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Aalia Ahmed and Lucia Scigliano

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*10:04***

Alex J. Calder
University of Edinburgh

‘Break the narrative’: Metafictional Anthropocene Aesthetics in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Powerbook* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

*Alex J. Calder*¹

University of Edinburgh

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Timothy Clark defines the Anthropocene as ‘a cultural threshold’ of environmental crises, that ‘blurs and even scrambles some crucial categories by which people have made sense of the world and their lives’.² Two contemporary literary texts, Jeanette Winterson’s *The Powerbook* (2000) and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014), respond to these cultural crises through their experimental literary techniques. In *The Powerbook* and *10:04*, their literary forms deploy self-conscious textual styles to emphasise how environmental crises undermine anthropocentric structures of epistemology and history. Against the Anthropocene’s ‘resistance to language itself’ these texts function as ‘hybrid forms’ of literature, which imaginatively engage with the impact of environmental decline through metafiction.³ As Anthropocene aesthetics, these texts represent humanity’s exploitation of natural environments and nonhuman life to offer an ecocritical perspective to a reader. However, the innovative forms of *The Powerbook* and *10:04* resist the conventions of ecological disaster narratives. Adam Trexler argues that ‘[t]here remain[s] significant confusion’ over definitions of ‘cli-fi’ as a subset of speculative or science fiction, and calls for a recognition of how ‘the Anthropocene threaten[s] to rupture the defining features of genre’ as ‘climate novels must

¹ Acknowledgements: thanks go to Dr Benjamin Bateman, for his comments on the original essay concept and his support on my research while at the University of Edinburgh. I would also like to acknowledge Andreea Gabriela Alexa and Lisa Risch for their proofreading and editing, as always.

² Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 9.

³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 84.

change the parameters of storytelling' itself.⁴ Amitav Ghosh similarly claims that 'the Anthropocene resists science fiction' as it is 'precisely not an imagined "other" world apart from ours; not "located in another time or another dimension"' but fundamentally our own precarious world that is experiencing ecological collapse.⁵ Through narratives which reflect upon the production of literature, Winterson and Lerner represent their anxieties about late capitalist society and how this corresponds to an increasingly uncertain future outwith definitions of speculative fiction. By analysing their texts in relation to both contemporary aesthetics and ecocritical theory, Winterson and Lerner emblemise how the artfulness of experimental metafiction can provide alternative perspectives on global environmental crises. This modality of contemporary literature constitutes a form of metafictional Anthropocene aesthetics which explicate the impact of humanity upon the environment precisely through textual subversion. Crucially, these novels challenge boundaries – between fiction and reality, prose and poetic address – through metafictional experimentation beyond self-conscious artifice on a surface level. Instead, both authors' experimental aesthetics emphasise the relationality of experience and represent humanity's impact on the environment while illustrating that it is still a contingency that we can alleviate.

The Powerbook and *10:04* demonstrate how metafictional narrative techniques, associated with postmodern critiques of grand narratives, can imaginatively engage with contemporary environmental crises. According to Linda Hutcheon, critics claim that 'the self-consciously textual cannot 'act' in the world' and 'is fundamentally different from what [Edward] Said calls the "worldly"' despite the 'paradoxically worldly textual dimension' of many postmodernist texts.⁶ The forms of these texts, like postmodernist fiction, are 'always a

⁴ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

⁵ Ghosh, p. 72.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002), pp. 179-80.

