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ON THE VERGE OF (NOT?) EXPIRING:
URBAN AND NARRATIVE REARRANGEMENTS
IN BEN LERNER'S *10:04*

Various rearrangements, personal, spatial, and temporal ones, constitute the central component upon which Ben Lerner's novel *10:04*, published in 2014, is built. The novel's present is connected to the past, either personal or communal, which is somehow always revisited, and ultimately affects and defines the future. Due to the diverse temporal textures of the novel, *10:04* has been studied through a temporal perspective.¹ While acknowledging the multiplicity of temporal aspect in the novel, my perspective focuses also on the novel's spatial dimension. What does rearrangement—a word often repeated in the novel—entail and how do temporality and the urban environment inform each other? Firstly, I approach the novel through a spatiotemporal prism and regard *10:04* to be a contemporary urban novel, with New York being its major protagonist; secondly, I argue that this dual (spatiotemporal) quality becomes a vehicle which reinforces a feeling of almost-expiration engraved onto the novel's narrative that extends to and ultimately defines the urban condition of New York in the 2010s.

10:04 is a New York novel that explores the city's ecosystem through the lens of rearrangement, a concept that is liable to many interpretations. The feelings of rearrangement that arise in the novel correspond to personal ne-

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¹ Alison Gibbons, in her article "Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's *10:04* and 'the utopian glimmer of fiction'" (2021) approaches *10:04* as a metamodern novel through the idea of the Anthropocene and in relation to temporality. Also, Leonid Bilmes' (2020) article examines the novel through the prism of temporality.

gotiations, distinct and divergent possibilities that might or might not happen, as well as an urban space and bodies that are on the verge of expiring. The narrative begins when Ben, the protagonist-narrator, recalls a baby octopus, which he has probably just consumed, and which has been “massaged to death” (3).² The image seems to highlight the literal, life versus death, sense of expiration. Subsequently, Ben reflects on the *Back to the Future* movie stating that “as Marty’s time-traveling disrupts the prehistory of his family, he and his siblings begin to fade from” (9) a photograph; the reference to the movie connects to the novel and the rearrangement sensation that pervades it, indicating both change and the fragility of the present, and, simultaneously, blurs the lines between the past, present, and future. This temporal multiplicity sets an agony-oriented tone that saturates the novel and fosters feelings of anxiety, as even the present becomes more flickering, and everyone’s futures could be fading away soon. This in turn affirms the rhetoric of existence versus non-existence, which is further explored in the novel: Ben attests that he lives in a world that keeps on “rearranging itself around” him (32) as a “doctor... discovered incidentally an entirely asymptomatic and potentially aneurysmal dilation of [his] aortic root that required close monitoring and probable surgical intervention” (4). Alex, Ben’s friend, undergoes her own personal rearrangement confessing to him that her mother is being diagnosed with late-stage cancer. On a communal level, the city faces an upcoming threat, something that creates “a familiar sensation” (32) of change and, gradually, of possible expiration. In all those cases, bodies and spatial entities are under attack, rearranging themselves, changing in a threatening way and facing potential decomposition.

Bodily and spatial fragility suggests that living organisms and environments are always on the threshold of existence, confronting an upcoming non-existence in the form of physical, organic expiration which marks the moment when the future begins to collapse. The bodily malfunction, for instance, that Ben suffers from becomes the main factor that puts his present in a rearrangement mode and paves the way for potential future expiration. The same applies to New York threatened by an approaching “unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core” (16), which threatens the well-being of the city’s ecosystem.³ As Ben and New York’s realities converge, “the setting takes precedence over character ... ris[ing] to the level of protagonist”

² Most parenthetical references are to Lerner’s *10:04* and are indicated by a page number only.

³ Ben de Bruyn (2017, 953), for instance, sees *10:04* as an Anthropocene novel, which “highlights the environmental trauma of climate change.”

