Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and "the utopian glimmer of fiction"

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has been characterized by a reductive presentism that suppresses historicity and neglects the possibility of the future. If we have seen a shift from postmodernism to a different cultural logic and structure of feeling—as, indeed, many critics argue—it therefore follows that this may also entail a new dominant in temporal dynamics. In this article, I take Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04* as a case study in literary metamodernism, though I also make reference to Adam Thirlwell's 2011 novella *Kapow!* and Ruth Ozeki's 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. Across these texts, and primarily in *10:04* as a quintessentially metamodernist fiction, I observe and explicate a metamodern temporality characterized, interconnectedly, by the aesthetics of heterochrony, sideshadowing, and the anticipation of retrospection. Whilst this temporal dynamic emerges from the precarity and volatility of experience in the twenty-first century, anthropocenic climate change has been and remains—I suggest—the greatest catalyst in producing this new temporal experience which resurrects historicity and resuscitates the future as a field of possibilities.

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…while the duration of the real minute and *The Clock*'s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds. I watched time in *The Clock* but I wasn't in it, or I was experiencing time as such, not just having experiences through it as a medium. As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction.

Ben Lerner, *10:04*, p.54

In Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014), the narrator Ben experiences Christian Marclay's video artwork *The Clock* during its display at the Lincoln Centre in New York. The clock is a looped 24-hour video montage, composed of thousands of filmic and televisual sequences of clocks, edited together and synched with real-time. For Ben, whilst the temporal moment corresponds across his actual experience and the virtual representation, the ontological fissure between the invented and the real enables multiple possibilities. These possibilities, he suggests, are potentially and, at least momentarily, utopian[1]; most significantly, these possibilities enable awareness of potential agency and future change. During the novel, Ben's hipster New York life is disrupted—twice—by the threat of a catastrophic "superstorm" (222, 240). Such moments of environmental crisis, alongside Ben's everyday observations and anxieties about climate change, also evoke this subjective and heterochronic—overlapping,

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[1] Of course, since they are multiple, some could equally be dystopian.

as he says of *The Clock*—experience of time, in which possible futures generate and overlay onto possible presents, and future outcomes proliferate.

10:04 has predominantly been read through three critical lenses: as a contemporary autofiction; as a "weather novel" (Grossman, 818) or climate change fiction; and as a distinctly contemporary time-oriented work, described by Manshel as a "recent historical novel" and by Davies as a "contemporary 'contemporary' text (or a 'meta-contemporary' text) that reflects (upon) its own relationality to the time it depicts" (2).[2] Although separating discussions of *10:04* into these three optics allows a concise summary of the novel's critical reception, *10:04*'s engagements with auto-ontological, environmental, and temporal instabilities are—to continue the visual metaphor—kaleidoscopic or, at least, vitally interlinked: Narrator Ben is an autofictional counterpart of the Brooklyn-based author Ben Lerner, whose real existence alongside the novel's preoccupation with and narrativization of recent crises—above all, environmental—grounds the fiction in contemporaneous reality whilst regenerating historicity. Consequently, I assert, *10:04* is a decisively metamodernist text;[3] its significance rests on the way it exemplifies the figuration of time in response to life in the Anthropocene as well as in the cultural context of metamodernism more broadly.

Metamodernism is a designation for the structure of feeling, emerging and coagulating throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, which has superseded postmodernism as the dominant cultural logic in Western capitalist societies.[4] It is primarily associated with the cultural philosophy of Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen.[5] They draw on

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[2] On *10:04* as: an autofiction, see Gibbons "Autonarration"; as a climate change fiction, see De Bruyn; Grossman; Malm; Tsitsovits and Vermeulen; and for discussions of its temporality, see Bilmes; Clare; Davies; Katz; Manshel; O'Dell; Vermeulen.

[3] It is read as an exemplar of metamodernist fiction by: van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen; Gibbons "Postmodernism".

[4] Metamodernism is by no means the only such designation for what critics see as the shift in contemporary aesthetics away from postmodernism. Rudrum and Stavris' edited collection *Supplanting the Postmodern* gathers key essays of other existing accounts of the cultural formations after postmodernism. Nevertheless, metamodernism appears to have gained the most critical traction.

[5] van den Akker and Vermeulen first used the term in their 2010 article (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes") and later developed their ideas with a greater emphasis on historicity in their introduction to

Raymond Williams's concept of the "structure of feeling", which they understand as symbolizing "a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down. Its tenor, however, can be traced in art, which has the capability to express a common experience of a time and place" (7).[6] Consequently, van den Akker and Vermeulen emphasize that the dominant collective experience of the twenty-first century differs from that of its postmodern predecessor, and they cite historical events—such as the Iraq War, 9/11, the 2008 financial crash, the Arab Spring, and the climate change emergency, amongst others—as external factors that led to this shift.

Responding to Jameson's characterization of postmodernism as the waning of affect, depth, and historicity, Vermeulen and van den Akker therefore "conceive of metamodernism as a structure of feeling typified by the return of many of these debates, foremost among them History, the grand narrative, *Bildung* and the agent" ("Utopia" 55). In Jameson's account, the consequence of the poststructuralist perception of language and narrative on the postmodern consciousness is significant: "If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience and psychic life" (*Postmodernism* 27). Postmodern experience is thus reduced to "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (*Postmodernism* 27). Certainly, the postmodernist preoccupation with senses of ending, entropic disintegration, and apocalyptic visions of the world's destruction resulted in reductive presentism; a blocking out, or forgetting, of the future that ultimately suppressed historicity (Gibbons, "Entropology" 283-4). As Vermeulen and van den Akker note, even postmodern dystopic

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Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism. It is also worth noting that there are preceding uses of the term 'metamodernism' (see Zavarzadeh; Furlani; Dumitrescu,) though these are seen to have differing emphases (van den Akker and Vemeulen, 4-5).

