

Klaces, Caleb ORCID logoORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7293-5256> (2020) Ben Lerner's 10:04 and Climate Change. Textual Practice. p. 1.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4193/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1731583>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at [ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

**Ben Lerner's *10:04* and Climate Change**

Author: Caleb Klaces

*York Centre for Writing, School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy, York St John University, York, United Kingdom*

Lord Mayor's Walk, York, YO31 7EX

[c.klaces@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:c.klaces@yorks.ac.uk)

07791889892

No co-authors.

## **Abstract**

This article shows how the formal tactics of Ben Lerner's hybrid novel, *10:04*, respond to climate change. The article reads two related aspects of the text – its foregrounding of the medium and its use of appropriated images and poetry – in terms of their negotiation of a realist literary space which Amitav Ghosh has argued precludes engagement with extreme, unpredictable weather events. By focussing attention on aspects of a literary text typically overlooked in literary discussions of contemporary ecological issues, the article helps extend the purview of what it might mean for a novel to engage with a climate in crisis. This expanded understanding of engagement contributes both to the ongoing, collective exploration of contemporary climate change fiction and to the stock of critical tools with which to interpret it.

**Climate change; realism; hybrid novel; Ben Lerner; Amitav Ghosh**

## Ben Lerner's *10:04* and Climate Change

There is a contradiction in the scholarly reception of Ben Lerner's 2014 novel, *10:04*. For Ben De Bruyn the work is characterised by 'large-scale thinking'; another critic has called its approach a 'withdrawal from the global to the local' and a 'scaled-down mode of attention'.<sup>1</sup> How can *10:04* be both scaled up and scaled down? What is it about this novel which means it may, in De Bruyn's eyes, 'play an important role in cultural responses to climate change', a planetary phenomenon, while its narrative remains firmly located in one place: Brooklyn, New York City, in the United States?<sup>2</sup> This article negotiates these questions by going beyond a reading of the representations of unpredictable weather that mark *10:04* as a climate change novel. I argue that the novel's formal strategies are deranged by ecological emergency. Specifically, I place two related aspects of the text – its foregrounding of the medium and its use of appropriated images and poetry – in an ecological context, to show how they disturb distinctions between foreground and background in the novel, just as climate change disturbs distinctions between foreground and background in real life. In doing so, I help extend the purview of what it might mean for a novel to engage with climate change. I hope that this expanded definition of *engagement* contributes both to the ongoing, collective exploration of contemporary climate change fiction and to the available stock of critical tools with which to interpret it.

In the first part of this article I weigh the implications for literary scholars of novelist Amitav Ghosh's long 2017 essay, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.<sup>3</sup> I draw out the central narrative of Ghosh's essay and deploy recent scholarship on the broader history of literary realism to interrogate the limits of Ghosh's characterisation of the codes of 'serious literary fiction'. I follow Ghosh's persuasive, if simplified, ecological reading of the division in the realist novel of

foreground from background to read *10:04* as a novel interested not only in representing climate change, but in representing what kind of challenges climate change poses for literary representation.

Following this engagement with Ghosh, I bring together Timothy Morton's conception of 'medial' space with Lerner's own description of the experience of reading the poetry of John Ashbery. I do this to extend the scope of what might qualify as a meaningful engagement with climate change beyond Ghosh's more limited interest in descriptions of extreme weather. Through readings of *10:04*'s deployment and discussion of appropriated image, and then poetry, I argue that Lerner's foregrounding of different media is forcefully and meaningfully continuous with a foregrounding of the environment as a mediated phenomenon *and* an active and unpredictable presence in the novel.

Finally, I explore the broader implications of this derangement of perception beyond the ways that writers and critics engage climate change. I cycle back to the spatial and geopolitical division of foreground and background with which I started. In the final pages of the novel, after the second superstorm, prepositions become promiscuous, leaving the characters in an indeterminate space, 'flickering' between foreground and background. I read this as the flickering of the privileged narrator's ontological status, as though the very basis of his understanding of the world is beginning to shake. This is a powerful reminder of the unevenly distributed responsibilities and impacts of a climate in crisis.