critical reworking, never a nostalgic “return” to the past as ‘ironic dialogue[s] with the past of both art and society’.⁷ Winterson’s novels have been described within Hutcheon’s terminology of “‘historiographic metafiction””, which appear to recognise that narrative is not objective and that any representation of history is always an ideologically-laden discourse’.⁸ *The Powerbook* deploys typically postmodern literary techniques of textual play, such as historiographic metafiction and narrative fragmentation, but with an ecocritical edge. Winterson’s metafictional prose effectively ‘[softens] the boundaries between fiction and “reality” and virtual reality [...] to “imagine” rather than go on “facts”’.⁹ Winterson shows how storytelling can examine the Anthropocene beyond factual discourses with a unique imaginative capacity. This ability follows Trexler’s definition that climate fiction can explore environmental crises ‘in ways that studies of glaciers, atmospheric carbon dioxide, and global climate models cannot begin to describe’.¹⁰ Going beyond an apocalyptic sense of impending destruction, the metafictional aesthetics of Winterson and Lerner implement a paradox of being both worldly and self-consciously textual through metafictional Anthropocene aesthetics. By recognising how the Anthropocene is a result of humanist narratives and destructive practices, Winterson and Lerner subvert anthropocentrism while dramatising the possibility that we can still change and intervene in environmental crises.

Both texts approach the challenge of representing emergent futures though comparable, but differing, metafictional strategies to rework the historical progression of the Anthropocene while responding to contemporary culture. Their narrative techniques correspond to a movement away from the linguistic turn of postmodernism in contemporary

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 4.

⁸ Helena Grice and Tim Woods, ‘Reading Jeanette Winterson’s Writing’, in *I’m Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 1-11 (p. 1).

⁹ Justyna Kostkowska, ‘Multiplicity and Coexistence in *The Powerbook*’, in *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 71–90 (p. 87).

¹⁰ Trexler, p. 22.

aesthetic practice and theory. Mark Currie has discussed how contingency and modes of maybe, emphasising doubleness and possibility, are at the heart of a methodological change in narrative theory.¹¹ Similarly, in *Narrating Complexity*, Susan Stepney and Richard Walsh write that the ability to understand ecological, economic, and political systems ‘is substantially dependent upon the ability to make narrative sense of them’ as an ‘innate means’ of comprehending complex systems.¹² These insights present literature’s ability to render the complexity of phenomena through narrative as a means of engaging with contemporary experience. In contrast to continual internal linguistic reference and a proliferation of language games, literature has an epistemic value that affords a reader new perspectives on contemporary crises as complex, albeit contingent, phenomena. By recognising how metafiction, in particular, can be contextualised as a means of grasping environmental crises, Winterson and Lerner’s texts demonstrate the relevance of narrative experimentation to seeing the contemporary situation anew. By closely analysing *The Powerbook* and *10:04* in turn, we can trace the dissolution of late postmodernist aesthetics at the beginning of the twenty-first century towards recent discussions about literature after postmodernism. In contrast to irony and complicit critique of humanism and cultural capitalism,¹³ Winterson and Lerner’s textual play realises how ecological disasters are contingencies that, through awareness and individual change, humans can still change.

10:04 attempts to hybridise poetry and prose through autofiction, as Lerner’s formal innovations find new ways of representing contemporary reality rather than deconstructive language to address an impending sense of crisis. While discussing *10:04*’s narrative style, Alison Gibbons describes ‘contemporary autofiction as metamodern (a paradigm of the post-

¹¹ Mark Currie, ‘Modes of Maybe and Forms of Contingency in the Theory of Narrative’, Theory Now Symposium (University of Glasgow, 23 Mar 2019).

¹² Richard Walsh and Susan Stepney, *Narrating Complexity* (New York: Springer International, 2018), p. 319.

¹³ Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 13.

postmodern)' as it 'represents and questions selfhood, ontology, truth and memory'.¹⁴ Analogous to a newly defined space of metamodernism, Lerner's text inhabits a 'tension [...] of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all' in response to contemporary ethical crises (original emphasis).¹⁵ Oscillating between critical despair and optimistic idealism, *10:04* represents both the distress and urgency for an ethos of revitalising hope in response to environmental crises. Rather than claiming that identity is a textual construct, *10:04*'s autofictional form demonstrates how 'reading novels, we connect to the lives and selves of others and precariously experience the veracity of fiction'.¹⁶ As indicated by Gibbons's recent conference paper, Lerner's innovative literary experimentation has a directly ecological resonance, responding to environmental crises in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Through narratives which oscillate through time, between genres, and conceptual distinctions, Winterson and Lerner write experimental aesthetics that engage with the cultural crisis of the Anthropocene. The simultaneously metareferential and worldly narratives of *The Powerbook* and *10:04* exemplify Wolfgang Funk's theory of reconstructive literary aesthetics, which 'generate ontological and epistemological paradoxes' that 'require the reader's response and responsibility to recreate a coherent act of literary communication'.¹⁸ By means of metafiction, both texts stipulate a reader's response to their experimental forms about the production of human history while pre-empting a relational engagement with the Anthropocene. Through analogous forms of contemporary fiction, Winterson and Lerner use self-conscious literary devices to paradoxically communicate to the reader. Their