[6] Raymond Williams outlined his conception of the structure of feeling in his 1954 essay "Film and the Dramatic Tradition".

futures generated refracted critiques of the present, "rather than attempts to evoke an image of the possible future" ("Utopia" 57).

Whilst van den Akker and Vermeulen's discussions of metamodernism have tended to focus on art and film, a metamodernist sensibility has also been observed in contemporary literature. [7] In this article, I explore the temporal logic of literary metamodernism, concentrating specifically on the resurgence of the possible future—or possible futures—and, more generally, historicity in relation to global warming. Reopening the possibilities of the future is vital for redefining a world after postmodernism, as Jameson emphasizes ("Future" 76):

> I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it again begins to transmit feeble signs of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings.

10:04, I suggest, offers a new, metamodernist temporal model, precisely because the narrator's experience breaks out of the present. In contrast to a postmodern temporal logic, then, the act of imagining the possibilities of the future—"how many different days could be built out of a day"—is significant because it revivifies an affective sense of reality and human

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[7] I have previously discussed metamodernism as exemplified in contemporary fiction (see: "Take", "Postmodernism", "Contemporary Autofiction", and "Entropology"). Another influential account of literary metamodernism comes from James and Seshagiri but this focuses on the revitalisation of modernism in contemporary literature and, as such, is somewhat at odds with Vermeulen and van den Akker's (as well as my own) sense of metamodernism, which entails an "oscillation" between the styles of modernism and postmodernism.

agency. In the next section, I outline the impact of climate change on historicity in relation to metamodernism. I subsequently turn to *10:04* as a case study for metamodernist time, though I also make brief reference to two other contemporary novels—Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* and Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!*—in order to situate *10:04* as an exemplar for metamodernist fiction and its temporal logic more generally. Through two foci—the use of *Back to the Future* as an intertext and the crisis represented by climate change—my analysis of *10:04* explicates a metamodernist account of time that is heterochronic as well as anticipatory, bringing back the future and rebooting historicity.

Historicity, Heterochrony, and the Anthropocene

The significance of climate change, Baucom suggests, produces the need to "periodize in relation not only to capital but to carbon" (125), creating a new world view "measured both in dates and in degrees, in times and in temperature" (142). Certainly, the cultural rise to dominance of metamodernism coincides with increasing awareness of the already unstoppable processes of climate change and, relatedly, general acknowledgement of 'the Anthropocene'[8]—the present geological epoch, in which humanity's destructive role and impact on the environment in recognized. [9] The influence of climate change on the contemporary structure of feeling is important since the precarity it evokes is characteristic not only of individual experience but collective experience in the acknowledgement of our shared human fate.

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[8] Crutzen first postulated and coined the term 'the Anthropocene'. However, his article in *Nature* was published after his co-written account of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer).

[9] Notably, the concept of the Anthropocene already interconnects natural and cultural worlds (for instance, see Clark). Furthermore, van den Akker and Vermeulen relate the metamodern world-historical, socio-political cultural moment to the Anthropocene, by describing a situation "in which wealth is concentrated at the top 1 per cent of the pyramid, while rising sea levels and super storms crumble its base, where the rest of us reside in highly precarious conditions" (14). I, too, have elsewhere identified climate change as "a contributing component within a more complex configuration of contemporary crises . . . that together, relatedly, engender a new cultural sensibility" ("Entropology" 3).

The impact of anthropocenic climate change on contemporary thought and culture is most evident in the various calls, of scientists and humanities scholars alike, for a resurgence of historical thinking. As Menely outlines, climate change presents as a "catastrophe – as a unique geological event, which requires us to recalibrate our philosophies of history and time" (85). He continues, the "Anthropocene is, after all, a name for a problem of time, of how we perceive, conceptualize, and give form to temporal heterogeneity in the interface between social systems and planetary systems" (85). Offering a historian's perspective, Chakrabarty argues that the collapsed distinction between the social and the planetary, between culture and nature, evoked by the Anthropocene requires us "to scale up our imagination of the human" (206): Humans are no longer only biological agents but geological agents too, and the recorded history of human activity must be repositioned within the larger context of a deep history of humanity as a planetary species. This is no easy task, as Chakrabarty acknowledges: "we may not experience ourselves as geological agents, but we appear to have become one at the level of the species. And without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all" (221). Consequently, he urges, "we can become geological agents only historically and collectively" (206).

The historical thinking required to understand climate change, in turn, necessitates narrative thinking; and precisely because anthropocenic narratives call for collective imagination, they are mythic structures or, in other words, grand narratives. [10] Grand narratives of the Anthropocene fundamentally require future thinking and, resultantly, they

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[10] Bonneuil argues that scientific accounts of the anthropocene, such as Crutzen's original outline, show this collective narrativity through the prominent use of lexemes such as 'we' and "humanity" (indeed, this is evidently true of Chakrabarty's writing discussed above). Bonneuil identifies four prevalent grand narratives of the anthropocene which he refers to as: (1) the naturalistic narrative; (2) the post-nature narrative; (3) the eco-catastrophic narrative; and (4) the eco-Marxist narrative.

have the potential to engender change, or at least some form of environmental intervention.[11]

Gare consequently suggests that we move beyond the distrust associated with postmodernist thinking in order to regenerate grand narratives that offer new, alternate philosophies of the future, specifically in the service of developing "an environmentally sustainable civilization" (106).[12] Gare has a particular kind of grand narrative in mind. He proposes: "If we are to confront the global ecological crisis we need to create a new, polyphonic grand narrative which can do justice to the immanent dynamics and intrinsic significance of the world and all its participants" (115).[13] This grand narrative is not only polyphonic but—crucially, in terms of this article's concerns—also polychronic or heterochronic: Gare contends that it is by "revealing the present as the product of the destructive trajectory of modernity, we can see ourselves in a crisis" and overcoming this crisis "will require a new vision or visions of the future" (116). Like Ben in *10:04*, then, Gare perceives the utopian potential of imagining various future possibilities and prospective outcomes.

