjectivity. That intersubjective exploration is supported by the interplay of literary (poetic, essayistic, *and* narrative) forms across Lerner's works.

Before offering an extended discussion of *The Topeka School*, I will sample recent scholarship that addresses the possibilities of the collective in literary fiction; I will then turn to an examination of the philosophy of poetry contained in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*—a discussion that will pave the way for my reading of *The Topeka School* in this article's final section.

Fiction and the Collective

A basic principle organizing the multiplicity of characters in fiction is the distinction between the protagonist, whose actions drive the plot, and a set of secondary figures who—to quote Alex Woloch—"jostle for, and within, the limited space that remains" (2). The concept of character group complicates the distinction between the protagonist and the totality of a novel's minor characters; it has become an important focus of narratological debates after Woloch's work.[4] In certain fictions, groups are not only significant on the level of action—the overt patterning of represented behavior—but also through shared cognitive acts of believing, desiring, and responding emotionally to the fictional world.

Focusing on this cognitive dimension of groups, Alan Palmer has brought insights from the contemporary mind sciences to bear on what he calls "intermental thinking" in fiction. One of his most striking examples is George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. As Palmer shows, the town of Middlemarch represents an intermental unit in the novel: it "literally and not just metaphorically has a mind of its own" (65). This collective impinges on the individual characters' minds (for example, through received opinions and social expectations), shaping the protagonists' trajectory and therefore the plot of the novel as a whole. For Palmer, Eliot's "omniscient" narrator becomes an interpreter and spokesperson for the town's collective mentality.

While narratologists have focused on narrative (that is, formal) strategies that probe collectivity, literature can also confront collectivity in thematic or conceptual terms. Most pertinently for this article, Clemens Spahr and Philipp Löffler have argued that contemporary American literature is engaged in a renegotiation of notions of collectivity (community, society, etc.) prompted by the collapse of Cold War-era ideologies and influenced by movements such as Occupy Wall Street or environmental activism. As the failures of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies (with their underlying individualism) become more and more apparent, literary authors embark on a project of imaginative (re)construction of collectivity. According to Spahr and Löffler, this literary negotiation can follow three different, but partly intersecting, routes. First, literature can become a means of inspiring collective action by explicitly affirming a political agenda. As a second possibility, literature can "can function as a laboratory for ideas of collectivity, raising questions about the necessity and aporias of communal existence in the past, present, and future" (170). This more philosophical approach resonates closely with the thinking on collectivity one finds in Lerner's works, as I will argue over the next pages. Finally, literature can be regarded as a fundamentally collective medium, one that embodies through its very history and intertextuality a developing sense of the collective. We will see that this idea is also deeply at work in Lerner's novel.[5]

What one does *not* encounter in Lerner's novelistic trilogy is a plural, we-narrator in the sense theorized by Natalya Bekhta. Via the autofictional conflation of author and narrator, the voice of Adam/Ben is emphatically singular: as he struggles to imagine a future shaped by catastrophic climate change and social or racial inequalities, his anxieties suggest a Romantic hypersensitivity—De Bruyn's "barometric subjectivity"—that effectively isolates him from society. But even as the narrator's identity remains singular, his longing for collectivity—repeatedly thematized in the three novels—reflects the significance of intermental thinking, patterns of shared perception and affect that place the protagonist within a larger constellation of characters.

However, notions of collectivity are not only enacted at the level of the characters' intersubjective dynamics in the novels (and especially, as we will see, in *The Topeka School*). They are also pursued via a sustained essayistic articulation of the collective value of poetic *form*, including the form of Lerner's own poetic works, which are repeatedly quoted in the trilogy. Lerner's point of departure is that poetic language is grounded in prosodic patterns—an affective syntax—that are potentially shared across writers and their audiences, sowing the seeds of community. But Lerner complicates this idea by suggesting that genuine poetic experience can never be achieved: the failures of poetry are just as important as the promise of a shared affective syntax in creating community.

Insofar as it highlights the value of poetic form vis-à-vis collectivity, Lerner's engagement with the collective dovetails with a philosophy of poetry that downplays the poet's creative insight and instead assigns collective agency to the *form* of literature itself.[6] This formalism implicit in many of the narrator's statements is not a retreat into the rarefied world of art for art's sake; rather, it hints at how literature may help create or consolidate an image of collectivity that represents a radical alternative to individualistic agency. Lerner's trilogy thus tackles the problem of imagining collectivity both through thematic reflection on the affordances of poetic form (in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*) and, in the later novel, on the level of narrative pattern, by foregrounding the protagonists' embedding within a constellation of characters. Importantly, in both cases literature's imagination of the collective remains partial and aspirational, a work-in-progress rather than a possibility actualized by Lerner's writing: but even as Lerner's attempts to fully articulate the collective through literary form "fail" (in a restricted sense of failure), his experiments with the combined syntax of ideas, poetry, and narrative—and with readers' bodily responses to them—remain highly instructive.

