

Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

In *The Topeka School*, Ben Lerner narrates the world that created the one in which we now live. Lerner's world, or rather that of his protagonist, Adam Gordon, is marked by the Reagan-era political rhetoric, liberal disaffection, and pharmaceutical numbness that would ease the neoliberal implementation of widespread austerity, the social dislocation of labor, and the foment of right-wing rage. Only the latter has vividly maintained media attention in the wake of Donald Trump's election as president of the United States. Amid these transformations, there has been a narrative shift to personal experiences of the supposedly forgotten, overlooked, and now resurgent America—J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* is one controversial example—that seem to provide a generic corrective to this incoherent image of the nation.

Lerner's first two novels—*Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*—depicted large-scale historical events—the Madrid train bombing and Hurricane Sandy, respectively—through an individual perspective that explored shifts in history through the texture of one, often unlikeable person's experience, and in many regards, *The Topeka School* similarly promises to explain late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century political changes. Like Lerner's prior novels, this book explores the confusion, pathos, and disaffection that shape the experience of the present through modes alternately confessional and ironic, but in *The Topeka School* there's no clear, catastrophic spectacle to unite the narrative. Rather, *The Topeka School* drifts across the 1980s and 90s Midwest, searching personal memory and history for an event that might—finally—explain Trump's America.

In this regard, Lerner takes a similar approach to something like *Hillbilly Elegy*, but through the historical novel. If, in György Lukács's account, the historical novel should let readers “reexperience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality,”[†] this distance between historical reality and the writer's present is complicated in the case of Lerner's fiction. As Alexander Manshel has recently noted of *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*, these novels belong to a genre that he calls the “recent historical novel,” in which they depict history that is “less than a dozen years in the past,” attempting to “accelerate” the novel's “historical imagination” at the same time that they try to “decelerate” the experience of an ongoing present. For Manshel, the recent historical novel is made equally compelling and limited through the personal connection it offers to its readers: each novel “gratifies by way of the pleasant surprise that the reader's [and, I would add, the author's] memories of recent events are now the stuff of history and, what's more, literary history.” Or, as Nicholas Brown

[†]/ György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 42.

draws the lines in an account that takes up the autobiographical aspects of *10:04* (the protagonist is a poet-turned-novelist named Ben Lerner): “No matter how close Ben Lerner is to Ben Lerner, the problems confronted by Ben Lerner the narrator and Ben Lerner the novelist are totally different, and this is true even if Ben Lerner the novelist understands the world in exactly the same way Ben Lerner the narrator does.”[†] For Brown, Lerner’s conjunction of roman à clef and roman historique acts as the author’s ideological exemption from the narrator’s problems. But in *The Topeka School* the “social and human motives” through which it revivifies historical reality become increasingly, uncomfortably close to our own present motives. If *Atocha Station* and *10:04* gratify readers by exempting them from the demands of history, *The Topeka School* tells a story, spanning from the Midwest in the 80s to New York City ICE protests in early 2019, that is constrained by the fact that we still do not know how this particular chapter ends.

In this regard, *The Topeka School* might be understood as an intensification of Lerner’s projects in his prior two novels. His earlier books understand history particularly through series of generations. In *Atocha Station*, this sense of history manifests as ignorance. The novel follows Adam Gordon, living in Spain on a Fulbright scholarship to research “the significance of the Spanish Civil War, about which [he] knew nothing, for a generation of writers, few of whom [he had] read” and write “a long, research-driven poem exploring the war’s literary legacy.” In *10:04*, however, previous generations beget anxiety. Lerner’s protagonist grapples with his literary inheritance when his mentor, Bernard, is hospitalized, and he must choose a book for him to read in the hospital. Lerner’s protagonist anguishes over a decision that collapses all temporality, layering in the future through a child that Ben may have with his friend Alex:

Bernard and Natali were succumbing to biological time; they had asked me and my aorta to conduct their writing into the future, a future I increasingly imagined as underwater; none of the past was usable—I couldn’t find, in my apartment full of books, a single page of it to bring to the same hospital where they’d measured my limbs and, depending on insurance, might inseminate my friend.

Whether they are darkly comic or humorously tragic, Lerner’s first two novels compulsively organize their conceptions of history around series of generations that rely on each other through inheritance and stewardship, death and memory. In these books, the previous generation determines its successors. Lerner unites the bitter account of the poet’s ignorance of history in *Atocha Station* and the apocalyptic rendering of the author’s book choice

[†]/ Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 88.

in *10:04* through a shared obsession with the way in which the future starts to feel like the past before it feels like the present.