Climate change has become a trope of much contemporary fiction, leading to genre classifications such as Trexler's 'Anthropocene Fiction'. Mehnert notes both: that climate change "plays out on a range of timescales, with its most detrimental outcomes lying in the future" (9); and that "past, present, and future become inseparably intertwined" in climate change fiction (94). In a chapter focusing specifically on time, Mehnert consequently suggests that climate change fiction rejects the presentism of postmodernism (94) and instead offers "a timescape perspective that engages in the temporal aspects of living in a climactically changing world" (97). Whilst Mehnert does not necessarily seek to periodize or

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[11] Postmodernism's prior hostility and incredulity towards the grand narrative (Lyotard 1984) left us, according to Gare, "suspicious of all totalizing visions of history" (Gare 106) but—in the context of accelerating climate change—this suspicion has "been disastrous" (107). Gare therefore advocates the politico-ethical potential of grand narratives because they enable us "to envisage new possibilities for the future" (106). Similarly, Bonneuil writes, "the kind of stories we tell ourselves today about the Anthropocene can shape the kind of historical future we will inhabit" (17).

[12] Corsa has explicitly proposed that Gare's advocacy of the grand narrative as a hopeful intervention, and the resurgence of grand narratives more generally, is inescapably metamodern (258-268).

[13] Gare's thinking here is inspired by Bakhtin's discussion of the multitudinous complexion—of voices, consciousnesses, and worlds—of polyphony.

to describe the cultural formations after postmodernism, her remarks that the temporal structures of and in climate change fiction do not correlate with the simultaneity of postmodern time lend support to my arguments; both that the Anthropocene acts as a catalyst for the shift in temporal modes of experience and that this new timescape resonates with a different cultural logic and emergent structure of feeling, that I align with metamodernism.

In this article, I show that *10:04*—like other metamodernist fictions, particularly those which engage with climate change—offers a heterochronic model of time and temporality. I have previously—in my initial account of metamodernist literary style ("Take")— synthesized ideas from Vermeulen and van den Akker's first article on metamodernism and Bourriaud's mapping of altermodernism: whilst Vermeulen and van den Akker speak of an impossible but "deliberate being out of time" (12), Bourriaud articulates an "aesthetics of heterochrony" in which "delay (analogous to the 'pre-recorded') coexists with the *immediate* (or 'live') and with the anticipated" ("Altermodern" 21). Metamodernist writing thus often entails "an intermixing of temporal chronologies" that generates an oscillating or coinciding sense of atemporality along with hetero- or polychrony (Gibbons, "Take" 33). Since Bourriaud emphasizes heterochrony in relation to composition, Christian Marclay's *The Clock*—and Ben's experience of it in *10:04*—resonates with these aesthetics. Moreover, not only does Bourriaud compare this heterochrony to the way "documentary coexists with fiction" as it does in autofictions like *10:04*, he ultimately claims that such ontological and temporal matrices have "the aim of revealing our present, in which temporalities and levels of reality are intertwined" (21). Such an effect is palpable in Ben's account of *The Clock*, as well as throughout *10:04*, and most intensely in moments when environmental catastrophe comes into view.

Whilst my analysis of *10:04* consequently depicts this metamodernist temporal logic as primarily shaped by the precarity of the Anthropocene, the poly- or heterochronic

restructuring of the timescape is, undoubtedly, the consequence of a greater and more volatile world-historical moment. Corresponding with Vermeulen and van den Akker's discussion of a renewed utopian impulse, I similarly view the metamodernist re-emergence of historicity, its temporal heterochrony, and proliferating possible futures as arising "because we are faced with a radically unstable and uncertain world, where political systems and power relations are diffuse and unpredictable, financial security a rare privilege and ecological problems – sometimes quite literally – clog the horizon" ("Utopia" 57). I now turn to *10:04*, introducing the novel's pre-occupation with time through its intertextual connection with *Back to the Future* and positioning this in the context of lived experience in the Anthropocene.

Back to the Future, Anthropocenic Historicity, and Heterochrony in *10:04*

The title of *10:04* references the 1985 film *Back to the Future*, which is narrator Ben's "favorite movie" (111) and a significant intertext of the book. In *Back to the Future*, 10:04 is the time at which lightning strikes the Hill Valley Court House, freezing the clock's time. For Marty McFly, it takes on numerous significances: in 1985, Marty *remembers* the 10:04 of the clock tower as a significant past-event yet once transported into 1955, he *anticipates* the 10:04 lightning strike as a moment of radical possibility in which he *will* be able to time-travel back to the future. Temporal multiplicity is also present in the title of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, wherein the phrase "time being" signals both a transitory present moment as well as the deep-scale and scope of humanity, that is "someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be" (Ozeki 3). Manshel reads the titles of both novels as encoding contingency (2017, n.p) whilst Katz speaks of *10:04*'s title as signifying Lerner's commitment to "modes of futurity" (2017: 325). I add that since the Hill Valley clock of *Back to the Future* is frozen and the time itself becomes a heterochronic reference point, 10:04 also represents a perpetual stutter: 10:04 is

atemporal, existing across temporalities and, as such, gestures towards a conception of time that connects particular moments (e.g. 1955, 1985) to a longer durée. This makes a fitting parallel with anthropocenic narratives in which the recorded time of human history must be contextualized within the deeper time of species thinking and planetary evolution.