Poetry and the Collective in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*

The narrator of *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a young American writer—originally from Topeka, like the author—who is spending a year in Spain on a prestigious fellowship. Repeatedly, he articulates a sense of alienation from his surroundings—a feeling of not belonging that is only intensified, in the second half of the novel, when he becomes a witness to the terrorist bombing of Madrid's Atocha Station on March 11, 2004 (and an estranged bystander in the collective trauma that results from it). Before this tragic event, the primary source of the narrator's alienation in the novel is his lack of intimacy with the Spanish language. Echoing Viktor Shklovsky's famous essay on defamiliarization, the narrator reasons that there "would of course come a point when I would be familiar enough with the language and terrain that it would lose its unfamiliar aspect, a point at which I would no longer see a stone in Spain and think of it as, in some essential sense, *stonier* than the sedimentary rocks of Kansas" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 155).

Making "a stone feel stony" is, for Shklovsky (6), the essential function of art (and artistic uses of language)—a defamiliarization that Lerner's narrator experiences on a daily basis because of the novelty of the Spanish physical and linguistic landscape. In the narrator's comments on his own poetry, however, this defamiliarizing effect is not specifically linked to poetic language. Making "a stone feel stony," in Shklovsky's work, involves recovering the experiential vividness of reality—the vividness that is normally abraded by conventions of thinking and feeling. While, for Shklovsky, art is an important means of recovering that experiential resonance, the narrator of *Leaving the Atocha Station* voices the "incommensurability of language and experience" and wonders "if there were happy ages when . . . this division of experience into what could not be named and what could not be lived just was experience, for all people for all time" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 62).

The narrator is here expressing a double impasse: on the one hand, poetic language appears unable to come to grips with reality and render it in an experientially illuminating way (as Shklovsky would have it); on the other hand, everyday experience itself is out of reach, it can only be characterized negatively ("what could not be lived"). With one of Lerner's many self-conscious nods at the reader, the narrator's ironic conclusion is that he "would never write a novel" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 62). Poetry is not powerless, however: if it cannot restore the experiential texture of the world, it can at least create a distinctive feeling of "pure potentiality, awaiting articulation" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 36). The narrator's pastiche-like poetic practice, which builds on the juxtaposition of randomly selected materials, is meant to deepen this feeling of potentiality by distancing poetic language from the subjectivity of the individual writer.[7] The more disjointed and elusive the poems themselves, the more they can evoke an unactualized potentiality that Lerner describes in affective, if extremely vague, terms: "the poems would constitute screens on which readers could project their own desperate belief in the possibility of poetic experience, whatever that might be, or afford them the opportunity to mourn its impossibility" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 36).

The impossibility of poetic experience is an important theme in Lerner's writings. In the essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner comments on a poem by nineteenth-century Scottish poet William Topaz McGonagall, "The Tay Bridge Disaster," which attempts (and, as the consensus goes, spectacularly fails) to commemorate a railway disaster. Yet, Lerner adds,

> by hammering away at McGonagall's extreme failure here, I find myself implying a poem that could do something like the following: create a rhythm at once recognizably collective (because using the framework of inherited prosody) and irreducibly individual (because McGonagall's management of that framework would be expressive of his specific poetic voice), a rhythm that therefore enacts what the poem attempts to describe—the integration of individual (lost) lives into a human community that persists across time. (*The Hatred of Poetry* 29)

More succinctly, McGonagall's "failure can be recognized more or less universally and does in this sense produce community" (*The Hatred of Poetry* 30). In Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, a similar sense of failure defines the narrator's account of the Madrid train bombings, and here too community plays a central role. Awakened by a loud noise, the narrator—disoriented and hungover after a night of heavy drinking—starts roaming the streets of Madrid and taking in the aftermath of the attack, with sirens blaring around him and people lining up to donate blood. Lerner's style is completely unemotional, reflecting the narrator's shock but also his inability to find words that match the magnitude of the disaster. Even his attempt to donate blood proves unsuccessful, the nurse waving him away after he mentions feeling sick (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 113). Eventually, he joins a demonstration against the terrorist attack, and here his voice merges with that of the crowd—but not without a hesitation that speaks to the impossibility of fully claiming this tragedy as his own: "Teresa and Arturo and Rafa were chanting, so I chanted too, but my voice sounded off to me, affected, and I worried it was conspicuous, that it failed to blend. I couldn't be the only one not chanting, so I mouthed the words" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 116).