(Wolfe Levy 1978, 66). What this means is that in the novel the city is a distinct character that stands on its own and interacts with the individuals occupying its space. The city, like other characters, “becom[es] one organism” (17), a body that faces its own challenges, which brings to mind Ben Highmore’s (2014) take on the “city-as-a-body” (29) metaphor. The body is “one of the most dominant metaphors for thinking and experiencing the city”, (28), a closed system, a “body-city of lungs and hearts, of stomachs and bowels” (29), “internally coherent and self-sustaining” (29). In other words, the city’s architecture, infrastructure, different topographical characteristics, as well as its inhabitants, are all incorporated into the city’s body.

Highmore’s “city-as-a-body” metaphor is further explored as Ben becomes “aware of the delicacy of the bridges and tunnels spanning it, and of the traffic [directed] through those arteries” (28). As the narrator postulates, “[w]henver [he] walked across the Manhattan Bridge, [he] remembered [himself] as having crossed the Brooklyn Bridge. This is because you can see the latter from the former, and because the latter is more beautiful” (134). Within the city’s limits, the natural environment, organic bodies, and any material entities co-exist and interact with one another showcasing an interplay and a communal dimension. More specifically, in the novel, Ben approaches the city as such, meaning that the city is not simply any body but rather a communal one, hence introducing the city-as-a-communal-body metaphor; in moments of crises, for instance, when “[a]n usually large cyclonic system” (16) threatens to approach New York or “a record-setting snowstorm” (16) occurs, the city is experienced mutually by those inhabiting it. As Ben also acknowledges the feeling of “a proprioceptive flicker in advance of a communal body” (28), and continues that he experiences “softly colliding with so many bodies as a pleasure ... as if the crowd were a single, sensate organism (29), it seems that the city is experienced both communally and idiosyncratically. Highmore (2014) talks about coherence and self-sufficiency when the city appears to be “in a healthy state” (29), functions properly, and its parts are coordinated. Nevertheless, what happens when the city faces life-threatening situations, like the ones that happened in the past, for example 9/11, or the climate menaces of *10:04*’s present? In those moments, there is a lack of consistency and lack of coherence as the communal body is not healthy anymore. When the city-body deals with such lack of consistency, with its parts not being fully coordinated the way they should, co-dependent sensibility, a form of becoming mutually aware of and communally experiencing the threat, emerges. For instance, as the storm ap-

proaches, Ben and his friend Alex find themselves at the “large empty spaces” (18) of a store alongside “other shoppers” (18), all of them being aware of potential destruction, trying to prepare themselves for it. It is this kind of co-dependency that motivates a plethora of interrelations to take place within the confines of the city-body and to underlie several pathologies of the communal, twenty-first-century, urban fabric.

It can be argued, then, that in the novel New York’s ecosystem is represented in terms of the-city-as-a-possibly-fragile-communal-body metaphor. Just like all organic bodies are susceptible to their own fragility, so is the city. The multiple layers that characterize the city’s space, such as its architecture and the city’s skyline, attest to its past, simultaneously both informing and questioning the present and paving the way for the potentialities of the future. The traumas of the past continue to be physically engraved on the city’s urban environment. This is visible, for instance, in the destruction inflicted upon the city by the events of 9/11, which resulted in topographical rearrangements and a consequent evolution of the city’s fabric. The city, however, never forgot the trauma⁴ it experienced, turning its rearrangements into a testimony to its past. After the events of 9/11, New York confronted a physical, spatial expiration that partially materialized through the collapse of the Twin Towers. Commenting on this visceral moment, Brian Jarvis (2006) describes New York as an urban environment being “in shock, wounded, a traumatized topography” (55). The wounds Jarvis describes continue to penetrate the urban fabric of the present, physically marking Manhattan’s Grid and the city as a whole. Architectural traces of the trauma the city experienced and the healing process it went through intermingle temporalities, rendering the past ever present. At the same time, the novel’s precarious and environmentally challenged present indicates the current pathologies that start from the city’s urban environment and extend to the individual, creating all those feelings of concern and anxiety that the characters experience.