The pivotal moment in *Back to the Future* is extracted and incorporated into Christian Marclay's *The Clock*. In *10:04*, when Ben recounts his viewing of *The Clock*, he also reveals, "(I had wanted to arrive by 10:04 to see the lightning strike the courthouse clock tower in *Back to the Future*, allowing Marty to return to 1985, but Alex couldn't get a train back from her mother's in time.)" (52). On one hand, because this admission is presented in parenthesis as part of the speaker-now of narration, it is out-of-time with the narrated events. On the other hand, it inscribes multiple temporalities: the narrator's wish is presented in past perfect tense ("had wanted") to position his infinitive viewing of *Back to the Future* ("to arrive", "to see") in an anterior domain of unfulfilled optimism; the force of lightning and Marty McFly's time-travelling is manifested through simple present ("strike") and present continuous ("allowing"); yet all of this is negated and placed in the conditional past when Alex's delay ("couldn't get") prevents the narrator's hopes from being realized "in time"—an expression that, in itself, signals both temporal urgency and temporal grounding. Ben therefore expresses his anticipatory hopes in retrospect and even though he doesn't watch the *Back to the Future* scene in *The Clock*, the vivid possibility of his doing so is nevertheless felt through the simultaneity of present tense forms. Investigating the manifestation of the aesthetics of heterochrony in linguistic style, I have previously suggested that "[i]n metamodernist writing, heterochrony is often created through frequent temporal deictic shifts (e.g. changes in tense)" ("Take" 33). As my analysis here reveals, Lerner's prose enacts such heterochronic temporality. This shows the ways in which, as Katz puts it, *10:04* is "concerned throughout with how the *horizon* of this future, itself unrealisable, is at the same time the single most

determining factor dictating how we live every 'present' we inhabit" (325). The present moment appears heterochronic because our imagined projections into possible futures (hopeful, or otherwise) refract back into our lived experiences.

Crucially, the time-travelling enabled at 10:04 in *Back to the Future*'s 1955 is brought about by the force of lightning: time-travelling is possible, in O'Dell's words, only if Doc and Marty McFly "harness the catastrophic storm's power" (450). In *10:04*, New York faces two superstorms: Hurricane Irene (which struck in August 2011) in the novel's opening and Hurricane Sandy (in late October 2012) at its close. The plot of Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* also engages with the global environment: the narrative stretches across the pacific ocean, alternating between chapters narrated by the autofictional 'Ruth' in Canada and a fictional character called Nao in Japan whom, Ruth worries, may not have survived the 2011 Tsunami. [14] The structure of both *10:04* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, therefore, highlight the deep-scale impact of natural forces on small-scale narratives of human experience. Extreme weather events—such as a Tsunami in *A Tale for the Time Being* and superstorms in *10:04*—act as palpable events that extend our sense of history by bringing the intangible scope of climate change, however briefly, into focus.

Manshel claims, the "nonfictional, precisely datable, eventness" of Hurricanes Irene and Sandy in *10:04* and the tsunami in *A Tale for the Time Being* serve to revivify, and ground the narratives in, historical time (Manshel n.p; cf. O'Dell 3, 4). Events such as this also ground the narrative in a reality that the autofictional author-character shares with real readers. A significant proportion of Anthropocene fiction is science-fictive, fantastical, or set in the future,[15] presumably because the Anthropocene figures the future so apocalyptically. However, in her study of climate change fiction and time, Mehnert discusses two novels set

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[14] Caracciolo discusses the relationship between the novel's plot and oceanography.
[15] Indeed, such Anthropocene fiction is numerous and significant enough for Bloom's neologism 'cli-fi' to have gained currency in mainstream literary discourse. As a journalist, Dan Bloom claims to have coined 'cli-fi' as a short genre descriptor that "could fit easily into newspaper and magazine headlines" (in interview with Brady).

in "the near future and thus the temporal horizon of their contemporary readers"; this proximal temporal horizon means that "in countering the assumption that climate change is something that will take place in the far-off future, the novels become attuned to a different dimension: environmental time" (124). In contrast, both because of what Manshel calls its "datableness" and because of its autofictional dimension, Ben Lerner's *10:04* reflects on the environmental crisis from what was the author's present, which subsequently exists as the 2011-12 past for readers. As such, the framing of the fiction with two historical hurricanes not only casts *10:04* as an autofictional account of life on "a warming planet" (Lerner 7); it positions Ben's anxieties as already part of a reader's past and present. The future possibility of environmental apocalypse is thus made to feel more meaningful to readers and consequently, that possible future installs a sense of environmental time into readers' own present reality.

Opening Up the Future through Sideshadowing

The hurricanes of *10:04*—as events of environmental crisis—play a significant role in the book's metamodernist model of time. As Malm notes: "The protagonist sinks into obsession with temporality, as he ruminates over what he believes to be the source of all these storms: climate change" (3). I suggest that such moments of potential environmental crisis generate a temporal experience that Morson refers to as sideshadowing—"a concept of time as a *field of possibilities*" (119; original emphasis) or "an open universe" (118). For example, whilst waiting for both Hurricanes Irene and Sandy to pass, Ben and his close female friend Alex watch *Back to the Future*. Here is how Ben describes the latter event (230):

> . . . we got into bed and projected *Back to the Future* onto the wall; it could be our
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> tradition for once-in-a-generation weather, I'd suggested to Alex . . . Branches scraped

against the windows, casting their shadows in the 1980s, the 1950s; a couple of plastic trash cans were blown down the street, and rain hit the skylight hard enough to sound like hail. By the time the storm made landfall, Marty was teaching Chuck Berry how to play rock and roll in the past, which meant that, when he got back to the future, white people would have invented, not appropriated, that musical form; I spent a few minutes describing this ideological mechanism to Alex before I realized she was asleep. I drifted off too, and when I woke I walked to the window; it was still raining hard, but the yellow of the streetlamps revealed a mundane scene; a few large branches had fallen, but no trees. We never lost power. Another historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time.