¹⁴ Alison Gibbons, 'Autonarration, I, and Odd Address in Ben Lerner's Autofictional Novel *10:04*', in *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language*, ed. by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 75–96 (p. 76).

¹⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2.1 (2010), 1–14 (p. 6).

¹⁶ Gibbons, 'Autonarration', 87.

¹⁷ Alison Gibbons, 'Metamodernist Futures or "a future that had never arrived": Climate Change and Temporality in *10:04*', AHRC Metamodernist Research Conference (Radboud University Nijmegen, 4 Jul 2019).

¹⁸ Wolfgang Funk, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 6.

metafictional texts present Anthropocene aesthetics which emphasise relational multiplicity as an alternative to environmental destruction.

Winterson's *The Powerbook*, written during the technological optimism of the new millennium, self-consciously engages with the contingencies of the twenty-first century. *The Powerbook* demonstrates the mutability of experience as textual narrative through the novel's unconventional romantic plot through the exchange of online stories. Through metareference, Winterson emphasises multiplicity and subjective agency in being in the world, with a conscious appeal for the reader to enact change. Justyna Kostkowska argues that *The Powerbook* 'promotes ecological values of multiplicity and coexistence' through its hybridised, experimental form: an "'anarchic" space that questions rigid boundaries, reworks old definitions, and encourages involved awareness of other systems and worlds'.¹⁹ However, going further than Kostkowska's reading that the text 'implicitly promotes a progressive ecological philosophy without direct reference to environmental issues',²⁰ *The Powerbook* also represents the cumulative impact of human history through metafiction. In the final chapter 'SAVE', Ali recalls going down 'to the Thames at the lowest tide of the century' and seeing an assortment of debris: traces of the past that lead her to contemplate the fragmentary nature of history.²¹ While considering the transience of this 'collection of found objects washed up through time [...] all subject to the tide', Winterson's historiographic metafiction articulates how '[w]e cannot rely on the facts [...] Explanations drain away. Life is what it really is – a jumble, a chance, the upturned room of a madman'.²² In the present tense, Ali decides to go the Thames at low tide once more, navigating through the remnants which '[c]enturies have been pumped into' the 'dirty river'.²³ The levels of pollution in the

¹⁹ Kostkowska, p. 72.

²⁰ Kostkowska, p. 72.

²¹ Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook* (2000; London: Vintage Books, 2014), pp. 241-42.

²² Winterson, pp. 242-43.

²³ Winterson, p. 243.

riverbanks are a result of passed eras, from when ‘[m]ammoths used to drink from the shallow sandbanks’ to anthropocentric definitions of the Thames as ‘a Roman river, an Elizabethan river’.²⁴ This succession of images leads to the speculation that this trajectory ‘is the route to the Millennium Dome’.²⁵ This references how Winterson’s text is ‘tightrope walking the twenty-first century’,²⁶ being between the “Great Acceleration” since 1945 in which human impacts on the entire biosphere have achieved an unprecedented and arguably dangerous intensity’ and the oncoming millennium.²⁷ Winterson states that the entire text we have just read is impossibly ‘the true history of the world’, articulating how this premillennial situation is one contingency among many like the fluid oscillation of stories that comprise *The Powerbook*: ‘You can change the story. You are the story’.²⁸ Comparable to Jason Moore’s argument that ‘[h]ow we conceptualize the origins of a crisis has everything to do with how we choose to respond to that crisis’, Winterson suggests different beginnings and endings can be written to refute ‘the relations of power, capital, and nature that rendered fossil capitalism so deadly in the first place’.²⁹ Through its metareferential address to the reader, *The Powerbook* ‘manage[s] to conceive of concrete, sincere environmental politics even while remaining, to varying degrees, sceptical [sic], ironic, and self-reflexive’.³⁰ The text proposes that history is a forceful but mutable narrative, positing that momentum behind humanity’s progressive exploitation of natural environments can be redefined to find alternatives to impending catastrophe.

