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## **“Everything Will Be as It Is Now, Just a Little Different”: Affectively Imagining Alternative Worlds in Ben Lerner’s *10:04***

Grace Riley

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“EVERYTHING WILL BE AS IT IS NOW, JUST A LITTLE DIFFERENT”:  
AFFECTIVELY IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS IN BEN LERNER’S *10:04*

by

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most crucial concerns of cultural criticism today is the question of how to grapple with what Mark Fisher refers to as the “malaise” of the present; the pervasive belief that capitalism is the only viable option, that there is no alternative ‘other.’ However, there remains a vibrant scholarship committed to resisting such pessimism that theorizes the possibility of alternative, utopian futures that lie athwart the apocalyptic present. This thesis explores the question of how one begins to imagine such alternative futures from within a capitalist order that constantly works to pre-emptively subsume any possibilities of resistance. Art and fiction specifically play a vital role in this conversation; Ben Lerner’s *10:04* goes beyond dominant modes of resistance by exploring the ‘revolutionary’ possibilities of *aesthetic* resistance. The novel’s nameless narrator experiences various aesthetic moments in which crises—both punctual and durative—open up a space in which he is able to articulate affective dispositions which make visible the glimmers of alternatives amidst the heterotemporal present. It is a confrontation with shame specifically that allows the narrator to affectively register the apocalyptic state of the present. Shame is registered *first* as an instantaneous experience that alters one’s perception of the world, and then as a quotidian process of reflection and resistance. Various modes of art liberated from market logic and commodification within *10:04* illuminate the overlap of apocalypse and utopia, evoking in the narrator the euphoric possibility of alternative futures where “everything will be as it is now, just a little different.” Finally, the narrator (and/as Lerner) reveals through his artistic decision

to write his/this novel, *10:04*, that responding meaningfully to a capitalist order is not necessarily radicalization, but a change in perception that enables the imagining of alternative futures beyond capitalism.

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CHAPTER 1  
DIAGNOSING THE PRESENT MOMENT: TEMPORAL PARALYSIS  
AND CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

The present moment is typically defined in relation to the past and future; following the logic of the traditional linear historical narrative, the present is wedged between where we came from and where we are going, with the compass pointing towards ‘progress.’ No one better explains the fundamental flaw in this temporal/historical perception than Walter Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1969). Benjamin famously uses Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, what he names “the angel of history,” to analogize our distorted perception of history and temporality;

His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (392)

Benjamin's angel of history transcends space and time and is thus able to see that the history of the world is not linear and progressive, but a vicious cycle of destruction. However, rather than fully reckoning with historical trauma and the ways in which it informs the present, mankind's "storm" of progress thrusts the angel of history *irresistibly*, blindly, and prematurely into a future that promises to be better with no justification as to how or why. Crucially, there is actually no 'present' here; the irony is that this linear historical narrative is *one single catastrophe*. To the angel of history's horror, the past, present, and future are indistinguishable from one another—Benjamin refers to this delusive sense of temporality as "homogenous, empty time," when really "[h]istory is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time" (394-395). In other words, history is the accumulation of various presents and present experiences, and the future is simply a now-time that is to come; to perceive the past as passed is an abjection of sorts that disillusion human beings into believing in their myth of progress. This has inevitably resulted in what I refer to as the temporal paralysis of the contemporary moment—the seeming inability to look to the past or the future as a model for constructing a different, better future, and moving beyond this specific neoliberal moment.

Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* offers the most detailed diagnosis of the crisis of the contemporary moment and our collective response to it—what he calls the cultural "malaise" of the present, "the feeling that there is nothing new," no realistic or viable alternative to capitalism (6). This pervasive malaise is unique to neoliberal capitalism's operation of power; Fisher explains the dystopian reality specific to late capitalism through his analysis of the film *Children of Men*; mass

oppression is discrete and ongoing, rather than traditionally overt with the responsible source or powers immediately identifiable. In other words, crisis is “neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened,” and is instead “being lived through” (Fisher 2). To survive within this kind of social organization results in the “normalization of crisis . . . in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable”; crisis is embedded in the very fabric of quotidian existence (Fisher 1). As a result, capitalism produces a psychological manipulation that enables its survival; citizens adopt a sense of “capitalist realism,” the malaise which Fisher defines as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2).