This temporality resembles what Jasbir Puar has called “prehensive biopolitics”[†]—in which “the terms of the present are dictated through the containment of the terms of the future”—but in these books that prehension is made pitiful by the mundanity of the lives inhabiting it. Lerner simultaneously ironizes and mourns the fact that we must go on living in a future that we “increasingly imagine as underwater” (or burnt to a crisp, or leveled by mass shootings, or engulfed in another forever-war, or converted into ever-more-efficient Amazon warehouses), and these contradictory feelings result in anxious inaction. As Ben Merriman notes of *Atocha Station*, “Lerner’s writerly skill” suggests “the existence of an emergent, mature sensibility while offering nothing in the plot itself to indicate that the narrator could plausibly possess or acquire this sensibility” (*CR* 57:1, 248). Or, as Brown characterizes the protagonist of *10:04*, indicting these stylistic inconsistencies on political grounds: “he believes what the radical believes and acts how the liberal acts.” This anxiety about inevitable futures supplants any desire to improve either himself or the present world. However, *The Topeka School* marks a subtle shift in this apathetic yet (ap)prehensive relationship to the present and its futures. Whereas *Atocha Station* depicts an apathetic tragedy that drags on too long and *10:04* plays out an anxious farce of the world ending too quickly, *The Topeka School* explores how tragedy, farce, and the availability of time are distributed across the contours of the present.

The Topeka School opens in a police station in Topeka, Kansas, at the end of the twentieth century and closes with a protest outside a Lower Manhattan ICE detention center in 2019. In the former moment, a young man named Darren Eberheart has been arrested, apparently for throwing a cue ball at a party. When he attempts to detail his crime, a cop interrupts him: “Darren, we need you to start at the beginning.” But he quickly realizes the impossibility of communicating any such origin:

What Darren could not make them understand was that he would never have thrown it except he always had. Long before the freshman called him the customary names, before he’d taken it from the corner pocket, felt its weight, the cool and smoothness of the resin, before he’d hurled it into the crowded darkness—the cue ball was hanging in the air, rotating slowly. Like the moon, it had been there all his life.

A series of interludes gradually reveal Darren’s motives, but not in his own words. The years of mental illness, unsuccessful treatment, bullying, and

[†] / Jasbir K. Puar, “The ‘Right’ to Maim: Disablement and Inhumanist Biopolitics in Palestine” *Borerlands*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2015, pp 1–27, 14.

drug and alcohol use, which led to him throwing a cue ball at a high school girl who turned down his advance at a party (which was itself egged on as a prank), all of this seems outside Darren's articulation.

On the other hand, the novel's protagonist, Adam, is gifted with a hyper-verbosity that figures Lerner's most extended engagement with temporality and language. Adam's participation in high school debate contrasts Darren's own manual labor. Debate, especially Adam's particular version of policy debate, provides a disembodied analog to this labor, as the debater's language tries to exceed the body that produces it:

For a few seconds it sounds more or less like oratory, but soon she accelerates to nearly unintelligible speed, pitch and volume rising; she gasps like a swimmer surfacing, or maybe drowning; she is attempting to "spread" their opponents, as her opponents will attempt to spread them in turn—that is, to make more arguments, marshal more evidence than the other team can respond to within the allotted time, the rule among serious debaters being that a "dropped argument," no matter its quality, its content, is conceded.

The "spread"—a spatial description of a temporal phenomenon—uses speed to enthrall others in its specific game. The debater's accelerating speech, which begins to look like "drowning," pulls the other speakers down with her, as everyone has to speak with more speed and less coherence just to stay above water. Whereas some claim that the spread "detached policy debate from the real world," Lerner instead considers it as encapsulating potent historical transformations of that "real world" in the form of disclosures at the end of "increasingly common television commercials for prescription drugs," caveats to "promotions on the radio," and the "fine print" attached to documents from financial and health institutions: "Even before the twenty-four-hour news cycle, Twitter storms, algorithmic trading, spreadsheets, the DDoS attack, Americans were getting 'spread' in their daily lives." This sudden shift from narrating the past to discussing the present characterizes the style of *The Topeka School*. To make sense of the spread, even Lerner's narrator must fast forward from the action of 1990s Kansas to use his twenty-first-century knowledge of Twitter and DDoS attacks.