The Powerbook collapses the distinction between the intratextual real and fictional worlds it generates through its series of interconnected stories, written for a reader who

²⁴ Winterson, p. 243.

²⁵ Winterson, p. 243.

²⁶ Winterson, p. 166.

²⁷ Clark, p. 1.

²⁸ Winterson, pp. 243-44.

²⁹ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 172-73.

³⁰ Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), pp. 1-2.

requests ‘*Freedom, just for one night*’ (original emphasis).³¹ Winterson’s authorial interventions short circuit the oscillation between the ‘realist’ plot of Ali’s romantic entanglement to this married woman and the virtual stories that comprise the text, using metafiction to address both Ali’s lover and *The Powerbook*’s actual reader. Drawing upon Rosi Braidotti’s new materialist philosophy, Fiona McCulloch writes that *The Powerbook* ‘dramatizes a transpositional nomadism in its journeying between boundaries of difference’ through ‘a hybrid narrative that exists in the space between fiction and criticism, navigating a new possibility in the wake of postmodernist fragmentation’.³² The text’s intermedial form disrupts the mimetic plot as a refusal of ‘automatic writing [...] of writing yourself towards an ending that need never be told’.³³ In amongst *The Powerbook*’s textual play of fluctuating virtual stories, Winterson appeals to the reader to ‘[b]reak the narrative’ and refuse the momentum of ‘all the stories that have been told so far’.³⁴ This has an ecocritical urgency as ‘we need a different ending’ to the increasing damage of the Anthropocene.³⁵ For the author and her character Ali, the creative possibilities of storytelling offer fluid and personal ‘wild places’ beyond the Anthropocene’s ‘Talmudic layering of story on story, map on map [...] the weight of accumulation’.³⁶ By ‘tell[ing] the story differently’, Winterson’s experimental fiction attempts to ‘allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use’,³⁷ in tandem with Ghosh’s argument that traditional forms of literature fail to represent environmental crisis. Through this conflation of narrative style with anthropocentric pollution, the text expresses that ‘the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the

³¹ Winterson, p. 3.

³² Fiona McCulloch, ‘Boundaries. Desire: Philosophical Nomadism in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Powerbook* and *The Stone Gods*’, in *Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) pp. 45-74 (52-53).

³³ Winterson, p. 53.

³⁴ Winterson, p. 53.

³⁵ Winterson, p. 53.

³⁶ Winterson, p. 54.

³⁷ Winterson, p. 53.

imagination'.³⁸ Winterson's metafiction advocates the value of storytelling to provide virtual access to other worlds that allow imaginative freedom beyond the restrictive confines of reality. Yet this is not an act of escapism from the 'one world – material, seeming-solid [...] the weight of that is quite enough', but rather the idea that fiction can provide 'another chance' for how we relate to the environment through the insights made possible in stories.³⁹ *The Powerbook's* metafictional narrative provides a worldly engagement with environmental crises, exhibiting the positive value of storytelling to destabilise an anthropocentric historical trajectory.