The obvious question is why can we not help but feel that there is no alternative? Capitalist realism importantly functions based on the same flawed ideology of historical progress that Benjamin critiques through his angel of history. Fisher explains that capitalist realism thrives and consumes any hope for an alternative by operating on a “bipolar oscillation” between “nihilistic hedonism” on the one hand, and “weak messianic hope” on the other (Fisher 1, 3). Nihilistic hedonism, or “reflexive impotence” refers to the pessimism most prevalent in capitalist subjects—to recognize that this world is flawed and understand that capitalism is to blame, but to feel that there is nothing that can be done about it and to therefore to try ultimately not to think about it. On the other hand, the “weak messianic hope” Fisher refers to is the hope that change is to come, but

ultimately lies in the future when change can *actually* happen.<sup>1</sup> The fact that both convictions of this malaise promote complicity and thus allow this present moment or “now-time” of neoliberal capitalism to persist is what has produced the temporal paralysis that has halted our storm of progress while keeping us blind to the historical reflection Benjamin insists on. We no longer have an idealized notion of what a ‘progressive’ future looks like to drive us forward into the future, and yet capitalist realism has also “subsume[d] and consume[d] all of previous history . . . In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures [have been] objectively ironized, transformed into *artifacts*”; capitalist realism insists that the past(s) are artifacts of broken systems that did not work then and could not possibly work now (Fisher 4). There is thus no creative, innovative energy or inspiration to imagine a future beyond or outside of the capitalist order.

Regardless, the fact that scholars and critics like Mark Fisher, Gilles Deleuze, Aislinn O’Donnell, Elizabeth Povinelli, and many others whose work will support the theoretical framework of this essay can articulate the cultural malaise of capitalist realism offers a hope for the future that this essay will argue can be demarcated from counterproductive forms of “weak messianic hope.” This critical and imaginative work—and, I will argue, the modes of art that demonstrate it—suggests that it is precisely the dystopian, apocalyptic nature of this “now-time” of the present that makes it also a temporal space filled with ‘utopian’ possibilities which can cure its temporal paralysis; that it is a space of utter crisis *and* revolutionary potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher’s notion of “weak, messianic hope” also resonates with what Todd McGowan calls “revolutionary hope”—see *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* for more details, specifically the psychological effects we “capitalist subjects” suffer that allows it to persist and manipulates us into complicity.

Ben Lerner's *10:04* participates in this conversation by demonstrating the ways in which art and fiction can seize the utopian possibilities located within the crisis of the contemporary moment, and through it, attempt to imagine otherwise. Throughout the novel the nameless narrator experiences various moments in which crises—both punctual and durative—open up a space in which he is able to articulate affective dispositions which make visible the glimmers of alternatives amidst the heterotemporal present. However, the novel intuits the vulnerability of such glimmers of possibility to capitalist realism's subsumption and thus demonstrates the ways in which they are often "retrospectively erased" (Lerner 24). It is through affective articulation that the narrator is able to respond to what it means for apocalypse and utopia to occupy the same temporal space—that is, by confronting the trauma of the 'Real,' the narrator is able to move beyond shame and articulate the utopian possibilities athwart the present. Various modes of art liberated from market logic and commodification within *10:04* illuminate the overlap of apocalypse and utopia, evoking in the narrator the euphoric possibility of alternative futures where "everything will be as it is now, just a little different."

## CHAPTER 2

### “SPACES OF OTHERWISE,” CRISIS, AND CAPITALIST REALISM

Part of what encourages the nihilistic hedonism of capitalist realism—the recognition that things are bad, but the overwhelming and ultimately numbing feeling that ‘realistically’ nothing can be done about it—is the globally pervasive state of contemporary capitalism; Marx warned of the violent cosmopolitanism of capitalism and the way its “need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere” (Marx 16). This has produced an oppressive form of power akin to a Foucauldian surveillance state, with power operating at both the corporeal and psychological level. How, then, can we think of these spaces as holding any revolutionary possibilities or subversive potential?

Crucial to the theoretical framework of this essay is Elizabeth Povinelli’s concept of temporal spaces loosely referred to as “spaces of otherwise” or alternative “social orders.”<sup>2</sup> In *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011) she explores the concept of this temporal space through an analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli explains in *Economies of Abandonment* how we can begin to imagine alternative worlds specific to the contemporary moment of what she refers to as “late liberalism.” Povinelli defines these alternative worlds that have yet to be realized, cannot quite be described, and therefore do not yet exist, as “social projects” (Povinelli 7).