### **What the Barometer Conceals**

Ben Lerner was born in 1979 and has already published a substantial body of interlinked poetry, fiction and criticism.<sup>4</sup> His two novels both use text from his earlier three poetry collections.<sup>5</sup> *10:04*, his second novel, is a series of interlocking episodes told in prose, poetry and embedded black-and-white images<sup>6</sup>. It concerns a young American writer and his friend Alex's decision to become platonic parents. The protagonist is coming to terms with the surprise commercial success of his second novel, a fate which has become Lerner's: *10:04* has been surprisingly commercially successful.

The narrative is bookended by two real events: Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. With precise descriptions of these events – and others from the author's life – it is a novel which describes itself as existing 'on the very edge of fiction'.<sup>7</sup> Its register is often more academic and technical than that of Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, which started life as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago.

Amitav Ghosh was born in 1956. He is a writer who has stood, in real life, in the eye of a tornado. He describes this experience in *The Great Derangement* – and it is a good story. So why does Ghosh say that 'no tornado has ever featured in [one of his] novels'?<sup>8</sup> Because the codes of what he calls 'serious literary fiction' have developed to exclude such apparently unlikely events. 'Surely,' he writes, 'only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability?'<sup>9</sup>

Ghosh develops the tradition of criticism of literary realism which begins with Roland Barthes's reading of *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert's inclusion of a barometer on a wall is a detail 'neither incongruous nor significant': it has no narrative function except to signify 'the category of "the real"'.<sup>10</sup> For Ghosh, the detail that Barthes alights on is

prescient in relation to our climate crisis. The rise of the western novel coincided with the development of other disciplines, including geology and statistics, which brought new instruments for measuring and regulating the exterior environment into the home. The barometer suggests that the outside can be understood and predicted (a typical dial might read ‘Stormy / Change / Dry’) from the safety of the interior, domestic world.

Ghosh describes how the natural world is transformed into a setting in *A River Called Titash*, the 1956 novel by Adwaita Mallabarman. Mallabarman gradually isolates the river Titash from the vast river-network across Bengal. ‘In this way,’ Ghosh concludes,

through a series of successive exclusions, Mallabarman creates a space that will submit to the techniques of the modern novel: the rest of the landscape is pushed farther and farther into the background until at last we have a setting that can carry a narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Ghosh argues that there exists a conventional structuring of space in the realist novel, and that this implies that humans are the primary active participants in stories, which take place on a regulated backdrop. As critic Franco Moretti puts it, the ‘unheard-of [moves] towards the background [...] while the everyday moves into the foreground’.<sup>12</sup> The human psychological drama, full of quotidian details, can take place without fear of disruption from the gently flowing Titash. The rest of Bengal, with all its uncertainties and potential for surprise disruption, is artificially separated from the narrative – replaced with details, to reuse Barthes’s phrase, ‘neither incongruous nor significant’, which suggest that nature is ‘commonplace,’ ‘moderate’ and amenable to human organisation. ‘What this means in practice,’ Ghosh writes, ‘is that the calculus of

probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel is not the same as that which obtains outside it'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Nuancing *The Great Derangement***

Like Lerner's novel, Ghosh's polemic is both scaled-up and scaled-down. It is powerfully expansive in its characterisation of the multiple literatures that constitute a realist literary tradition, yet narrow in its assumption of what is currently permissible for the diverse array of writers that make up his corpus. On the one hand, Ghosh assumes a continuity in 'serious literary fiction' between *Madame Bovary* and *A River Called Titash*, between nineteenth-century France and twentieth-century India. On the other hand, he also assumes that there is agreement among writers of 'serious literary fiction' over the nature of realism, without settling himself on an explicit definition of what realism is. Other critics have made similar arguments about the literary novel's foregrounding of 'everyday life'; Bruce Robbins has gone so far as to say that 'worldliness is not natural to the novel'.<sup>14</sup> But Ghosh takes this premise in a different, and significant, direction. Where Pieter Vermeulen focusses on the importance of novels which refuse 'the protagonist's meaningful transformation', Ghosh is interested in transformations which are too abrupt to *feel* meaningful.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps because he is a writer as well as a critic, Ghosh risks linking this argument to one which hinges on a relationship between realist codes *as* literary status, a pragmatic argument which feels warranted in the face of climate catastrophe. His interest in what he calls realism stems from a belief that it is the mode taken most seriously by a reading public, despite that mode's inability to integrate the most important issue facing humanity. His hope is that 'serious literary fiction' will confer on climate change, via representation, the



seriousness it demands; while climate change, having been incorporated into the novel, will make realism real again.