Ben's proposal that watching *Back to the Future* could be a "tradition for once-in-a-generation weather" is both ironic and poignant, precisely because the act recalls Ben's experience of the first storm so closely: Accompanied by a sleeping Alex, he watched the film whilst Hurricane Irene circled by (22-24), also undramatically since similarly "a few branches had fallen, but no trees" (24). Rather than occurring once approximately every hundred years, hurricane activity is intensifying because of climate change. In fact, Lerner's novel makes this explicit. The narrator quips: "For the second time in a year, we were facing once-in-a-generation weather" (213). Ben emphasizes the strangeness of this recurrence through repetition, in both instances anticipating the storms with the same statement: "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York" (16, 213). And in case there were any doubt that the increasing frequency of such extreme weather is characteristic of life in the Anthropocene, one of Ben's agitated graduate students frantically demands, "Do you want to tell me these storms aren't man made . . . ?" (219). Just as anthropocenic precarity is a key player in the metamodernist reboot of historicity and grand

narratives, in *10:04* it is an urgent anxiety which affects Ben's experience of time, and particularly the heterochrony of the present and its possible futures.

Ben's visual projection of *Back to the Future* during Hurricane Sandy also projects and interjects temporalities. Tree branches from the actual world of 2012 infringe into the fictionalized pasts of the movie (the 1980s, the 1950s) whilst Marty's ideologically-loaded cover version of Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode'—a simulacral replacement of the original—becomes co-temporal with the storm's arrival (through the adverbial "By the time the storm made landfall"). As O'Flynn wittily writes: "While there is no flux capacitor in Lerner's novel, there is a multiplicity of pasts, presents and futures" (2015: n.p). However, this multiplicity—the heterochrony as well as the ontological realms it cuts through—is actually a vital distinction between the temporal models of *Back to the Future* and *10:04*, as well as their expressions of postmodern sensibility and metamodernist structure of feeling respectively.

In postmodernist thinking, as Brown articulates: "History is figured less as a stream linking past and future than as a cluttered and dynamic field of eruptions, forces, emergences, and partial formations. As the discontinuities and lack of directional laws in history are pushed to the foreground, history is spatialized—conceptually wrenched from temporal ordering" (116-7). In postmodernism, time was reconfigured as space (Harvey 1989); in *Back to the Future*, you can travel through time as a spatialized landscape, if you reach 88 miles per hour.[16] Furthermore, and specifically citing *Back to the Future*, Booker claims that "the fascination with time travel (almost always involving travel into the past) in postmodern film might be taken as a sign of this same sort of loss of historical sense" (69). This is, in effect, the point Lerner makes when he describes how, in *Back to the Future*, Marty's siblings fade from a family photograph and Marty's own hand begins to vanish (9). Both of these events in

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[16] Ní Fhlainn observes that the movie not only presents a very "localised sense of time travel, in that, time travel and its effects is explicitly limited to Hill Valley" (179), but that time is also "fleeting and dangerous, something to be chased and manipulated" (177).

the movie come about because Marty's presence in 1955 endangers his own—and his siblings'—existence when he interferes with his parents' first meeting and his mother instead becomes romantically attached to him. In Lerner's words, "Marty's time-travelling disrupts the prehistory of his family" (9) and Marty's own erasure illustrates "the absence of the future" (10).

One might argue that the future does exist in *Back to the Future*; but even so, that future is reduced to text—it is written, rewritten, and defined by past actions. Indeed, Morson reads *Back to the Future* as a plot governed by what, in contrast, he calls foreshadowing, which "indicates backward causality" (48): In the film, "a journey to the past allows for action that will make the existing present cease to be, though we know it has 'already happened'" (70). The photograph of Marty and his brother and sister are evidence of this: "the image held in one's hands alters because of events that will happen—or we might better say, that will have happened—later" (Morson 70). Ultimately, then, in *Back to the Future* as a postmodern film, "the future is already there and ineluctable; but somehow the sequence itself is not ineluctable, providing one can travel through time" (Morson 70). It might therefore seem as though Marty can intervene in history but this agency is illusory. In fact, foreshadowing "seems utterly to preclude the possibility of options" (Morson 49); the tangible present effect (faded images and body parts) evidences the prescribed inevitability of the future.

In contrast, *10:04* is driven by sideshadowing (117-172) and, relatedly, by what Currie calls the anticipation of retrospection (the latter of which is discussed in the next section).[17] In sideshadowing, "two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible. This is a simultaneity not *in* time but *of* times: we do not *see*

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[17] For another discussion of these temporal dynamics in *10:04*, see Bilmes. Although Bilmes and I agree that sideshadowing and the anticipation of retrospect are at work in Lerner's novel, Bilmes primarily reads the novel's temporal structure as a dynamic of subjective remembrance in which, through narrative acts, past experience can be reinvented (as outlined in Bilmes 4-5).

contradictory actualities, but one possible that was actualized and, at the same moment, another that could have been but was not" (Morson 118; original emphasis). These temporal sentiments are resonant when 'Ben' laments, "[a]nother historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time" (230). Even though Hurricane Sandy hasn't materialized in Ben's physical environment, he characterizes it with temporal significance as "historic". Moreover, a heterochrony of tenses co-occur: the historic storm is subject to both anterior time through the past-perfect "had failed" and infinitive possibility in "to arrive"; similarly, whilst Ben's lived experience is conditional ("as though"); he conceives of it as past ('lived') and past progressive/imperfect ("were falling").