It is important to underline that the narrator's participation in the demonstration is a matter of coincidence, of blindly following his friends' bidding. The same haphazardness is at work in the narrator's poetic compositions, which build on a linguistic jumble. If the crowd marching through Madrid stands in for community in this passage, the narrator can only stumble into it, without any sense of willful planning and without intending to make an ideological statement, just as his mosaic-like poetry distances him from conventional notions of poetic inspiration and insight. Both the

accidental nature of the narrator's participation and his failure to describe the affect pervading this moment in Spanish history are, paradoxically, a sign of the narrator's tentative integration in a community that transcends him. The "rhythm" of collectivity Lerner refers to in *The Hatred of Poetry* is implied by the very impossibility of its verbalization. Rather than restoring the fullness of experience (the "stoniness" of the stone), poetic language dwells in the impossibility of bridging the gap between everyday language and experience. This failure—when it is intersubjectively shared—is constitutive of community.

Lerner's second novel, *10:04*, continues pursuing this thematic interest in the rhythmic patterning of intersubjectivity. Like Adam in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the narrator of *10:04* (Ben) experiences debilitating anxieties when attempting to project his life into the future. But whereas Adam mainly perceives this uncertainty in personal terms (should he move back to the US or stay in Madrid at the end of his fellowship?), Ben's quandary is more strongly embedded within an interpersonal network: at the start of the novel, we learn that his friend Alex "had recently proposed impregnating herself with my sperm, not, she was at immediate pains to make clear, in copula, but rather through intrauterine insemination" (*10:04* 7). The extent of Ben's involvement in the child's future remains hazy, however. The specter of climate change—evoked much more frequently in *10:04* than in Lerner's first novel—hangs over the narrator's inability to imagine parental care as sea levels rise. Hurricanes Irene and Sandy, which are prominently featured in the novel's plot, function as a prefiguration of the coming catastrophe, but neither of these events provides the novel with a real climax: their limited impact on the narrator's life does not bring relief or comfort but only underscores the unimaginability of the climate-changed future to come.

In a discussion of contemporary literature's engagement with the climate crisis, Adeline Johns-Putra has examined the possibilities of literary realism when faced with the more-than-human history of the climate—that is, the way in which human societies (and particularly advanced industrial societies) are intervening in geological processes that far predate the rise of *Homo sapiens*. Johns-Putra's reappraisal of realist representation revolves around Walter Benjamin's concept of the "arrest" ("Stillstellung" in the German of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"). The arrest, Johns-Putra writes, "is not just an interruption, but a critical interruption, as the reader is called upon to see how certain events, figures, symbols, or even objects come together in a way that is both relevant to her Now and revelatory of something outside it" (260). In *10:04*, the narrator's account of the hurricanes offers an illuminating demonstration of a literary realism attuned to Benjaminian arrest. As the narrator braces for the first hurricane, even something as mundane as a pack of instant coffee becomes "revelatory of something outside it": "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" (*10:04* 19).

The pocket of "arrest" created by the hurricane enables the narrator to glimpse the complexity of social relations that sustains his life of privilege as he hunkers down in New York City, but also the profound injustice of the capitalist machine that put the instant coffee on a supermarket shelf in Brooklyn. Resonating with the Benjaminian inspiration of Johns-Putra's notion of realism, the passage in *10:04* is followed by a quotation taken from the novel's epigraph: "Everything will be as it is now, just a little different" (*10:04* 19). The epigraph, unattributed in the novel, comes from a page of Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* in which the Italian philosopher quotes an exchange between Benjamin himself and Ernst Bloch. After a night spent anxiously awaiting the hurricane's landfall, the narrator comes to realize that while externally "everything is as it was" (the hurricane has caused no devastation in his immediate surroundings), the suspension produced by the

incoming storm has revealed both the precarity of present-day society and a radical unknowability in our collective experience of the future.[8] This is the "little difference" encapsulated by the Benjamin quote, and while it is minor from the external perspective of eventfulness (the hurricane has passed, nothing seems to have changed) its psychological and existential ramifications are profound.

If the uncertainty of the future looms large in Lerner's *10:04*, the "coming community"—the possibility of imagining social relations after the collapse of capitalism—is just as recalcitrant. Nevertheless, amplifying ideas already broached in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Lerner's narrator presents poetic language as a means of sensing this community affectively. One of the clearest articulations of this idea is contained in a talk given by the narrator at Columbia University, where he traces the origins of his poetic vocation to an episode from his childhood. Here the text switches from narrative to essayistic writing.[9] The narrator explains that, like most American children in 1986, he was shocked to watch the Space Shuttle Challenger disintegrate on live TV. Even more transformative than the direct experience of the disaster was, for the narrator, the address to the country given by President Reagan on the same day. In particular, he remembers finding the ending of the speech strangely moving:

> "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God.'"
>
> The prosody of that last part of the sentence, the way the iambs offered both a sense of climax and of closure, the way the alternating stresses lent the speech a sense of authority and dignity, of mourning and reassurance—I felt it in my chest; the sentence pulled me into the future. (*10:04* 112)[10]