Crucial to Winterson's idiosyncratic style is the continual undermining of binary oppositions and epistemological boundaries. In contrast to 'transcendent, definitive mappings, transparent knowledge systems, or confident epistemologies', *The Powerbook* is a novel which represents Stacy Alaimo's concept of 'dwelling in the dissolve' during environmental crisis 'where fundamental boundaries have begun to come undone, unraveled by unknown futures'.⁴⁰ *The Powerbook* foregrounds the unruly desire of '[t]he heart. Carbon-based primitive in a silicon world' in a metamorphosing narrative of Ali and her lover who continually switch genders, identities, locations, and fictional situations throughout the text.⁴¹ Here, the primacy of love against social constructions is expressed through a metaphor of an organic element in contrast to a synthetic material used for machines. Winterson emphasises the synchronicity between restrictive gender norms and the discourse of mechanics, which mean that Ali's lover cannot leave the structure of her life as 'there would be nothing to hold her'.⁴² Leaving her stagnant marriage would release Ali's lover into 'outer space. Space

³⁸ Ghosh, p. 9.

³⁹ Winterson, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 2-3.

⁴¹ Winterson, p. 40.

⁴² Winterson, p. 39.

without gravity or weight, where bit by bit the self disintegrates'.⁴³ This figurative language of physics recalls Alaimo's identification of a 'hegemonic masculinity [that] lurks in the representations of climate change science—the invisible, unmarked, ostensibly perspectiveless perspective' that denies the necessity of 'not just abstract but virtual conceptualizations' to address the complexity of environmental crises.⁴⁴ As a rebuttal to a humanist, metaphysical understanding of the world, Winterson iterates how science's 'grand theory of the universe [...] will not make it any easier to read the plain text of our hearts' and subjective relations with each other and the environment.⁴⁵ However, she does not deny the effectiveness of scientific discourse for understanding phenomena; McCulloch has identified how 'scientific theory of strings and Winterson's textual universe of spiralling thread-like narrative structure' are explicitly connected as '[y]et another boundary is dissolved, namely of science and fiction'.⁴⁶ Rather, Winterson subverts the idea of science as a totalising narrative and dissolves categorical dualisms. *The Powerbook* challenges 'strict, moralized limits to futurity' established by 'normative, reproductive heterosexuality' to demonstrate an 'environmental ethics rooted in futurity' within Nicole Seymour's interstice of queer theory and environmentalism.⁴⁷ *The Powerbook* proposes that 'a truth of the heart' can be written beyond cultural boundaries,⁴⁸ articulating the fluidity of experience outwith factual discourses and thereby promoting alternative perspectives on contemporary experience.

Through metafictional Anthropocene aesthetics, Winterson presents relational ways of being as alternatives to environmentally destructive practices. Emma Hutchison writes that Winterson 'cultivate[s] a sense of contingency that is capable of disturbing dominant political

⁴³ Winterson, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Alaimo, p. 98.

⁴⁵ Winterson, p. 97.

⁴⁶ McCulloch, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Seymour, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Winterson, p. 40.

conceptions' to provide 'previously marginalised voices or perspectives a political space'.⁴⁹ While Hutchison argues that Winterson's fiction 'reveal[s], in a playful but also in a very real, everyday manner, that notions of gender and history are neither natural nor fixed',⁵⁰ this cultivation of contingency is also intrinsically ecocritical. *The Powerbook* uses storytelling 'to break from or imagine a way around the confines of fixed or static understandings of the social world' to find 'a way to construct new possibilities – new realities – through imaginative language'.⁵¹ On a visit to the Louvre Museum with her lover, Ali watches reflected light 'turning the puddles into ten thousand mirrors that shone on the glass as if to furnace it', leading her to consider how 'Nothing is solid. Nothing is fixed'.⁵² The changing reflections of light destabilise the solidity of the historical glass pyramid to show how '[t]hese are images that time changes and that change time, just as the sun and the rain play on the surface of things'.⁵³ This moment simultaneously indicates to Ali that a relationship with her partner is possible, showing that solid perceptions of truth can dissolve. Ali remembers this moment later in the text, recalling how '[d]rops of rain fell from the hem of our coats [...] [e]ach one was a complete world, a crystal ball that held our future'.⁵⁴ The raindrops reflect kaleidoscopic 'universes dripping with worlds' as Winterson uses an intimate weather metaphor to represent a multitude of potential futures.⁵⁵ Such contingencies beyond immediate surfaces are presented through the image of raindrops, which connect meteorology with contingency and futurity. Winterson's metafictional paradoxes and layering of metaphoric tensions stress the positive value of storytelling to provide 'another view' beyond 'the window that is open on the screen [...] full of detail, where the meaning is often lost

⁴⁹ Emma Hutchison, 'Unsettling Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Cultivation of Political Contingency', *Global Society*, 24.3 (2010), 351-368 (p. 352).