Lerner is not alone in opening up the timescape to heterochronous possibilities. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth considers how Possible Worlds Theory allows for multiple presents as a means of abating her uncertainty over Nao's fate precisely because she "cares whether [Nao is] dead or alive in this world" (400); the proximal deictics of "*this* world" prioritizing the actual whilst also comparing it to its possible sideshadow. Additionally, the narrator of Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!*—who also resembles the author[18]—discloses: "I realised that for the first time I was imagining a story when the backstories were basically invisible, and so was the ending – because it was happening right in front of me. But this didn't mean, of course, that the backstories didn't exist. They existed as always. Just as the ending existed, somewhere, in an absent future" (31). He adds that in his "new theory of language as a trampoline, they [backstories and endings] were there already because they were just side-effects of syntax" (31). These "side-effects" are akin to sideshadows, influencing the narrator's ongoing present experience. Temporal potentialities are thus re-opened in metamodernist fiction through characters' felt sense of possible futures and the heterochronic present.

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[18] Unlike 'Ruth' and 'Ben', the narrator of *Kapow!* is anonymous/unnamed. However, the narrator references two previous books which, through likeness to Adam Thirlwell's own back catalogue, allow a reading of the narrator as a counterpart of the author (Thirlwell 10).

The Anticipation of Retrospection and the Potentialities of the Future

In *About Time*, Currie investigates the philosophical relationship between time and narrative. Even though narrative "is understood as retrospection more readily than it is understood as anticipation," he writes, "it cannot really be one without the other. If, in order to look back at what has happened, we tell a story, we must also know that the present is a story to be told" (5). This means that "the present is the object of a future memory, and we live it as such, in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the present as past" (5). Currie elaborates in his subsequent discussion of the unexpected, which he describes as "a little bit of the future installed in the present. It is not the actual future, but an envisaged, virtual future which is part of the present, experiencing the present moment as one that *will have been*, as something that *will have happened*" (*Unexpected* 63; original emphasis). Whilst this may appear similar to foreshadowing—particularly because these italicized modal verb phrases echo Morson's discussion—it crucially differs. Instead, "retrospect is virtual, envisaged, predicted in tandem with the event concerned" (*Unexpected* 71). The anticipation of retrospection therefore instead resembles sideshadowing because, rather than the future being predestined and channeling back to the present, the anticipated future is imagined and provisional as is the retrospective impression of the present that it creates. To return to Lerner's words in this article's epigraph, the anticipation of retrospection induces "more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction" (54). Moreover, the anticipated future manifests not as an actual effect in the present but as an experience or, in other words, an affective effect.

Bilmes has also noted these temporal dynamics in *10:04*, focusing on "Lerner's project of writing memory in a media-saturated age" (4). Whilst my thinking coincides with Bilmes in terms of identifying these temporal structures, our arguments are by no means identical.

Bilmes focuses on sideshadowing as "the narrator's way of critiquing our contemporary sense of time, a sense fostered by digital mnemotechnologies and the pervasive soup of stories wherein much of our consciousness is daily immersed" (16). Although he sees sideshadowing and the anticipation of retrospection as peculiarly contemporary, he only intimates that this temporal structure is related to a cultural account that is beyond the postmodern.[19] In contrast, I argue that sideshadowing is not only Ben's subjective narrative strategy but a fundamental experience of life in the anthropocene and characteristic of metamodernist temporality. Moreover, whilst Bilmes's argument concentrates on the retroactive dimension of narrating the self,[20] I see heterochrony and the field of potentialities generated by sideshadowing as the essential axes on which an affective sense of agency and future intervention are made possible. In relation to the first distinction, the two hurricanes in *10:04* are key in bringing possible futures into view. Preparing for the first, Hurricane Irene, Ben finds—in the atmosphere of New York—"the air excited by foreboding" (18) and, as he and Alex buy emergency supplies, he notices that "the approaching storm was estranging the routine of shopping" (19). The epigraph for *10:04* ends with the words, "Everything will be as it is now, just a little different" (1),[21] words that become a resonant refrain throughout the novel. Lerner repeats them, too, in recounting his commercial preparations for Hurricane Irene: "*Everything will be as it is now, just a little different*—nothing in me or the store had changed . . . but, as the eye [of the storm] drew near, what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly" (19; original emphasis). In his reading of *10:04*, Bilmes highlights that "a moment of anticipated

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[19] He writes: "This new experience of time is one whereby the future tense is becoming (and arguably has been becoming since the heydey of postmodernism) increasingly dominant both in culture and philosophical critiques of culture" (2).

[20] For instance, Bilmes argues, "Ben's sideshadowing of his past self's present with the future pull of anticipated events thus demonstrates how the future comes to exercise its 'presence', or how it somehow presences itself not only in moments of present expectation, but also in moments of retrospective narration" (16).

[21] *10:04*'s epigraph is purportedly taken from Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*. For a discussion of the relationship between *10:04* and Agamben's thinking, see Davies.

danger seems to open up the future" (13) but, crucially, the anticipated threat is a superstorm, specifically Hurricane Irene, and by extension the cataclysmic catastrophe of climate change that it represents.