"Pulling us into the future" is a phrase that occurs earlier in Reagan's speech, where it participates in a conventional rhetoric of technological progress: if outer space is the new frontier, even disasters like the Challenger's explosion can be seen as momentary setbacks in the nation's teleological advance. But Lerner's narrator reinvents the embodied metaphor ("pulling") by bringing out the embodied impact of Reagan's language ("I felt it in my chest") and by linking it not to the explicit *meaning* of Reagan's words, but to their prosodic rhythm. That "first experience of poetic measure" was also the first seed of community: "I felt simultaneously comforted and stirred by the rhythm and knew that all across America those rhythms were working in millions of other bodies too" (*10:04* 112). The form of poetic language is felt in the body, it creates a peculiar bodily grammar that inspires community by sidestepping political differences and leanings.

Lerner's essayist-narrator is, of course, well aware of the "preposterousness" of having first encountered poetic rhythm in a speech by a politician he has no sympathy for. But as the protagonist goes on to discuss, the words at the end of Reagan's speech were not truly Reagan's, nor had they been composed by his speechwriter, Peggy Noonan: both "slipped the surly bonds of earth" and "touch the face of God" are drawn from John Gillespie Magee's 1941 sonnet "High Flight," and the latter phrase was already a quotation in Magee's poem. This intertextual play, explains the narrator, "showed poetry's power to circulate among bodies and temporalities, to transcend the contingencies of its authorship" (*10:04* 113). Here Lerner's character comes close to an explicit articulation of Spahr and Löffler's third route for literature's engagement with collectivity, how literature itself—seen as an intertextual and diachronic system—represents a collective medium.

This discussion specifies the link between poetic failure and community drawn by Lerner in *The Hatred of Poetry* (and, more implicitly, in *Leaving the Atocha Station*). The narrator of *10:04* does not think Magee's lines are great poetry: as he points out, they are conventional, derivative, and even slightly incongruous in their use of the word "surly." Thus, there is "failure" at play here, too, but ultimately the mediocrity of Magee's partly recycled language and its falling into a shared interpersonal rhythm go hand in hand: because the creative act is deeply indebted to a collective repertoire (hence its mediocrity), the affect created by the speech's prosodic form can also spread intersubjectively.

This philosophy is an ideal continuation and extension of the narrator's interest, in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, in a poetics of the collage, whereby materials are displaced and recycled to gesture toward the possibility of poetic experience, without actualizing it. If poetry deploys language in a way that creates community, it is because it can become uncoupled from the individual and the personal, at two levels: its prosodic form produces shared affect, and its circulation resists authorial intention. The experience of poetry thus becomes an aspirational figure of the transpersonal, "a kind of palimpsestic plagiarism that moves through bodies and time, a collective song with no single origin, or whose origin has been erased" (*10:04* 114). The connection between poetic form and the collective is thus outlined in Lerner's first two novels through a series of narratorial reflections on the act of writing and reading poetry. However, these statements remain largely detached from the *novelistic* form of the text, in which we see a protagonist struggling to achieve full integration within a community (because of cultural differences, in the Spain of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, or because of a radical gap in the narrator's imagination of a climate-changed future, in *10:04*). In *The Topeka School*, by contrast, Lerner seeks to reduce the gap between poetic and novelistic (i.e., narrative) form: by working with a larger cast of characters, he seeks to translate the philosophical ideas articulated in the previous novels into a concrete intermental network—even as this translation is bound to remain tentative and incomplete. Poetry and narrative are not mutually exclusive forms, with the latter having clear advantages over the former in encapsulating community: rather, it is their interplay—as demonstrated by the trilogy as a whole—that is best positioned to yield affective insight into the collective.

Intermental Networks in *The Topeka School*

As mentioned above, *The Topeka School* forms with *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04* an autofictional trilogy: the last novel in the series, it is also the furthest removed from the present, since it focuses on Lerner's teenage years in Kansas. The titular school is a fictionalized version of the Menninger Foundation, a renowned psychiatric institution in Topeka that employed Lerner's parents (Harriet and Steve Lerner) for many years. Of course, the title is multilayered: it evokes the importance of Lerner's formative years in Topeka and also hints at the centrality of the collective in the novel (Topeka as a community of intersubjectively linked individuals). If Lerner's earlier novels are firmly grounded in autofictional subjectivity through first-person narrative, *The Topeka School* retains the autobiographical inspiration of the previous works but juggles a variety of narrative perspectives, some of them presented by a heterodiegetic narrator, the others cast in the first person. The titles of the main chapters include, between parentheses, the name of the focal characters. Thus, Adam (Ben Lerner's fictional stand-in), who opens and closes the novel, is juxtaposed with Jonathan and Jane, who are based on Lerner's parents. In addition to the triangle of Berner's family, seven italicized interludes center on Darren Eberheart, an intellectually disabled child in Adam's cohort. Darren's experiences are reported in a highly impressionistic and elliptic style reminiscent of William Faulkner's Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. The novel starts with one of these italicized sections, with Darren being interrogated by a police officer after assaulting a girl at a

party (by hurling a cue ball at her). The other Darren sections reconstruct the physical and verbal abuse Darren suffered from his peers in the years leading up to the attack, which is fully presented only in the final italicized interlude. Meanwhile, the other, longer chapters relate events involving the three main characters but also Adam's best friend Jason, his parents Sima and Eric (who are colleagues of Jane and Jonathan at the Foundation), a senior psychiatrist named Klaus, and Darren himself.