⁵⁰ Hutchison, p. 367.

⁵¹ Hutchison, pp. 359-360.

⁵² Winterson, p. 44.

⁵³ Winterson, p. 44.

⁵⁴ Winterson, p. 230.

⁵⁵ Winterson, p. 230.

amongst the facts'.⁵⁶ Through these self-conscious addresses to the reader, *The Powerbook* imaginatively engages with the crises of the Anthropocene and simulates contingencies of reinvention and active change beyond the surface appearance of contemporary experience.

10:04 also responds to environmental contingencies through its worldly metafictional form; however, Lerner frames his textual engagement with the oncoming future through an autofictional narrative which reflects upon the production of the text itself. In contrast to the technological optimism of *The Powerbook*, *10:04* was written more recently in the second decade of the twenty-first century and is overtly self-conscious about the proliferation of late capitalism and has a focused attention on its own materiality. Lerner self-references the material circumstances of *10:04*'s composition in the opening sequence, revealing that the novel came from a "strong six-figure" advance based on a story that had appeared in *The New Yorker* that is reprinted later in the text.⁵⁷ Lerner shows the development of *10:04* from being a book about literary fraudulence, which was the initial concept that was auctioned to publishers, to 'the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them [...] an actual present alive with multiple futures'.⁵⁸ As Pieter Vermeulen argues, Lerner's 'metafictional elements [...] emphatically do not serve to expose fiction as pure artifice or expose reality as an imaginative construct [...] but in fact serve to affirm the inseparability of actuality and virtuality'.⁵⁹ Denying that *10:04* is part of the New Sincerity movement, Daniel Katz interprets Lerner's novels as 'extensions and prostheses of a poetic project' which 'very much act in the service of [his] poetry [...] which occurs both within and without them'.⁶⁰ As a poet responding to contemporary crises of late

⁵⁶ Winterson, p. 103.

⁵⁷ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 4; 'The Golden Vanity' reprinted across pp. 61-81.

⁵⁸ Lerner, p. 194.

⁵⁹ Pieter Vermeulen, 'How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future', *Political Theory*, 45.5 (2017), 660-681 (p. 667).

⁶⁰ Daniel Katz, "'I did not walk here all the way from prose": Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2017), 315-337 (pp. 316-317).

capitalism and the Anthropocene, Lerner attempts to realise a textual form which prevents ‘the work of art being subsumed within the inevitable damages of capital, [as] the damages of capital are subsumed within it’.⁶¹ As a novel, *10:04* is ‘on the very edge of fiction’ by presenting how the text is written,⁶² thereby blurring distinctions between autobiography and fiction to respond to the representational crisis of the Anthropocene. Gibbons maintains that the doubled ‘ontological reference of *10:04*’ through self-conscious autofiction ‘is the closest we can get to authentic truth’.⁶³ Functioning as a textual paradox that uses metareference precisely to engage in world issues, *10:04* is an example of ‘reconstructive literature’ in Funk’s terms.⁶⁴ By concentrating on materiality and the future, *10:04* generates poetic correspondences which lead to moments of heightened awareness of relational dynamics through metafictional Anthropocene aesthetics.