Lerner's novel has been received as a work of 'serious literary fiction', and indeed, markers of critical esteem, from publication in *The New Yorker* to the writer's estate being collected in a library archive, are self-consciously – perhaps proleptically – the material of the novel itself. At the same time, it is a novel which appears to have a relationship with realism that Lerner sets out for poetry, rather than the one Ghosh sets out for critically acclaimed fiction. Lerner's narrator says that 'part of what [he loves] about poetry was how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn't obtain, how the correspondence between text and world was less important than the intensities of the poem itself'.<sup>16</sup> Peter Boxall argues that realism has always been in crisis: 'a dissatisfaction with realism [...] is part of its basic condition, and its means of going on'.<sup>17</sup> This historically deeper account of realism provides a way to square Lerner's downplaying of 'the correspondence between text and world', while at the same time writing forcefully (and commercially successfully) about climate change, with Ghosh's insistence that only a text which markets its relationship with the real can begin to approach this dispersed, multifaceted phenomenon. Climate change appears in *10:04* as the extreme, unpredictable weather that Ghosh prescribes; it also 'circulates through the novel', to adapt Adam Trexler's phrase, disturbing the relationship between foreground and background.<sup>18</sup>

Ben De Bruyn has attended to networks in *10:04* – of objects, weather and infrastructure – and shown how they are drawn into what he calls, aptly, the central character's 'delocalised epiphanies'.<sup>19</sup> Aspects of society which have tended to be peripheral in the realist novel – such as traffic or the supply of energy – are brought into the emotional economy of *10:04*. The central character's sympathies and moods are

bound up with price indexes as much as they are with other people. This expanded view of an emerging ‘warmer realism’ shows De Bruyn and Lerner figuring climate change as a dispersed phenomenon and ‘systems problem’, much more heterogeneous and enmeshed with the economic than it has often been described in the past, when conceived of more narrowly as an environmental issue.<sup>20</sup>

I take a different route through the novel. By focusing on Lerner’s use of poetry and images, I add a spatial dimension to De Bruyn’s analysis of how time works in the narrative. Ghosh suggests that poetry has been more successful at engaging with climate change than literary fiction.<sup>21</sup> I show how Lerner begins to make climate change thinkable by *deranging* the form of the novel (to use a term deployed by Ghosh and ecocritic Timothy Clark in reference to the disruptive effects of climate change on modes of perception).<sup>22</sup> The book’s combination of poetry, prose and images can be understood on the level of the spatial and temporal coordinates of literature. Lerner writes with ‘the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration’.<sup>23</sup> The formal challenge that *10:04* defines for itself, in other words, is how to shape the imaginary world of the novel when the distinction between foreground and background in reality breaks down. It succeeds, I argue, in emphasising the reality of climate change without insisting on its own realism. This is because Lerner’s interest is less whether words can accurately represent the world, but how words and world affect one another – an interest that, according to Boxall, Lerner shares with the first realist, Daniel Defoe. As Boxall puts it, in a discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*, generative for both writers are ‘the ways in which words and ideas are attached to the things of the world, bound in a mutually transformative relationship with one another’.<sup>24</sup> Lerner is interested precisely in

representing climate change as both part of the world *and* as a crisis in how to represent the world.

### **Climate Change as an Issue of Form**

Ghosh's measure of engagement with climate change is narrow: he discusses books which include descriptions of extreme weather. It is therefore important to situate Ghosh in a body of theoretically informed ecocritical thought which provides a framework for an environment reading of the *formal* aspects of Lerner's work, in addition to its ostensible subject. This leads me on to Lerner's use of appropriated image and text. In following this critical procedure, I am also responding to Adam Trexler's suggestion that the growing body of climate change literature requires a new kind of criticism. 'In contemporary literature,' Trexler argues, 'melting ice caps, global climate models, rising sea levels, and tipping points have altered the formal possibilities of the novel. To argue thus is to challenge the yet-pervasive origin story of literature, shifting attention from author-geniuses to texts in a complicated material world.'<sup>25</sup> By attending to *10:04*'s intertexts, I hope to help shift the focus from the individual author to the collective responsibility.