Taken together, these characters form what the text repeatedly refers to as a "network of crisscrossing relations." As the chapters detail, this network is traversed by many tensions having to do with the constant blurring of personal and professional boundaries at the Foundation. As Jane puts it in a first-person chapter addressed to Adam:

> [It] was one big overdetermined mess. Sima was in analysis with Klaus, who was like a second father to Dad [i.e., Adam's father, Jonathan], or maybe it was more that Dad was like a second son to Klaus; there was always some tension between Eric and us, even though we liked him, as we both thought he was overly aggressive with medication; he just had this tremendous uncritical faith in psychopharmacology as a cure-all. And then you and Jason were of course best friends, were around each other basically since birth, were like brothers; both couples had wills listing the other as the child's legal guardians in the event of a tragedy. (*The Topeka School* 79–80)

The "mess" becomes even more "overdetermined" when the reader learns about the love affair between Jonathan and Sima, or about Adam and Jason's teenage rivalry, or about the many other tangled relationships that sustain the Topeka school. Community, seen through the lens of Lerner's 2019 novel, is no harmonious structure: on the contrary, it is a pattern of complicated and even conflictual relations defined by "overdetermination"—that is, by a sense of experiential density that reflects the characters' sharing of experiences and affects (even beyond their explicit intentions and individual subjectivities, which are often at cross purposes). In a later passage, Jane returns to the image of the "network of crisscrossing relations," stating: "I was the Brain who wrote the purple cow that Darren shot from a nearby hill and now Jonathan's mom had to ride it forever in the first film he never made" (*The Topeka School* 223). In a single sentence, Jane compresses a large number of references to the characters that populate the world of *The Topeka School*, from the purple cow of a nursery rhyme she invented for Adam to her husband's experimentations with the medium of film. This density of linguistic references suggests that the "overdetermined mess" the protagonists experience is a positive, transformative force *despite* the intersubjective complexities it involves. In other words: the more the characters break with established social roles (analyst vs. analysand, friend vs. sexual partner), the more community comes to life. This is a group functioning as an intermental unit, to use Palmer's language, and the impression of coordination is deepened by the fact that the characters do not seem fully aware of how much they have in common: language circulates freely and unconsciously from one character to another (for instance, in the last passage I quoted Jane refers to herself as the "Brain," which is the derogatory nickname she got from a group of Christian fundamentalists in town, the Phelpses). This linguistic circulation is akin to the recycling of poetic material that the narrator of *10:04* saw as a building block of community, but it is here enacted by the polyphonic structure of the novel itself.

The density of experience at the center of the protagonists' "network of crisscrossing relations" stands in implicit opposition to what Lerner describes in the novel as the "spread," a metaphor drawn from the domain of college debate (at which Adam excels). Literally, "spread" refers to a

particular debate technique in which arguments are spun out at such a speed that the opponents cannot keep up in their responses. But in the course of the novel the word comes to denote what Heather Houser has called the "infowhelm"—an epistemic overload typical of interconnected, globalized societies, in which information is circulated so rapidly that it crosses the threshold of intelligibility. Thus, Adam observes: "It's no excuse that you didn't have the time. Even before the twenty-four-hour news cycle, Twitter storms, algorithmic trading, spreadsheets, the DDoS attack, Americans were getting 'spread' in their daily lives" (*The Topeka School* 24). The concept appears again in the novel's last sentence, from a chapter in which Adam—many years later—has joined a crowd of demonstrators in New York City: "I forced myself to participate, to be part of a tiny public speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread" (*The Topeka School* 282). The key word here is "slowly": if the spread of social media is defined by instant, post-and-forget communication, opposing this culture involves a deceleration of language. Delving into the intersubjective density of the past, as the novel as a whole can be said to do, is a way of resisting the advance of the spread.

The nonlinear structure of the novel performs the density of shared experience that is thematically opposed to the spread. A hint of nonlinearity is already present in the Darren-focused sections, which start and end with his assault on a young woman; the other sections can be construed as a series of flashbacks probing Darren's past *before* the assault. The other chapters, those bearing the focal characters' names, place even more pressure on a strict chronological trajectory through their constant moving back and forth in time. More accurately perhaps, these chapters point to an entanglement of temporalities that is a narrative-level, formal equivalent to the "overdetermined mess" mentioned by Jane: the crisscrossing of temporal planes mirrors, and fleshes out experientially, the characters' intersubjective network. A striking instance of this coexistence of temporalities can be found in the chapter titled "The New York School" and narrated by Jonathan.