Ben initially and mistakenly thinks that the outcomes of the storms are known. This is hardly surprising since "a million media, most of them handheld" forewarn and track Hurricane Irene, "a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single centered eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled" (17). Even Morson cites a storm as an instance of foreshadowing: "The storm is there because the catastrophe follows: it is an effect of that future catastrophe visible in temporal advance" (48). However, even though, before he falls asleep, Ben sees the "shadows of the trees bending in the increasing wind" (22), he wakes to the "failure of the storm" (24), "downgraded before landfall" (23), and leaving little visible impact. On the eve of Hurricane Irene, Ben and Alex experience a new tenderness— potentially romantic—in their relationship. Afterwards, Ben considers (24):

. . . whatever physical intimacy had opened up between us had dissolved with the storm; even that relatively avuncular gesture would be strange for both of us now. More than that: it was as though the physical intimacy with Alex, 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.

As Bilmes notes about this passage, "[s]tating that these past moments (of tangible presence made possible by anticipated danger) have been 'retrospectively erased' and 'could not be remembered' is nonsensical, in narrative terms", yet it contains some "phenomenological

truth" (13). Ben may claim that because the envisaged future does not come to pass, the evidence of what was the current moment—as in *Back to the Future*—will have faded or been erased. Nevertheless, that imagined future evidently leaves an experiential imprint. As in Morson's theory, "sideshadowing suggests that even unactualized possibilities somehow leave their mark on history" (120).

For Bilmes, this mark appears to be the crucial effect of self-narration, "the experience of living the present moment as a future memory" (16). However—and demonstrating the second distinction between Bilmes's argument and my own—if the ultimate effect of sideshadowing is "the always retrospective promise of narrative as a vital technology for personal memory" (Bilmes 19), its potentiality is somewhat limited—limited, that is, to the individual's self-narration rather than utilized for collective intervention. In my reading of *10:04*, although Ben and Alex did not progress their physical intimacy, their anticipation of the storm did unlock an unexpected moment in their present experience, and crucially that unexpected moment had *the potential* to become actual. In such moments wherein possible futures come into view, the retrospective projection of these futures not only opens the present up to heterochrony; our experiences of both the actualized and unactualized possibilities allow us to conceive of how we might act differently, both in the moment and moving forward towards these futures. In this way, and particularly in moments of environment crisis that bring the Anthropocene into focus, sideshadowing and the anticipation of retrospection revivify (rather than only foreclose) both individual and collective senses of our historical agency.

The many futures or sideshadows present in metamodernist fiction importantly allow inquiry not only into possible futures—utopian, dystopian, and all manner in between—but also into how the present might be, in Lerner's words, "as it is now, just a little different" (1, 19) or, in Thirlwell's, "new and not new, simultaneously […] the same but different" (2012:

21). Thirlwell's narrator, in fact, outlines a more explicit account of sideshadowing or the anticipation of retrospection, asserting: "You can only understand a story once it's over, at the end. Inside the roller coaster, you're nothing. So you have to imagine that you're out of it, if you want to understand what a mess you're in. You have to turn yourself inside out or back to front or upside down. You have to manage this gorgeous acrobatic feat of looking in every direction" (71). Crucially, just like Ben in *10:04*, the narrator of *Kapow!* emphasizes the act of imagining, a psychic projection into a possible future that enables us to grasp the meaning of, and potential agency in, our present experience. The narrator of *Kapow!* also insists on the polychrony or heterochrony of these narrative moments (72):

> if a story's extended in one direction then it might mean that the story was being extended the other way – and that the story you thought was real, in which all the other stories were contained, was in fact – like, wham! – part of another story, of which you knew nothing. Just as the reader is part of a story, of which the reader knows nothing. It all depends, after all, on what you think is magical.

The reference to magic once again intimates the power of imagination whilst, by gesturing towards the reader, *Kapow!*'s narrator implies the extra-fictional and collective significance of this kind of future thinking. Moreover, the narrator's exclamatory "wham!" expresses, like Ben's sensation of a faded or erased experience in *10:04*, the affective impact of the envisaged future failing to arrive and its potential for change. Indeed, Morson describes the effects of sideshadowing: "It is as if one possibility out of many became actual but carried another as a sort of recessive gene, invisible to the eye but capable of affecting future generations" (120).

While *Back to the Future* is Ben's favorite film, "one of [his] favorite paintings" is Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* (9). In the picture, Joan stands in the foreground—apparently at the bequest of angels—and extends out her left arm. Her outstretched hand "seems to dissolve" (Lerner, 9). In contrast to Marty's self-erasure by the future, Joan is "being pulled into the future", and a future that seems to manifest as "a presence, not an absence" (9). For Ben, rather than angels, it seems to be climate change anxiety that acts as the principal prospective pull on his temporal experience. Not only do the two storms trigger his anticipation of retrospection, but throughout the novel he emphasizes his anthropocenic experience, chiefly the "unseasonable warmth" and his visions of a "sinking" New York soon to be "underwater":

"unseasonable warmth" (3)

"unseasonably warm December afternoon" (32)

"The unusual heat felt summery, but the light was distinctly autumnal" (63)

"It was still unseasonably warm but there was now an implication of winter in the air"
    (66)

". . . it was unseasonably warm" (107)

"It was an unseasonably warm day" (153)

"The thin winter air was cool but unseasonably warm; it was probably in the forties"
    (164)

"You can say it's all a hoax and walk out into the unseasonable warmth . . ." (206)

"Outside it was still just unseasonably warm . . ." (213)

". . . I walked up Fourth Avenue toward Sunset Park, sweating profusely in the
    unseasonable humidity" (221)