Timothy Morton has long developed an argument about the effects of climate change on the spatial dimensions of artworks. I use a specific aspect of Morton's thought most powerfully articulated in his 2007 *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Morton draws a link between what he calls the 'medial' aspect of works that 'foreground the medium' and an ecological experience. 'The idea,' he writes, 'is to reinforce the illusion that the dimension of reading is the same as inscription: that the reader and writer inhabit the same dimension, the same place'.<sup>26</sup>

This formulation is uncannily similar to the argument Lerner makes about poet John Ashbery, in a long review-essay (2010) on Ashbery's *Collected Poems, 1956–1987* and in his first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (another example of Lerner appropriating his own work). 'Part of the bizarre power of Ashbery's best poetry,' Lerner writes in 2010, 'is that it seems to narrate what it's like to read Ashbery's best poetry, and when his work manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading, we experience mediacy immediately'.<sup>27</sup> The way that Morton hooks this medial experience to the distinction that Ghosh, after Moretti, makes between foreground and background could apply equally to Ashbery and, I argue, *10:04*:

one of the contents of a medial message could be the medium [...] This undermines the normal distinction we make between medium as atmosphere or environment—as a background or “field”—and medium as material thing—something in the foreground. In general, ambient poetics seeks to undermine the normal distinction between background and foreground.<sup>28</sup>

### **‘Unseasonable Weather’**

The way that *10:04* signals its interest in climate change is a medial gesture that reinforces the illusion that reader and writer inhabit the same dimension, the same place. On the first page (3), the narrator uses the phrase, ‘unseasonable weather’ (and variations on it are repeated throughout the novel). In this formulation there is an implicit understanding that the reader has read the same news articles, too often, describing the fact that the seasons we take for granted are becoming different from themselves. But the link to an international scientific consensus explaining the shifting seasons is not made explicit, and nor is a direct description of weather from experience. The environment is, in other words, already mediated.<sup>29</sup> This is important for the space

that the novel opens up: climate change is both overly familiar in discourse and frighteningly mysterious in lived experience. It is a kind of in-joke – the equivalent of a barometer to those who are familiar with Barthes – an in-joke that, with the arrival of Sandy later in the book, has the most ambivalent sort of punchline. By calling attention to the uncertainty of reference here, the oblique, almost fanciful, phrasing brings to mind Timothy Clark's 'Anthropocene disorder', 'a state of mind [...] inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects'.<sup>30</sup> However much a person understands, from science, that climate change is real, there lingers a sense of disparity between that mediated reality and what is known from direct experience.<sup>31</sup> I want to suggest that the feeling is strikingly similar to the uncanny (and not always comfortable) experience of reading a book which narrates what it's like to read that book.

From the outset of *10:04*, representations affect what they represent: 'awareness of the storm seeped into the city, entering the architecture and the stout-bodied passerines'; and the world affects its representations, infusing them with strange agency, as when the narrator sees 'foliage changing its Crayola' in a school corridor.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge about climate change changes climate change. This adds another layer of complexity to Ghosh's simplified division between 'the calculus of probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel' and 'that which obtains outside it'.<sup>33</sup> In *10:04*, mediated and unmediated experience exist in dynamic relation. Central to Lerner's approach to realism is that, to use Timothy Clark's phrase, '[t]he breakdowns of inherited demarcations of thought can still become a means of disclosure and revision'.<sup>34</sup>

## Creating a New Space, Mingling Characters and Scenery

*10:04* introduces its setting with a conventional panorama, apparently creating Ghosh's 'space that will submit to the techniques of the modern novel'.<sup>35</sup> New York City is seen from the raised perspective of the High Line, 'an elevated length of abandoned railway spur [converted] into an aerial greenway'. The writer and his agent stop at 'a kind of amphitheatre where you can sit and watch the traffic'.<sup>36</sup> With the reader, they look down on the city that will provide the backdrop for the story.