At the start of the chapter, Jonathan is flying into New York City, his plane on a holding pattern while waiting for the authorization to land at JFK. The year, we infer from later hints, is 1999. A few paragraphs into the chapter, a flashback captures moments of Jonathan's youth in Taipei, where his father worked as a "low-level diplomat" at the US embassy (*The Topeka School* 161). After the first section break, the scene with the plane flying over the city in 1999 forks into three distinct temporalities, with Jonathan imagining that the distant planes he can see from the window are instances of him landing into the city earlier in his life, in 1961 and 1991:

> One of the planes circling JFK was waiting to land in 1961, the first time I'd approached the city from the air, my crew-cut head against the oval window, the pane vibrating from the propeller; the Soviets had just detonated Tsar Bomba, largest man-made explosion ever; all the clouds looked like mushroom clouds to me. And one of the circling planes was waiting its turn in the winter of 1991, the last time I'd flown into the city, in-flight smoking only recently banned, Jane and Adam on either side of me, Sima and her family two rows behind, aerial bombing of Iraq in its twentieth day. (*The Topeka School* 169)

A dense web of recollections and intratextual links runs through the rest of the chapter. Jonathan's extramarital relationship with Sima looms particularly large: it was consummated while the two families were visiting the city in 1991—the same visit during which, as Jane related in an earlier chapter, Adam and Jason got into a scuffle that sent Jason to the emergency room. Memories keep trickling into Jonathan's mind while his plane follows its holding pattern over the city: he returns to an episode also related by Jane earlier on, when Adam—well before the 1991 scuffle in New York

City—was hospitalized with transient amnesia after suffering a bad concussion. Jonathan also remembers two visits to the MET, both with Jane, one before Adam's birth (narrated in a previous Jonathan-focused chapter) and the other in 1991. Finally, with a leap back to the present, Jonathan explains the reason for his flying into New York in 1999: Adam, now a student at Columbia, is facing serious mental health issues and needs his father's help.

Many of these temporal shifts are unmarked in the novel, testing the reader's memory of earlier sections and disrupting or at least slowing down narrative comprehension: the result is disorienting, but also remarkably effective at recreating the nonlinear dynamics of memory as well as the free associations of a mind in the grip of low-grade anxiety (about landing into JFK in the middle of a storm, about his son's future). Nevertheless, the constant references to earlier chapters focusing on Jane or Adam problematize a reading of this chapter, with its superposition of temporalities, as an exploration of individual psychology. Rather, the nonlinear presentation of multiple temporal planes mirrors the tangle of "crisscrossing relations" that the novel as a whole teases out: it points, in other words, to an ensemble of minds, a collective of characters functioning as an intermental unit. This is perhaps most evident in the chapter's ending, where Jonathan conflates more distant memories of Jane receiving harassing phone calls and a recent phone conversation with Adam, in his Columbia dormitory, experiencing a nervous breakdown: "The metal doors shut, the landing gear unfolded, and we made our descent, first person and third, together through the clouds. Jane had talked us down" (*The Topeka School* 183).

Jonathan's subjectivity is here split between first and third person, awareness of himself in 1999 and awareness of his past selves while flying over New York earlier in his life—an experience of dislocation that he shares with Adam and with the narrators of Lerner's previous novels. But it is the first-person *plural* form that stands out in this passage. The first instance of "we" points to Jonathan's multiple selves, assembled by memory on this plane. The "us" in the final sentence, however, works differently: it brings together Jonathan and Adam, who was "talked down" by Jane on the phone in the scene just related by Jonathan—in the same way as the memory of that episode relieved Jonathan's own anxieties while circling JFK airport. The "us" thus hints at an intermental unit that transcends Jonathan's subjectivity. Jane's performative speech act of "talking us down" evokes the role of language in building an intersubjective triangle (Jonathan, Adam, Jane herself) that persists despite the rapid—and disorienting—temporal shifts staged by this chapter.