Ursula Le Guin’s dystopian short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”; the utilitarian social order in Le Guin’s fictional society, Omelas, entails that a young girl locked away in a broom closet suffer perpetually in order to sustain the universal happiness of the rest of society. The horrified reader must ask how this is possible or excusable, to which Povinelli explains that the Omelans either see it as too late for the girl to be saved, or face the “true paradox” of perceiving the injustice of the girl’s suffering only to accept it as the necessary “justice of reality” (Povinelli, 2; Le Guin 866). This should ring familiar, as it resonates with the very notion of capitalist realism. Yet, Le Guin’s story is centered around producing an alternative ethical option, moving beyond this unjust fatalism. At the story’s end, some choose to stay in Omelas, but others decide to leave, regardless of the fact that they do not know where or to what they are going—crucially, neither does Le Guin. Making an important authorial and theoretical move, Le Guin admittedly “cannot describe it all,” but has them go nonetheless, creating a temporal space located between moving away from the current social order and towards something not yet realized (Le Guin 866). Povinelli explains that this theoretical move is unique to the specific ethical imperative the Omelans face because

In the oscillation between this state of neither great crisis nor final redemption there is nothing spectacular to report. Indeed, nothing happens that rises to the level of an event let alone a crisis. The small child’s life-as-suffering will drift across a series of *quasi-events* into a form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of “natural causes.” As a result any ethical impulse dependent on a certain kind of event and

eventfulness—a crisis—flounders in this closet. How does one construct an ethics in relation to this kind of dispersed suffering?” (Povinelli 3-4).

I invoke Povinelli’s analysis of Le Guin’s story for various reasons: first, Povinelli explains the paradox of crisis here; rather than a single, catastrophic event that demands a response, the crisis occurring within Omelas is not only necessary for the current social order to survive, but it is an ongoing event through the *durative present*. In his essay on *10:04*, Ralph Clare reads the temporality of the novel through Henri Bergson’s notion of time as *durée*, or duration, which he describes as “consciousness experienc[ing] *the continuous, yet heterogeneous flow of time* via memory and perception, in a process that brings the past to bear upon the immediate data of a consciousness. Consequently, *the present is not a series of disconnected, empty moments but is continually passing and is pregnant with the past*” (Clare 4; emphasis mine). Echoing Benjamin, Bergson’s notion of durative time rejects the notion of homogenous, empty time and instead experiences time as inherently intermingled with past events that are continuously building upon themselves. In this sense, the past is never passed, but is constantly being revised and cultivated based on the present moment. This is how crisis—the girl’s suffering—is experienced in Omelas, and because it exists in duration, it is normalized, as Fisher previously explains. The result is that any methods of ethical resolution that depend on responding to instances of punctual crisis are not applicable to this durative crisis. Because of this, Povinelli explains, any desire for ethical resolution—or ‘progress’—requires new ethical approaches that must be created in response to this new form of durative crisis.

The question of how one “construct[s] an ethics in relation to this kind of dispersed suffering” is central to this essay for a few reasons: first, our impasse of the contemporary moment is analogous to that of the Omelans, though the situation is now reversed; the majority of global citizens suffer under capitalism with very few reaping the benefits of that collective suffering. Even those who are fortunate enough not to face excess-precarity and vulnerability recognize that implicit in their unavoidable consumption and participation in this capitalist order is the excess suffering of others. That the suffering enabling the flawed social order is now a collective, global suffering makes the necessity of an ethical response even more apparent.

Second, the space that opens up in response to the question of how to construct an ethical response—“spaces of otherwise”—relies on crises; they are spaces of both dystopian catastrophe and utopian possibilities. As Benjamin explained, and has become obvious based on current scholarship surrounding the issue of imagining alternatives to capitalism, durative crises tend to culminate in these moments of temporal paralysis when the path towards ‘progress’ is no longer clear. To move forward thus requires recognizing and seizing the possibilities that flicker before us in moments of crisis. Povinelli argues that these “spaces of otherwise” contain possibilities, or potentialities, that are “neither something nor nothing” (5).

Thus, the difficult question is how to seize and occupy these spaces of otherwise so as to imagine alternative future worlds beyond and outside of capitalism—this essay attempts to answer this question through a reading of Ben Lerner’s *10:04*. Doing so necessitates defining the space(s) of otherwise specific to the novel; capitalism may be a globally shared social order, but its effects and thus the “spaces of otherwise” it imagines

are unique to its geographic place. The novel intuits the paradox of this both subjective and collective experience and thus acknowledges the connections and disconnections between global capitalism broadly and America.

A useful way to understand the “spaces of otherwise” specific to *10:04* is through Povinelli’s articulation of Deleuze’s distinction between “ideas” and “affects.” Essentially, ideas are representational (i.e., fully realized and definable mental “contents”) while an affect is “a force of existing (*vis existendi*) that is neither the realized thing (an idea), nor the accomplishment of a thing (an act, *potentia agendi*)” (Povinelli 9). She further emphasizes that

For Deleuze, the perpetual variation between *vis existendi* and *potentia agendi*—between striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving—provides a space of potentiality where new forms of life can emerge. But it is exactly in this ontotheoretical spacing that a different, sociological question emerges: How do new forms of social life maintain the force of existing in specific social spacings of life? How do they endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere? And how in answering these questions do new, if not ontotheoretical, then political and ethical concerns emerge? (Povinelli 8-9).