When Hurricane Irene approaches this setting, the narrator and his friend Alex excitedly stock up at the supermarket and discuss the uncertain future with strangers. Alex sleeps and the narrator listens to radio coverage of the storm, while watching a film. The danger passes. By missing New York, the storm changes the past:

it was as though the physical intimacy with Alex, just like the sociability with strangers or the aura around objects, 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.<sup>37</sup>

The final phrase refers to the film *Back to the Future*.<sup>38</sup> When Marty, the protagonist of *Back to the Future*, travels in time, it changes his past, and he and his siblings begin to fade from the family photograph. *10:04* is a book which speculates about possible versions of the present, as they relate to possible futures. Imagining the destruction the storm will bring makes certain social situations possible. Actions which would ordinarily seem rude, forward, or risky, are made acceptable by the shared threat. That threat is frightening but also exciting, releasing erotic energy.

There is a similar erotic energy between Lerner's narrator and his friend Alex as they stand in front of a painting of Joan of Arc by Bastien-Lepage and talk about conceiving a child together, as friends. Alex is described as looking like the Joan in the painting.

Joan appears to stagger toward the viewer, reaching her left arm out, maybe for support, in the swoon of being called. Instead of grasping branches or leaves, her hand, which is carefully positioned on the sight line of one of the other angels, seems to dissolve. 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 favourite 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; the background swallows her fingers. [...] It's a presence, not an absence, that eats away at her hand.<sup>39</sup>

Bastien-Lepage, Lerner writes, was criticised for including two styles in one painting. Lerner suggests that the tension between these two styles is expressed in the strange detail where the first and second fingers of Joan's left hand are obscured by something of the colour and texture of the scenery. The green forest is, in the painting's terms, too far away to logically cover Joan's fingers. So part of her hand, which is in the foreground, is *behind* the forest, which is in the background. Lerner's 'glitch in the pictorial matrix' is another way of saying that Bastien-Lepage made a leap across what Ghosh describes as an artificial discontinuity. This is the kind of failure that Ghosh wants more of – a failure to be drawn into 'the modes of concealment' that separate foreground from background, and culture from nature. The author's decision to reproduce only a section of the painting (the hand, on page 10) can be read as an ironic 'failure' itself. The fragment leaves the reader with a sense of irresolution: of wanting to

look outside the artificial discontinuity between the book and the world, in order to reunite the severed part of the painting with an imagined whole.

‘Joan of Arc’ provides a transgressive model for a literature that can break the rules of decorum and mingle characters and scenery. Later in the novel, the speaker visits his literary mentor, Bernard, who is recovering from a broken neck after a fall. The speaker agonises while choosing a poem to take. In the end, he opens at random the selected poems of William Bronk, a largely unknown poet, who Bernard had met once. This is a piece of literary redress: a move, however small, to bring a poet describes as ‘underappreciated’ out of the background and into the foreground. I read it also as another commentary on negotiating the spatial disruptions of climate change.<sup>40</sup>

Bronk’s poem, ‘Midsummer’, begins in Bastien-Lepage’s palette: ‘A green world, a scene of green deep / with light blues, the greens made deep / by those blues’. ‘One thinks how

In certain pictures, envied landscapes are seen  
(through a window, maybe) far behind the serene  
sitter’s face, the serene pose, as though  
in some impossible mirror, face to back,  
human serenity gazed at a green world  
which gazed at this face.

Then the poem is inside that landscape, the one behind the sitter in the painting:

And see now,  
here is that place, those greens  
are here, deep with those blues. The air  
we breathe is freshly sweet, and warm, as though  
with berries. We are here. We are here.



Set this down too, as much  
as if an atrocity had happened and been seen.  
The earth is beautiful beyond all change.<sup>41</sup>

The poem is presented to a man in recovery (recall Lerner's phrase, in interview, about literature as 'an attempt to see what spaces for healing can exist'). It might also supply a way of talking about the need for privileged humans in the west to recover from the shock of discovering that they live in the envied landscape behind the serene sitter's face. We are not the serene sitter comfortably separated from the background after all. We are not what the anthropocentric organisation of society and knowledge has taught us we are. Somehow, the rigid rules of pictorial decorum have been breached, and the viewer is in the dangerously unpredictable place usually seen through the window.