These temporal shifts are comparable to prosodic patterns in poetry, but they are scaled up to the level of narrative discourse. Several narrative theorists have argued that narrative (including, but not limited to, novelistic narrative) has its own rhythms, which reflect patterns in both composition and reader response. Jan Baetens and Kathryn Hume, for example, have written about speed as an aspect of narrative's rhythmicity, discussing variations in speed as responsible for the peculiar effects of postmodernist and avantgarde fiction. In a book co-authored with Karin Kukkonen (Caracciolo and Kukkonen chap.5), I linked the embodiment of narrative form to the affective shifts that modulate the progression of plot.[11] In Lerner's New York flyover passage, for example, the juxtaposition of temporal planes has a pronouncedly embodied quality: the "speed of plot," to use Kukkonen's expression, here slows to a crawl that will be perceived by readers (or at least readers willing to put up with the difficulty of Lerner's prose) as an affectively charged pace. This sense of slowness is a narrative-level equivalent of how community itself emerges, through a gradual process of affective accretion, from shared history and experience.[12] But slowness is only one of the many parameters shaping rhythm across the novel as a whole: Lerner's movements back and forth in the novel's chronology, or from one focalizing character to another, also create rhythmic patterning that will be experienced by readers as affective, embodied shifts.

If Lerner's essayistic commentary in the earlier novels insisted on the significance of prosody in fostering community on a theoretical level, *The Topeka School* turns this insight into a narrative practice, through two convergent strategies. The novel's polyphonic structure captures an intersubjective unit much more straightforwardly than *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*, both of which repeatedly thematize the protagonist's isolation *despite* his longing for community. Further, the back-and-forth movements created by Lerner's periodic return to experiences or memories shared by the protagonists generate a narrative-level prosody—a formal language that both produces community (for the characters) and evokes it (for the novel's readers). Thus, *The Topeka School* uses the formal resources of narrative to encapsulate the connection between poetic pattern and collectivity identified by Lerner's earlier works. The analogy between narrative and poetry is, of course, imperfect: not all readers will be equally receptive to the complexity of this nonlinear narrative; further, reconstructing these temporal shifts does require more conscious work on the reader's part than experiencing the patterning of prosody.

These differences between poetic and narrative rhythm are a failure of sorts, but Lerner's insistence on failure as constitutive of community also emerges in the novel in more straightforward, thematic terms. The protagonists don't form a perfectly harmonious group, but an "overdetermined mess" with its own, sometimes tragic, shortcomings. The Darren-focused sections demonstrate this point most clearly. These interludes revolve around an act of violence carried out by the mentally disabled teenager, but the violence he inflicts is clearly symptomatic of the abuse he suffered at the hands of his peers, as multiple scenes from the novel detail: Darren, we read in a parenthetical, "had been defended before, but almost always from his peers, not by them" (*The Topeka School* 122). His assault on a young woman thus expresses a larger failure of the Topeka community (including Lerner's fictionalized stand-in, Adam) at protecting him from bullying and discrimination. In a poignant scene in the novel's penultimate chapter, Adam relives Darren's attack on the girl (Mandy), as if he was replaying it on a computer screen and could change the course of events by "rewinding" them: "The blood and teeth reenter Mandy's head as she regains her footing, her jaw re-knits; the lights go out, clouds of smoke reenter mouths, the music plays backward as the little moon spins through the basement firmament, all in a span perhaps no longer than / an arrow takes to strike, to fly, to leave // the bow" (*The Topeka School* 258).[13] This imaginative undoing of Darren's assault years after the fact does not, of course, erase the community's moral responsibilities. As in Lerner's poetry, it is the impossibility of actualizing this alternative course of action that lends poignancy and communal significance to the event. The "rage at emptiness" that Adam, in the same passage, identifies as the spark of the violence isn't Darren's, but a collective experience channeled by the community's most vulnerable member, as if on behalf of the Topeka school as a whole. The splicing of the Darren sections throughout the novel, together with their circling back to Darren's violent gesture, thus fulfills a double function: it recreates the phenomenology of guilt, with Adam revisiting his teenage years and projecting his complicity in the violence, but it also translates the communal fault into the formal syntax of novelistic narrative.

The novel's final chapter, with its focus on Adam's participation in a demonstration in New York City, goes one step further, suggesting that recognizing a communal fault cannot remain a purely intellectual gesture, but must lead to political action on a public stage. The contrast with Adam's estrangement in *Leaving the Atocha Station* couldn't be starker: if, after the train bombing in Madrid, the protagonist found himself reluctantly absorbed by the protesting crowd, at the end of *The Topeka School* Adam forces himself "to participate, to be part of a tiny public speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread" (*The Topeka School* 282). If being part of this "public" was a distant aspiration in Lerner's first novel, it is here a possibility that—while not fully realized—becomes more tangible through the polyphonic structure of the narrative.