The city’s current condition is further affected by potential expiration, as a cyclone which threatens the city’s survival approaches. This is a pathology which, while rooted in the present and hanging over the future, condemns the city to an unstable state that invariably brings forth the trauma of the past. Roberto, a child character in the novel, whom Ben helps with his school project, postulates that “[w]hen all the skyscrapers freeze they’re going to

⁴ Caruth (1996) defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11).

fall down like September eleventh ... and crush everyone" (12). The trauma of the past is present in the consciousness of the people inhabiting New York; it continues to be communally experienced and is bound to be relived whenever a catastrophe looms on the horizon. As a result, it creates a state of communal anxiety. It is already the first storm threat which appears in the novel that starts rearranging New York; in order to prepare the city for possible destruction, the urban space is divided "into zones" (16); evacuations are "mandated" (16), and the subway system is "shut down before the storm [makes] landfall" (16). Ultimately, the storm proves to be only a potentiality that ultimately fades away and dissipates quietly as an event/non-event of the past, securing a particular kind of expected future for New York. Nevertheless, this state of relative security does not last long, as the city's future is once again on the verge of being re-written when "for the second time in a year, [people are] ... facing once-in-a-generation weather" (213). The city's reality is that of lability. Whatever is supposed to happen is not a constant anymore but only a possibility that might or might not materialize with the threat being always present.

The fact that the past affects the present and the present extends to the future renders the temporality of events multipronged and suffused with potentiality. There is a certain kind of fluidity inherent to the novel's temporality and the-on-the-verge expiration that the described urban ecosystem experiences; everything and everyone constantly arranges and rearranges themselves without knowing what the outcome might be. An example of such communal rearrangement concerns the storm and, ultimately, its failure to materialize; it is the threat of the upcoming storm that brings Ben closer to his friend Alex, possibly rearranging their relationship. It is the same communally experienced threat that fosters social interactions like the one Ben and Alex share with a teenager at a supermarket, all of them "exchanging jokes about [their] ill-preparedness" (20). This kind of rearrangement is both communal and temporality-driven as well as uncertain; Ben asserts that the moment the storm did not take place, "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" (24). In this sense, New York City in *10:04* constitutes a communal space, a body of uncertainty and multidimensionality where the boundaries of all temporalities are not distinct but rather blurred, interrelated, and inextricably entwined. Thus, it could be argued that in the novel, New York is a major protagonist, whose body in-

corporates into its entity every-one and every-thing else, rendering all a part of the same communal existence, characterized by interconnectedness, perpetual transition (and possibly crisis), and an unyielding state of almost-expiring. This is further manifested through the connection that Ben shares with the city; he is a flâneur who has developed a psychosomatic relationship with New York and explores its space through his personal detours, while roaming around its streets. Observing people and the urban environment that both he and they inhabit, Ben addresses the reader, asking:

Have you seen people pause in revolving doors like divers decompressing, transitioning slowly so as to prevent nitrogen bubbles from forming in the blood, or noticed the puzzled look that many people wear—I found a bench across Fifth Avenue and sat and watched—when they step onto the sidewalk, as if they’ve suddenly forgotten something important, but aren’t sure what: their keys, their phone, the particulars of their loss? (43)

From this perspective, New York is depicted as a body in the process of continuous transitioning while a dichotomized image of movement and stasis, presence and loss informs its urban texture. When it comes to the ways Ben relates to the city, he becomes a Debordian *dérive*-practitioner, passing rapidly “through varied ambiances” (Debord 2006, 62) that compose New York: he feels “the trains moving underground” (28), he walks “home through the park” (31) and walks “past Lincoln Center, where the well dressed” (126) leave the opera. Nevertheless, Ben’s experience differs from the classic Situationist approach: every now and then, he does indeed “drop [his] relations, [his] work and leisure activities, and all [his] other usual motives for movement and action, and let [himself] be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters [he] find[s] there” (Debord 2006, 62). In this sense, Ben pauses his life, practicing the Debordian “letting-go” (2006, 62) and becomes an observer that pays attention to the city’s details; but more than half a century since the “Theory of *Dérive*” (1958) was written, in 2014, Ben’s current *dérives* are characterized by other qualities as well. Ben’s practice of observing extends from the spatial to the social sphere, revealing a socio-spatial dimension and the relationships that are fostered within it.