Towards the end of *10:04*, the narrator says that 'For the second time in a year, we were facing once-in-a-generation weather'.<sup>42</sup> Hurricane Sandy, the second superstorm of the book, killed 223 people and caused \$75 billion in damage.<sup>43</sup> The book registers the shock of the conditions of the supposed global periphery coming to the supposed centre. In the questionable but pervasive terminology of *developed* and *developing* nations, geographical distance from the supposed global centre is linked with a temporal scale in relation to modernity. The residents of New York City are supposed to live in the future of hypermodernity. The rest of the world lives in the past. But as Ghosh writes, the poor of the earth are now the avant-garde. 'The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits us all [...]'.<sup>44</sup>

In 'Midsummer', Bronk writes that it is just as important to describe the beauty of the place behind the figure as it would be to describe an 'atrocity', had one occurred. Lerner seems to have taken Bronk's injunction to heart. After their first pregnancy scan,

Alex and the narrator are forced to walk home through the landscape of destruction and deprivation left by Sandy. In Lerner's novel, this is linked too beautifully with his description in his 2017 essay *The Hatred of Poetry* of the literary avant-garde's conception of poetry as 'an imaginary bomb with real shrapnel'. In *10:04*, even Hurricane Sandy – the one that hits Manhattan – is, to the narrator, mediated. He draws an analogy between the images of the approaching storm and the ultrasound images of a foetus in Alex's womb: 'we see the image of the coming storm, its limbs moving in real time, the brain visible in its translucent skull'.<sup>45</sup> But it is a mediated phenomenon with real effects. It arrives from the background to drag New York City into the present.

### **Decarbonised Pleasures**

At least that is the theory. In fact, after Sandy hits and the background disrupts the foreground, Lerner likens the atmosphere to a snow day; the police looked 'more like they were preparing for a parade than dealing with the aftermath of a disaster'; the most prominent absences after the storm are the 'sad horses that were normally hitched to carriages along Central Park South'.<sup>46</sup> Surprisingly, this dark landscape becomes both foil for and location of intense lyric writing.<sup>47</sup> Many of the strands of the book are repeated and combined in new ways, filtered through the figure of Walt Whitman: 'everything [...] I hear tonight will sound like Whitman, the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding'.<sup>48</sup> The tense has shifted from the past to the future. The future of climate change disaster has arrived in the present. And for these privileged young parents-to-be it has produced a surprise: not an eschatology, but a kind of environmentally-heightened, off-grid leisure. The long walk through the devastated city ends at the ultimate image of the cosmopolitan bourgeois: a sushi restaurant. Self-aware

to the point of self-willed, this narrative is deeply ambivalent. When the narrator recalls in 1986 putting a penny under his tongue in an attempt to increase his temperature and trick the school nurse into sending him home so that he could watch a movie, he is suggesting that his desires, his consumption, his lifestyle, have of course played their part in creating the storm that is both devastating the place where he lives *and* allowing him this pleasurable, illuminating (if not electrically illuminated) moment away from his work.

By ending the novel in this way – with a walk through the wreckage to find a sushi restaurant – Lerner is alive to the uncomfortable ironies that his catastrophic narrative presents, and does not try to minimise them. *10:04* negotiates the issue by *not deciding* on the *where* and *when* of climate change – the narrative switches between foreground and background, present and future – because those various, sometimes contradictory, states remain faithful to the complexity of the phenomenon. Climate change, the narrative suggests, means everyone must be in at least two places at once. They are in their own bodies, in a particular place and time, and they are in the effects those bodies have on distant places in future times. ‘I may have no access to the singular world (including the culture and values etc.) of another person,’ Timothy Clark writes, ‘but I am in them in a minimal sense, affecting their lives indirectly, and leave obscure, if unidentifiable, traces and hairline cracks there’.<sup>49</sup> Lines of cause and effect are radically uncertain and so is the narrator’s location. At the end of the novel, Lerner’s narrator is, at the same time, in the restaurant and he is looking back from the Manhattan Bridge at himself and his pregnant friend in the restaurant. In interviews, Lerner has been sceptical about the political efficacy of attempting ‘to throw [his] voice, so to speak’.<sup>50</sup> Here, he is throwing his voice, after all – between two different versions of himself.