The narration’s sensitivity to the changing climate and the material histories of commodities provide self-reflective, ecocritical reflections. This is evident in Lerner’s attention to the physical presence of ephemera amid a subdued response to environmental crises. During Hurricane Irene, the narrator Ben becomes ‘viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy’.⁶⁵ While holding a container of instant coffee ‘like the marvel that it was’, Ben imagines the origins of the coffee beans and all of the stages of its production before it reached the supermarket ‘as if the social relations that produced the object [...] began to glow within it as they were threatened’.⁶⁶ Paradoxically, the instant coffee has ‘a certain aura’ as ‘the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor [*sic*]’ become ‘visible in the commodity itself’.⁶⁷ Lerner

⁶¹ Jennifer Ashton, ‘Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry’ (2015): <http://nonsite.org/feature/totaling-the-damage> [Accessed 09 April 2019].

⁶² Lerner, p. 237.

⁶³ Gibbons, ‘Autonarration’, p. 91.

⁶⁴ Funk, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Lerner, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Lerner, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Lerner, p. 19.

metareferences Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in which the unique presence of an artistic object is diminished due to its technological reproducibility.⁶⁸ As an inversion of the loss of an auratic perception of objects, Lerner's prose shows how the 'instant coffee is made newly individual by weather-induced scarcity, and its resultant glow [...] illuminat[ing] the many lines of industry converging in this commodity' to reveal 'the complexity of contemporary production'.⁶⁹ During the storm, 'what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many' through Ben's encounter with the 'social relations' of the instant coffee.⁷⁰ This instance also refers to the autofictional narration of *10:04*, which explicates Lerner's experience of writing *10:04* in relation to contemporary events. As a novel that will be published and openly disseminated, *10:04*'s exhibition value is grounded in environmental politics through its oscillating representation of Lerner as both subject and author of the text. Through the conflation of the instant coffee as an auratic object and its status as an extended metaphor in a self-conscious autofictional text, *10:04* presents the relations behind commodity and literary production as an alternative to the environmentally destructive practices of modernity.

The storm highlights how the future is contingent upon events which can change the structure of everyday reality, evident in the epigraph's refrain (a quote from Benjamin) that recurs throughout the text: '[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different' (original emphasis).⁷¹ As the storm intensifies outside, Ben projects some films on to the wall of his friend Alex's apartment and worries about the potential damage caused by the hurricane. When he watches *Back to the Future*, Ben listens to the storm radio 'while Marty travelled

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992) 211-244 (p. 215).

⁶⁹ Ben De Bruyn, 'Realism 4°: Objects, Weather, and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's *10:04*', *Textual Practice*, 3.5 (2017), 951-971 (p. 958).

⁷⁰ Lerner, p. 19.

⁷¹ Lerner, p. 19.

back to 1955 – the year, incidentally, nuclear power first lit up a town'.⁷² The film is based in 'Arco, Idaho, also home to the first meltdown in 1961' which causes Ben to contrast the film's plot of 'lack[ing] plutonium to power the time-travelling car' to 'real life [where] it's seeped into the Fukushima soil'.⁷³ Ben notes the risk of 'the Indian Point reactors just upriver' to the hurricane's force in the narration of *10:04*,⁷⁴ but this was also a real danger during the actual, past event of the hurricane. This is an example of how Lerner interjects concrete facts into a seemingly ironic narrative, such as when Ben reassures Roberto over his fears for future 'water wars' while simultaneously mentioning in the text that '[a]lmost half of humanity will face water scarcity by 2030'.⁷⁵ By representing visions of environmental destruction triggered by a story, Lerner emphasises that '[w]e inhabit the present, which is sandwiched between a fixed past and an open future' and uses *10:04* to express a 'new experience of time'.⁷⁶ *10:04*'s form demonstrates Currie's argument that 'fiction [...] [has] a critical role in the understanding of what lies outside of fiction' through the contradiction that '[t]he present for a reader in a fictional narrative is not really the present at all but the past'.⁷⁷ Lerner highlights how, by reading the text, what appears to be in the future while reading *10:04* is really a transposition of Lerner's past as autofiction. This textual paradox shows that while *10:04*'s narrative simulates the immediacy of past experiences, Lerner shows that the actual future is a dynamic contingency which we can influence to mitigate environmental crises.