Lerner suggests that this technocratic spread has particularly manifested in the right-wing government that came to power in the United States. If, as Manshel claims, the recent historical novel coalesces around a catastrophe, the 2016 election might be that catastrophe for *The Topeka School*, even though it never "happens" as a depicted event like the 2014 Madrid bombing in *Atocha Station*. Kansas—or whatever vision of the neglected Middle America it is that Kansas represents—is the novel's ground zero. From the infamous Phelps

family (with their “God Hates Fags” signs) protesting a variety of cultural events to Adam’s personal debate coach, who “would become a major ally of the Kansas-based Koch Industries, one of the world’s great funders of climate change denial,” the visages of Trump’s America stalk Lerner’s depiction of 1990s Kansas, as he tries to write the novel that can finally explain what it was like in the prehistory to the 2016 “rise” of American fascism.

In contrast to the Phelps and Koch families, Adam appears as the flawed hero, representing hope for a world that is increasingly being spread by forces it cannot understand. He loses his temper and yells at a Phelps protester outside a speech given by his mother, a minor feminist celebrity. In the final debate of his career, he argues against the value of the spread (and loses), just before he wins the national championship in a different event, extemporaneous speaking. On the other hand, Darren stands in the background of these scenes, functioning less like a force than a reaction, wrapped up by a world in which he has no say and even less comprehension. He frequently expresses misogynist and racist sentiments, he drinks too much to fit in, and he always acts just a little bit off.

Lerner’s novel—through its alternating voices and its recurrent figuration of the spread—represents the differences between these two characters as a differential experience of time, and their families seems to provide the material justification for these divergent experiences. Adam’s parents, Jonathan and Jane, both successful psychologists, work at an innovative psychoanalytic research center just called “The Foundation” (modeled on the real-life Menninger Foundation) and narrate large portions of the novel. Jonathan is also Darren’s therapist. While the novel’s “present” is largely set in the late 80s and 90s, Jane’s and Jonathan’s narration occurs through extensive confessional letters to Adam, remembering their own young adulthoods in 60s and 70s New York. Their bourgeois, multi-generational family drama—the novel’s primary plot—contrasts with Darren’s slow-motion tragedy. The divergent fates of Adam and Darren are exacerbated by Jonathan’s relation to them as father and therapist respectively. Jonathan’s attempts to help Darren are thwarted by the young man’s psychological damage and hatred of his own family. In contrast, Jonathan tries to give Adam a healthy amount of space, providing room for his anger, his confusion, his mistakes, like some sort of fantasy of what it would be like to have a therapist as your father.

Lerner’s figuration of parents in *The Topeka School* extends an obsession running through his fiction. This novel picks up thematically where *10:04* leaves off, with anxiety about the possibility of becoming a parent, but here narrated through the protagonist’s own parents. Their young romance in New York, which obliquely narrates Adam’s future (he later becomes a young poet living in New York), imagines the conditions upon which two people could build a life together. The novel repeatedly returns to an early scene in

their romance, when they drop acid and go to the Met (the ekphrasis echoes Lerner's previous novels, which obsessively depict moments of aesthetic experience): "Then we arrived before Duccio's *Madonna and Child*, where we stood for several minutes, my jaw clenching and unclenching involuntarily as we looked. Old paintings usually bored me; this one stopped me cold. The foreknowledge in the woman's expression, as though she could anticipate a distant recurrence." In the Madonna's face, Lerner finds a potent encapsulation of the blended past and future that subtend our present, as the pigments of imaginations, memories, and anticipations shade our ongoing experience of history. Temporality becomes a metonymy for familial determinism—Jonathan's and Jane's rich and cultured past promises an equally rich future for Adam; Darren's mother, always offstage, fails in this regard—similarly to how Lerner's other novels circumscribed the historical present within one individual's perspective. Rather than reveal the economic contradictions that structure contemporary life, Lerner's focus on the family rigidifies—and maybe even biologizes—our understanding of the stratifications it depicts, as the novel can only ever refer back to its own limited view of the structures in its world.

In this way, the alternation of narrative focus presents narrative shifts as though they are shifts in temporality. Lerner's layering of perspectives necessitates an attendant acceleration of the voice that is narrating. Note his narration of the conditions that allowed a high school fight to occur:

Where were the parents? Most were sleeping. Some were watching *Friends* or *Frasier*, some were watching *SportsCenter*. Some were doing desk work or wiping down the kitchen islands. Some were reading Rice and some were reading Clancy, some were reading Adrienne Rich or "Non-Interpretive Mechanisms in Psychoanalytic Therapy." Or pretending to read. Some were coming back from date night in Kansas City or making perfunctory love or waiting for Internet pornography to load in an otherwise dark, carpeted basement office. Some were at a conference in Toledo. Some were on stationary bikes or the Bowflex or tinkering in the garage or cleaning guns. Some were trying email. Some were waiting for the beep of call waiting—for their kids to check in—while they spoke to others on the cordless. Some were worried and/or oblivious. Some were line-editing college applications or making rounds at St. Francis. Some were eating or opening a window or just walking dully along on a treadmill. Some were drinking gin and tonics in Taipei and some were writing this in Brooklyn while their daughters slept beside them and some were coming back on trains in dreams and some were at Rolling Hills in twilight states, mechanical beds.