Lerner's response to the fraught discontinuities of literary realism is to describe another world that is this world. It is a world where future and present, foreground and background mingle and shift places. Sometimes the reader inhabits the prose of the foreground, sometimes enters the landscape which is the background of the painting in the poem. In *10:04*, the foregrounding of these other forms – of image and poetry – is key to the alternative medial space that the text proposes, a glitchy space between reader and writer, where they can weigh different forms of representation together. In addition to being inside and outside the restaurant, the narrator is, finally, 'at the time of writing'.<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis on the text itself as the space where different subject positions can coexist is a way of sharing, and making explicit, the distributed burden of responsibility for climate change. The final passage is awkward, and even inflammatory, because it shows a climate disaster in which privileged people look for and find privileged pleasures. Climate change is intimately linked to the pleasures of the privileged. The lifestyle of a young, wealthy writer in Brooklyn is among the lifestyles most responsible, and least affected, by climate change. The flickering, indeterminate presence of the narrator, I hope this article shows, is the flickering of his ontological status, as though the very basis of his understanding of the world is beginning to shake. This is not confined to the immediate impacts of extreme weather but pervades the novel as a whole. The experience of reading alerts the reader, once again, to two facts: that the burden of responsibility for action on climate change rests squarely with the privileged citizens of the west; and that, as Timothy Morton has recently argued, 'ecological politics is about expanding, modifying and developing new forms of pleasure, not restraining the meagre pleasures we already experience because we are

only thinking in ways that our current modes of doing things allows'.<sup>52</sup> *10:04* is one such new form of pleasure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ben De Bruyn, 'Realism 4°. Objects, weather and infrastructure in Ben Lerner's *10:04*', *Textual Practice*, 31.5 (29/July 2017), pp.951-971, p.952. David James, 'Transnational Postmodern and Contemporary Literature' in Yogita Goyal (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.136.

<sup>2</sup> De Bruyn, 'Realism 4°', p.951.

<sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: climate change and the unthinkable* (Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017). Hereafter cited as *Derangement*.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Katz, "'I did not walk here all the way from prose": Ben Lerner's virtual poetics', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (23/February 2017), pp. 315–337.

<sup>5</sup> Caleb Klaces, 'The Hatred of Lerner: Caleb Klaces on his struggle with Ben Lerner's Poetics' (*Poetry London* Issue 86, Spring 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The use (and suspicion) of photographic reproductions in literature is as old as photography itself (see Jonathan J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: image, archive, modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007)). But Lerner's insertion of black-and-white images is in dialogue, in particular, with three post-war European writers, Javier Marias, WG Sebald and Alexander Kluge, all of whom he has discussed in interviews, and, in the case of Kluge, has collaborated with (on the book, *The Snows of Venice* (Leipzig: Spekter Books, 2018)). De Bruyn, along with other critics, reads Lerner exclusively in an American literary context. The European influence, however, is equally strong. The use of photographic evidence, while also being suspicious of the 'distortion of reality by representation, "realistic" art is [...] a major theme of [Sebald's] *The Rings of Saturn*', a key influence on *10:04* (Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W.G. Sebald* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p.66).

<sup>7</sup> Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p.237. Hereafter cited as *10:04*.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Derangement*, p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Although Ghosh claims own novels have, in this sense, failed to develop a realism that can accommodate the radical uncertainty of climate change, critics have been more generous. The landscape of Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is described by Robin Chen-Hsing Tsai as 'like a palimpsest ready for metamorphosis' (Robin Chen-Hsing Tsai, 'Animality, Biopolitics, and Umwelt in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*' in Michael Lundblad, ed. *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2017), p.148).

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), p.148.

<sup>11</sup> *Derangement*, pp.60-61.

<sup>12</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 372, quoted in *Derangement*, p.17.

<sup>13</sup> *Derangement*, p.23.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Robbins, 'The Worlding of the American Novel' in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.1096-1106, p.1097.

<sup>15</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: creature, affect, form* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.6.

<sup>16</sup> *10:04*, p.171.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: the novel in a time of climate change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p.24.

<sup>19</sup> Ben De Buryn, 'Realism 4°', p.966.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.969. For an account of this shift from first-wave ecocriticism to a contemporary systems approach, see Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene: ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry* (London New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp.3-24. For such an approach applied to contemporary fiction, see Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*. I have chosen not to use the more expansive terms 'Anthropocene' or Donna Haraway's 'Chthulucene' (*Staying with the Trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)) because I want to focus on how climate change in particular disturbs the spatial

---

coordinates of Lerner's fiction. This is not to deny the validity and power of those terms but to emphasise the effects which are peculiar to climate crisis.