New York’s urban body faces challenges and undergoes rearrangements but, at the same time, brings together its different parts; within its physical boundaries, Ben, apart from a *dérive*-practitioner and an observer, becomes a collector who starts encounters and notices, assembles, and ultimately narrates not only his personal stories but also a plethora of others’. One such

example is the case of a bilingual boy, Roberto, who tends to “figure the global apocalyptically” (14), as “an undocumented Salvadorean” (14) child whose “Brooklyn-based dream of a future [is] wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns and an imperial juridical system that dooms him to statelessness” (14). Roberto’s example serves to unravel the city’s intricate essence as a dynamic space, which reinforces, absorbs, and eventually facilitates the existence and intermingling of diverse personal narratives. Another story Ben narrates concerns Noor, a woman the narrator meets while volunteering, who faces a complicated family story that entails possible identity loss. It seems that all the people who Ben meets in New York and whose stories he collects are dealing with the city’s pathologies and experiencing their own rearrangements. Their stories pave the way towards a re-visualization of New York as a multifaceted urban ecosystem and a communal body that accumulates, as Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean (2006) estimate, “a gathering of meanings in which people invest their interpretations and seek to create their own (hi)story” (176). Searching for a solid base upon which to build their own stories, individuals become parts of New York and find themselves rearranged multiple times; what is more, due to the crises that arise within the city’s confines, people find themselves on the verge of expiration, however defined.

The notions of rearrangement and possible expiration that prevail *10:04* and delineate both the characters’ existence and New York’s urban body work deeply on a narrative level. Multiple temporalities that pervade the novel, in conjunction with the stories which Ben collects and which interrupt his own story, as well as some framed stories that appear in the text disrupting the course of events, cause the novel’s linear structure to completely expire. This transpires already in the novel’s title, *10:04*, inspired by *Back to the Future*, a movie whose protagonist has a time-traveling experience which disrupts not only the past but also the future, creating a void in the present and resulting in its collapse. Such a choice of title accentuates both the future’s fragility and the way different temporalities are interrelated and intertwined with one another. The narrative is disrupted also by stories embedded in the novel, for instance, “To the Future”, an intertextual reference to *Back to the Future* and a distinct story that the narrator co-creates with Roberto, or “The Golden Vanity”, a *New Yorker* story that Ben writes, and which was in fact published in real life by Ben Lerner, the novel’s author, in *The New Yorker* in 2012. As a result of all these narrative maneuvers not only is the novel’s structural and temporal linearity disrupted but also the idea of a sin-

gle fictional ontological world expires. Together, the main and the embedded narratives function as a set of Chinese boxes that, as Brian McHale (2008) finds, “have the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological ‘horizon’ of ... fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world construction” (113). There is a density when it comes to the novel’s (non) fictional world(s) that is/are both constructed and subverted through the creation of other ontological cosmoses. Ontological multiplicity is especially visible in the case of *The New Yorker* story, as the story blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality following the “world-within-a-world” McHalean rationale (McHale 2008, 128). Due to such metafictional elements the fictional world of the novel invades the world of real life and poses questions regarding the autofictional (or not) nature of the novel. All these multiple narratives that both emerge from and create distinct ontological universes, are interwoven in such a way as to give the impression that one emanates and extends from another. While blurring the fine lines between them, the novel undergoes its own process of structure rearrangement/expiration and ontological proliferation.