This passage culminates in the frame-breaking deictic of “this” that refers to the novel we now hold in our hands, but its more complete effect is one of accumulation that necessitates acceleration. The deictic “this” is also in a temporal “now” that is 2019, whereas most of the narration happens in the late 90s. Lerner accumulates markers of time period (“trying email,” “cordless”), cultural distinction (Clancy and Rich), and geographic particularity (Kansas City, Toledo, Taipei, Brooklyn) that require a mix of free-associative and asyndetic maneuvers, as the narrating voice catches up to the collapsing time periods being narrated. This acceleration does not just occur within the interior temporality of the novel’s events, though; the mention of some parents “drinking gin and tonics in Taipei” refers to Jonathan’s father and Adam’s grandfather, even though these details (which precede the time of narration by decades) are not narrated until forty pages or so later in the novel. The linearity of familial descent, in tension with the recursive narration of its relations, disorders the novel, as each father refers back to his father, trying to make sense of how to father successfully. In this novel, Lerner’s questioning salvo—“Where were the parents?”—never receives an adequate answer, even as that answer’s urgency ramps up in the novel’s approach to our present moment.

The novel ends in 2019 with three vignettes. The first finds Adam, now a parent, confronting another father whose child won’t share the playground equipment. Realizing that he is losing control of himself—“both of us bad fathers now”—Adam angrily knocks the other parent’s phone out of his hands. The second shows Adam returning to read at Washburn University in Topeka, where his mother had read from one of her books years prior. The Phelps family protests this event too. Here, though, Adam keeps calm and instead narrates as though he is removed from the scene:

Now I am going to show you a picture of one of the protesters. Darren is heavier than the last time you saw him, bearded, almost certainly armed, although no printing is visible in the photograph; he is wearing the red baseball cap, holding his sign in silence. If your eyes were to meet, only the little mimic spasms would indicate recognition. What is happening in this moment? What are the characters thinking and feeling? Tell me what led up to this scene.

The novel seems, implicitly, to suggest that there is no direct answer to these questions and demands. The last vignette finds Adam at an ICE detention center protest, closing with a description of the “people’s mic,” “wherein those gathered around a speaker repeat what the speaker says in order to amplify a voice without permit-requiring equipment. It embarrassed me, it always had, but I forced myself to participate, to be a part of a tiny public

speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread.” Lerner’s answer to the all-pervasive spread is not more acceleration (as Adam has attempted all his life) but rather a dilation on specific scenes and words, detached vignettes only connected by experience, for which his preferred image of hope—rightly, if only gesturally—is the people’s mic. If, in his earlier accounts of the 90s spread, Lerner’s narrator could fast forward to twenty-first-century examples, that strategy no longer abides in making sense of twenty-first-century problems. Rather, Lerner stays with the solidarity of his group, finding a solution not in one exceptionally quick voice but in the “slowly” amplified repetition of words, so that more people in that “tiny public” can hear.

Darren’s silence excludes him from this public, just as he had been excluded from the promises of the bourgeois family. Facing Darren’s future, our present, Lerner’s demand—“Tell me what led up to this scene”—leads nowhere. If Lerner seems unable to comprehend the plight of Darren from his narrator’s perspective, it might be because that narrator has no better solution than the author writing him. Lerner’s latest novel illustrates the pitfalls of fictionalizing history through an intimately personal lens. Recalling what might be the greatest statement on the historical novel—Fredric Jameson’s claim that “History is what hurts”—we should note that Jameson puts aside how the historical subject feels about their experience of this hurt. Rather, the limits of history—imposed by the violences of capitalist exploitation and political struggle—are universally felt because history had to happen in the way that it did. As such, the position of the Gordon family at this novel’s narrative center, as the liberal stability that felt victimhood, rather than complicity, in response to 2016’s presidential election, limits Lerner’s narrative. This structure might tell us more about present failures than historical ones, providing few, if any, solutions.

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