The possible destruction of New York fails to materialise, as Ben 'glanced at the instant coffee on the counter and it was no longer a little different from itself, no longer an

⁷² Lerner, p. 22.

⁷³ Lerner, p. 22.

⁷⁴ Lerner, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Lerner, p. 222.

⁷⁶ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁷⁷ Currie, *About Time*, p. 6.

emissary from a world to come'.⁷⁸ Ben experiences 'disappointment in my relief at the failure of the storm' as 'the physical intimacy with Alex, just like the sociability with strangers or the aura around objects, wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased'.⁷⁹ These relational 'moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived' and are elided by anthropocentric structures of living.⁸⁰ However, as part of *10:04*'s narrative, these sequences convey the disparity between the past and an uncertain future. A modality of relational subjectivity beyond human structures of the Anthropocene and late capitalism is emphasised by Lerner as a response to climate crises. As Ralph Clare argues, Lerner generates 'a politics and utopia of the everyday, wherein the smallest, seemingly personal disruptions in one's life [...] are related to catastrophic, global events, such as environmental and economic disaster'.⁸¹ On the opposite page of the end of this episode is an image of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* with a caption from Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'.⁸² Benjamin comments that while we experience life as an immediate 'chain of events', the figurative angel of history sees 'one single catastrophe [...] the storm [which] drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky'.⁸³ Benjamin's concept of history as a destructive storm 'we call progress' is recontextualised by Lerner to refer to Hurricane Irene, connecting the risk of extreme climates to the progression of exploitative human history.⁸⁴ This technique of metaleptic recontextualisation is referenced when Ben encounters Alena's 'Institute for Totaled Art' which collects artworks that have lost their monetary value as they have suffered

⁷⁸ Lerner, p. 24.

⁷⁹ Lerner, p. 24.

⁸⁰ Lerner, p. 24.

⁸¹ Ralph Clare, 'Freedom and Formlessness: Ben Lerner's *10:04* and the Affective Historical Present', *Open Library of Humanities*, 4.2 (2018), 1-30 (p. 13).

⁸² Lerner, p. 25.

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in *Selected Writings: 1938-1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al, 4 vols (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), iv, 389-400 (p. 392).

⁸⁴ Benjamin, p. 392.

damage.⁸⁵ Alena's artistic project presents 'objects liberated' from the logic of capital value and recalls 'the jar of instant coffee' for Ben.⁸⁶ Through ecocritical metafiction, Lerner instantiates 'the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present' and compels readers to 'co-construct a world in which moments can be something other than the element of profit'.⁸⁷ Jennifer Ashton argues that this is how Lerner's 'aesthetics of resistance' culminate in 'the totaled work that is *10:04*'.⁸⁸ Given the fact that the world is experiencing the destructive repercussions of human history, *10:04* represents the damage of climate change to appeal for collective responsibility and the realisation of compassionate sensitivity amidst the precariousness of the contemporary moment. Lerner's formal experimentations with autofiction and temporality generate a self-conscious Anthropocene aesthetic through textual paradoxes that articulate hope for change and constructive interventions in response to environmental crises.

In contrast to the post-apocalyptic narratives such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* or Jeanette Winterson's later *The Stone Gods*, for example, *The Powerbook* and *10:04* are examples of contemporary fiction that engage with environmental crises through experimental literary techniques. Through metafictional forms, these texts broaden definitions of climate fiction to offer hope for preventive action in the present rather than generate apocalyptic despair in a doomed future. These texts emphasise that future ecological collapse is still a contingency that can be redressed if humanity realises its potential for change. By focalising upon the relational nature of experience through forms of metafiction, Winterson and Lerner critique the historical progression of the Anthropocene and exploitative relations of late capitalism to show the precarity of global ecology that must be protected before irretrievable environmental catastrophe.

⁸⁵ Lerner, pp. 131-132.

⁸⁶ Lerner, p. 133.

⁸⁷ Lerner, p. 47.

⁸⁸ Ashton, 'Totaling the Damage'.

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