Conclusion

Lerner's oeuvre forms a macrotext where generic boundaries are systematically and productively collapsed: his thinking, as expressed in essayistic work and interviews, informs his characters' views, his poetry enters the novels and complicates or disrupts conventional novelistic progression. Nevertheless, the trajectory of Lerner's novels demonstrates a deepening interest in the formal possibilities of storytelling when uncoupled from the autofictional subjectivity that serves as the centerpiece of his first two novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*. Undeniably, *The Topeka School* is still an autobiographically inspired work and an instance of autofictional writing, but it places a much stronger emphasis on collectivity—on a formal level—by juggling a variety of narrative perspectives, voices, and temporalities. Through their (often unconscious) sharing of linguistic and experiential materials, the protagonists of *The Topeka School* constitute an intermental unit that renders the density and complexity of human relations within a small community. Thematically, this complexity—which can only be apprehended through a careful, slow unveiling of the characters' intertwined past—is opposed to the "spread" of a society defined by the mindless consumption of goods and information. Formally and affectively, this complexity registers in readers' experience as a series of affective shifts as they follow the novel's nonlinear form and savor its slow pace. Tracing the characters' intersubjective network is no merely nostalgic act, in that it reveals the ethical flaws and shortcomings in which all characters are implicated. Lerner's novelistic reconstruction of these crisscrossing relations thus mounts determined resistance against the spread, particularly because it is tied to a nonlinear narrative form that requires patient teasing out on the reader's part.

In parallel, Lerner's third novel also performs a narrative translation of the remarks on the communal dimension of poetry offered in his previous works. Poetry, Lerner's narrators had suggested in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and in *10:04*, fosters community on two levels: through the embodied resonance that its formal patterns create, and by brandishing a possibility of genuine poetic insight that is bound to remain unactualized. If Lerner's earlier novels had articulated these ideas in philosophical terms, through the narrators' essayistic commentary, *The Topeka School* puts them into narrative practice. The syntax of collectivity is here scaled up to the level of narrative form, an operation that resonates with both recent work in narrative theory (on groups and rhythm) and with scholarly debates on how literature can negotiate notions of collectivity.

Nevertheless, as I have highlighted, this act of translation remains imperfect: while novelistic narrative has different affordances vis-à-vis the collective from poetry, notably through its explicitly polyphonic and nonlinear structure, it also falls short of the experiential immediacy of poetic rhythm. Yet the breakdown of that analogy between poetic and narrative rhythm hints at a productive failure: it shows how no single literary form, whether narrative, essayistic, or poetic, can fully encapsulate the anxieties and tensions of the collective. Instead, it is through the sometimes complicated coexistence of these forms that literature represents, to quote again Spahr and Löffler's contention, a "laboratory for ideas of collectivity, raising questions about the necessity and aporias of communal existence in the past, present, and future" (170). While Lerner's interest in the patterns of collective experience culminates in the polyphonic form of *The Topeka School*, the narrative complexity of that novel only comes into its own when read alongside the poetic and essayistic insights offered by the two previous works. Ultimately, the trilogy as a whole does not affirm the superiority of one literary form over another in relation to the collective, but instead pursues the unique possibilities afforded by their interplay.

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[1] I use the words "novel" and "novelistic" throughout this essay, but the reader should keep in mind that these are autofictional works (as discussed below) that combine novelistic imagination and autobiographical experience.

[2] "Lerner's novel encourages us to consider the possibility of human extinction but also to remember events like Sandy and landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge and to reflect on the role of weather in barometric subjectivity" (De Bruyn 969).

[3] See, for example, Lieven Ameel's reading of *10:04*: "While this impression of resonating with the environment is clearly informed by somatic and psychosomatic disturbances in the protagonist, there is also a sense of the narrator as a privileged visionary: the idea that it is exactly his condition and the 'visual disturbance' he experiences that help him to feel with his environment" (79).

[4] See, e.g., Alders and Von Contzen; Bekhta.
[5] Discussing this third approach, Spahr and Löffler quote the following passage from Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*: "all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community" (70).
[6] This focus on the agency of form emerging from Lerner's works bears a close resemblance to the New Formalism articulated by Caroline Levine in *Forms*. Both Lerner and Levine foreground the continuity between artistic and social forms—how literary strategies always build on (and complicate or challenge) the patterning of social relations.
[7] "[After] all, there was nothing particularly original about my original poems, comprised as they were of mistranslations intermixed with repurposed fragments from deleted e-mails" (*Leaving the Atocha Station* 38).
[8] For more on contemporary fiction's engagement with climate uncertainty, see Caracciolo (*Contemporary Fiction*).
[9] See Caracciolo (*Slow Narrative*, chap.4) for discussion on the coexistence of essayistic and narrative forms in contemporary literature.
[10] I have slightly adjusted the punctuation here to indicate that the first paragraph is a direct quotation from Reagan's speech.
[11] The book builds on our previous work on embodiment in narrative discourse, see Caracciolo ("Tell-Tale Rhythms"); Kukkonen.
[12] For more on the value of slowness in narrative, with a focus on human-nonhuman relations, see also Caracciolo (*Slow Narrative*).
[13] Seymour Chatman discusses this kind of backward narration in an insightful article. Lerner's arrow analogy could be read as a reference to Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, one of the most striking instances of sustained reverse narration and one of Chatman's main examples in the article.