<sup>21</sup> *Derangement*, pp.66-70.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Clark argues that this challenge for writers may be shared by critics: 'engaging climate change may...suggest that many eco-critical arguments are taking place on the wrong scale, or will now need to think on several scales at once' (*The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.136. He calls this a *derangement* of scale, developed in relation to his concept of 'Anthropocene disorder' in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a threshold concept* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), pp.139-157.

<sup>23</sup> *10:04*, p.14.

<sup>24</sup> Boxall, *The Value of The Novel*, p.56.

<sup>25</sup> Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, p.13.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.38.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2*, 37.1 (1/March 2010), pp. 201–213, p. 203.

<sup>28</sup> Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.38.

<sup>29</sup> In climate scientist Mike Hulme's words, the phenomenon is both 'discovered by [post-normal] science' (and therefore mediated) and 'encountered by experience' (and therefore understood directly) (*Mike Hulme, Why We Disagree About Climate Change: understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp.78-79)). I read the collaged texture of *10:04* as one strategy of coming to terms with a phenomenon that, to repurpose an image Lerner uses elsewhere, is experienced as 'an imaginary bomb with real shrapnel' (*The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p.25)).

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a threshold concept* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), p.140.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that this dilemma is real but parochial. The World Health Organisation does put a figure on climate-change-induced deaths (over 150,000 a year),

---

almost exclusively in the global south. See: 'WHO | Climate change'  
[<https://www.who.int/heli/risks/climate/climatechange/en/>], accessed 19/9/2019.

<sup>32</sup> *10:04*, p.17, 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Derangement*, p.23.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p.xi.

<sup>35</sup> *Derangement*, p.60.

<sup>36</sup> *10:04*, p.4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Zemeckis (Director), *Back To The Future* (US: Universal Studios, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> *10:04*, p.9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p.41.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *10:04*, pp.41-2.

<sup>42</sup> *10:04*. p.213.

<sup>43</sup> 'Superstorm Sandy | Path & Facts' [<https://www.britannica.com/event/Superstorm-Sandy>], accessed 19/9/2019.

<sup>44</sup> *Derangement*, pp.62-3.

<sup>45</sup> *10:04* p.233.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p.238.

<sup>47</sup> Although written in prose, Lerner's writing here could be defined as an 'Anthropocene lyric' in the sense proposed by Tom Bristow, in which 'place is felt as it is encountered as being lived out by others, by more than ourselves, by our situatedness in history and ecology' (*The Anthropocene Lyric: an affective geography of poetry, person, place* (Basingstoke New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.7)).

<sup>48</sup> *10:04* p.239.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Lerner's statements, in interviews and critical prose, are clear about his position regarding a writer's ethical obligations to the local:

I can see why, if I, the historical person, choose to write a book that's set in Brooklyn and talks about advances and eating Bluefin tuna or whatever, that it's just automatically in the category of the self-absorbed. [10:04] wants to acknowledge all of that as an attempt to see what spaces for healing can exist, as opposed to the model of fiction that's like 'The way I deal with the political is



---

that I pretend to have access to the mind of a nine-year-old boy in Sudan’ – instead of evading the material conditions of the book (Emily Witt, ‘Ben Lerner: “People say, ‘Oh, here’s another Brooklyn novel by a guy with glasses”’, presented at the The Guardian, section Books, 3/January 2015 [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/ben-lerner-1004-novel-books-interview], accessed 19/9/2019).

In other interviews (2015), the straw person has been different:

It’s much less politically interesting to think that you can throw your voice, so to speak, and write as a seven-year-old Afghan girl or whatever, than it is to actually try to inhabit your present moment (Patrick Langley, ‘Interview with Ben Lerner’ (*The White Review* Issue 13, March 2015)).

On the one hand, Lerner posits that the only interesting position for a writer is not to think she can throw her voice. On the other hand, climate change involves every person on the planet—and the slow progress on global emissions reductions has been characterised as a failure of empathy (see Mike Hulme, *Weathered: cultures of climate* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017). This tension is played out forcefully across the book.

<sup>51</sup> 10:04, p.240.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.210.