"It was a sunny, unseasonably warm day" (231)

“. . . in the sinking city” (4)

“. . . a future I increasingly imagined as underwater” (40)

“. . . the city would soon be underwater” (153)

Like Roberto, the eight-year-old child whom Ben tutors, Ben tends "to figure the global apocalyptically" (14); necessarily and relatedly, through his lived experience in the Anthropocene, he seems to figure one of the possible anticipated futures of the present apocalyptically too. Perhaps this is why, whilst *10:04* is supposedly the novel written by the autofictional Ben (237), the book Ben co-creates with Roberto is titled "*To The Future*" (221, 225)*, the preposition ambiguously saluting the future's magnitude as well as hurtling towards it. Roberto's book is actually about how the brontosaurus species turns out never to have existed, but was brought into being by an error in which paleontologists thought the skull of a camarasaurus matched the skeletal body of an apatasaurus. The dinosaur thus becomes a metaphor for the experience of sideshadowing or the anticipation of retrospection, since many people "still think there is a dinosaur called the brontosaurus" (229).

Roberto, though, is concerned not so much by the story of the dinosaur or the book that he and Ben have produced. Instead he, too, is worried about the oncoming superstorm, in this instance Hurricane Sandy, and its impact on essential resources. Ben attempts to comfort him: "Almost half of humanity will face water scarcity by 2030, but I assured him he had no reason to worry, and tried to refocus his attention on the high production value of our own study of extinction" (222). Although Ben's description of the book as "our own study of extinction" contextually indicates *To the Future*, given Ben and Roberto's shared anxieties about the effects of global warming, the phrase also seems to signify human life in the Anthropocene. As such, parallels are drawn between the fate of the dinosaurs and the precarity and providence of humans as a species. Heterochrony, sideshadowing, and the

anticipation of retrospection in *10:04* bring possible futures of the Anthropocene into view; in doing so, the present is imbued with the uneasy aftershock of these future images whereby it feels as though humans—as with Marty McFly's hand and like the image of him and his siblings in his photograph—are being retrospectively erased, fading from history. It is the affective imprint of this possible future that has the potential to prompt us to change the way we live in the present and influence the future ahead.

To the Future; For Now

In this article, I have argued that metamodernist fictions feature a temporal logic distinct from postmodernist simultaneity, presentism, and the absent future. Specifically, this new metamodernist model of time resurrects historicity and resuscitates the future as a field of possibilities. Jameson observes ("Future" 77):

> . . . a breaking of the sound barrier of History is to be achieved in a situation in which the historical imagination is paralysed and cocooned, as though by a predator's sting: no way to burst through into the future, to reconquer difference, let alone Utopia, except by writing yourself into it, but without turning back. It is the writing that is the battering ram, the delirious repetition that hammers away at this sameness running through all the forms of our existence. . .

Narrative forms of imagination—telling stories, literary writing, grand narratives—are a crucial vehicle for a more productive model of time that allows us, as individuals and collectively, to regain a sense of our own agency in the contemporary world. Metamodernist temporality is characterized, interconnectedly, by the aesthetics of heterochrony, sideshadowing, and the anticipation of retrospection. I have shown this temporal logic to be

at work in Ben Lerner's *10:04*, as well as other metamodernist fictions such as Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. It is not, however, a leap to extrapolate from the temporal dynamics of these literary works to the overarching structure of feeling that metamodernism represents. Indeed, Currie suggests that if "we scale [the anticipation of retrospection] up from the individual towards the collectivity of an epoch, we have a similar structure which is, similarly, a quasi-temporal self-reflection: a lived experience of the historical present which walks *pari passu* with its future memory" (*Unexpected* 63; original emphasis).

The Anthropocene, and the reengagement with grand narrative thinking it entails, is—I maintain—a chief catalyst in the emergence of the metamodern temporality that is observable in contemporary fiction. As Malm proclaims: "History has sprung alive, through a nature that has done likewise" (11). Horton suggests that, in *10:04,* "the artistic reconfiguration of historical time and the projection of alternate futures currently unavailable enables a sense of hope or promise regarding art's potential for social transformation, even in the context of large-scale socio-economic division and environmental catastrophe" (321). This sense of hope, I think, is co-existent with each alternate future's possible imprint on the historical present: the contemporary *now* becomes "an actual present alive with multiple futures" (Lerner, 194) and we feel "acutely how many days could be built out of a day" (54).

In *10:04*'s opening, and after discussing his proposed novel with his agent, Ben hypothesizes: "I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously," I should have said, "a minor tremor in my hand; I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city" (4). In doing so, he not only presents his future projections as contextualized acts in the precarious and vulnerable epoch of the Anthropocene, even his words are formed through the anticipation of retrospection—that is, "I should have said". Moreover, Ben's fantastical trembling hand subjects him to similar ontological and chronological glitches as *Back to the*

Future's Marty McFly and Bastien-Lepage's Joan of Arc: there is "a tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, producing a glitch in the pictorial matrix" (9). According to Baucom, "the anthropocene is more than a name for a new chronology, more than a new set of historical dates"; rather, "this new supra-, ultra-, or extra-historical moment we inhabit is one that is again composed of multiple scales, orders, and classes of time (abstract, hermeneutic, optic) and multiple corresponding orientations to the possibility of the (just) future fashioning of those times" (142). Ben Lerner's *10:04* manifests exactly this heterochrony because—as those of us living in the Anthropocene know and in Ben's appropriately glitched words (glitched, because Ben is, in fact, prosopopoeically voicing Ronald Reagan's famous expression)—"the future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave" (16).

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