There is a sense of mutuality and interconnection between the notions of rearrangement and expiration which are interwoven in *10:04*’s temporality, spatiality as well as its narrative space. While converging the past and the present, the novel contemplates a future that can possibly collapse and expire, making the reader wonder what is going to happen when the clock strikes 10:04 once again. However, I believe that it is this rearrangement feeling that is ultimately hopeful when interpreted as an in-between state and defined as a feeling of an *almost* expiration. Rearranging its temporalities, spatiality, and narrative, the novel renders New York its main protagonist and elucidates the characteristics of the 2010’s urban condition. New York here is not simply portrayed as a body: it is a communal and possibly a fragile body that intermingles the pathologies of the past with those of the present, becoming the-city-as-a-body-under-constant-transformation. Deeply rooted in this perspective reside endurance and the impossibility of not moving forward.

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URBAN AND NARRATIVE REARRANGEMENTS
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Summary

This article sets out to explore Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) and the representation of New York City's space through the notions of expiration as well as the constant spatial and temporal rearrangements that take place within the novel's confines. In *10:04*, temporality is multiplied as the past, present, and future are entwined and inform one another while being linked to New York's urban environment. In the city, the traumas of the past, either personal or communal, meet the precarious moments of the present, characterized by environmental threats which eventually render the future uncertain. Building upon Ben Highmore's metaphor of the city as a body, the article portrays and elaborates on a distinct image of New York. From this space and metaphor-oriented point of view, the article approaches *10:04* through a spatio-temporal spectrum, treating the city of New York as a major protagonist and revealing the textures of the 2010's urban condition. As the narrative continues to unravel, the spatial and temporal rearrangements that occur in the novel are accompanied by rearrangements in the page-space. Stories that are embedded within the main narrative tend to disrupt its linearity, creating new narrative spaces and showcasing the novel's ontological multidimensionality. The feelings of expiration and rearrangement prove to be the definitive factors that delineate the novel's three major elements: temporality, spatiality, and narrative.

Keywords: spatiality; temporality; narrative space; metaphor; expiration

NA SKRAJU (NIE?)WYGASNIĘCIA — MIEJSKIE I NARRACYJNE REORIENTACJE
W POWIEŚCI *10:04* BENA LERNERA

Streszczenie

Artykuł skupia się na powieści *10:04* Bena Lerner (2014), analizując zawarte w niej reprezentacje przestrzeni Nowego Jorku przez pryzmat wygasania oraz przestrzennych i czasowych reorientacji, nieustannie zachodzących na polu narracji. Wzajemne przenikanie się i oddziaływanie przeszłości, teraźniejszości i przyszłości nowojorskiej przestrzeni miejskiej skutkuje zwielokrotnieniem wymiarów czasowych. Minione traumy, zarówno osobiste jak i te przeżywane z innymi, stykają się w powieści z niepewną teraźniejszością, targaną zagrożeniami ekologicznymi, które czynią przyszłość niepewną. Posiłkując się metaforą miasta jako ciała użytą przez Bena Highmore'a, autorka przygląda się specyficznemu obrazowi Nowego Jorku i analizuje *10:04* z perspektywy przestrzenno-metaforycznej i w kontekście przestrzenno-czasowym, traktując miasto jako ważnego bohatera i ukazując jego strukturę charakterystyczną dla drugiej dekady XXI w. W miarę rozwoju narracji, reorientacjom przestrzennym i czasowym towarzyszą reorientacje na przestrzeni stron. Historie pojawiające się w głównej narracji powieści zaburzają jej linearność, tworząc nowe przestrzenie narracyjne i podkreślając wielowymiarowość powieści. Odczucia wygasania i reorientacji okazują się decydującymi czynnikami, nakreślającymi główne jej elementy: czasowość, przestrzenność i narrację.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzenność; czasowość; przestrzeń narracyjna; metafora; wygasanie