This distinction between ideas and affects is particularly important for my reading of the novel’s form as a retrospective account/transformation of nameless narrator’s social affects. What I mean by “social affects” is this: Povinelli invokes Deleuze’s notion of affect to explain why these spaces of potentialities are so precarious; while the narrator’s affects may be too complex to be ‘reduced’ to the idea(s) of capitalism, we must not

underestimate the ways in which capital is designed to produce certain affects in order to ensure its survival. The fact that potential affects can exist within a capitalist social order does not change the fact that capitalism is constantly working to manipulate those affects to its own ends. Mark Fisher explains that “What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture” (9). What Fisher illuminates here is the paradox of capitalism’s power: capitalism must pre-emptively shape our desires for commodities because it needs our collective engagement in order to survive—were we to collectively recognize it as a “hyper-abstract impersonal structure...that would be nothing without our co-operation,” we might be able to interrogate and reshape those very desires (Fisher 15). This tension begets the same questions Povinelli asks concerning how to seize and work to actualize potential affects within the system they threaten to subvert, but we must first ask how to distinguish between our desires pre-emptively shaped by capitalism and those that have the potential “ethical value” (Fisher 17). In other words, how to distinguish between the ‘Real’ and the false sense of ‘reality’ instilled by capitalist realism, for “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of the ‘natural order’ capitalism claims to emulate” (Fisher 17-18).

My contention is that the novel intuits that the key to this lies in a form of affective introspection. The novel demonstrates what this might look like through the development of the narrator’s internality through his affective ruminations on his experiences with others’ stories and forms of art liberated from commodified value. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator exemplifies the “bi-polar oscillation” inherent in

capitalist realism between nihilistic hedonism and weak, messianic hope. The scenes I'll discuss in relation to this revolve around crisis—particularly the narrator's meeting with Roberto, and the potentially catastrophic storm at the beginning of the novel. However, I argue that as the novel progresses, the narrator experiences a fundamental shift in perception—particularly in his encounter with the Zuccotti Park protestor—allowing him to recognize the durative crisis and intolerability of the present *and thus* the various alternative possibilities that lies athwart it. Doing so allows him to imagine a more sincere, collective future outside of capitalism from within the very present order which previously foreclosed such possibility—a future where “everything will be as it is now, just a little different.”

## 2.1: CRISIS: GLIMPSES OF OTHER WORLDS

Crisis is central to the irony of this novel since it is immediate forms of crisis that enable the collective acknowledgement of the durative crisis that neoliberal capitalism entails but normalizes and embeds in our everyday lives. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's internality exemplifies the “bi-polar oscillation” of capitalist realism that allows one to survive what would be constant anxiety over various forms of capitalism's durative crises. For example, when Roberto, a third grader the narrator tutors, begins to tell him about an apocalyptic nightmare he had that was rooted in anxieties and fears about the future of global warming, the narrator consequently begins to feel “[a]n increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough *agnosia*<sup>3</sup> . . . a condition brought on by *the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration* . . . Roberto, like me, tended to figure

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<sup>3</sup> The “inability to interpret sensations and hence to recognize things, typically as a result of brain damage.”

the global apocalyptically” (Lerner 14; emphasis mine). The horror of this young child having nightmares about global warming, a durative crisis in and of itself, spirals the narrator into a panic that estranges him from his sense of space and time. Even though he shares Roberto’s reasonable anxieties about the future, the narrator ultimately promises him that he has “nothing to fear” (14).

Capitalist realism is constantly upholding this temporal agnosia that desensitizes the collective ‘us’ to certain long-term forms of disaster by normalizing unstable conditions like the climate crisis. This normalization convinces us that because capitalism is the only viable option, there is no way to console or survive our internal anxieties about our imminent demise other than to either ignore the fact, or as Fisher explains specifically in relation to capitalist realism and environmental crisis, attempt to solve them using the same system that is to blame for its destruction in the first place (18). Roberto’s comment causes a temporary glitch in which the narrator is forced to recognize the truth behind his terror and is thus paralyzed, unable to recognize the world around him. However, the narrator’s immediate insistence to Roberto that there is nothing to fear reinforces the reflexive impotence Fisher explains is inherent to capitalist realism. Thoughts or desires centered around slowing the climate crisis or instilling in Roberto the confidence that something can be done to prevent such apocalypse are not entertained; the narrator immediately jumps to the *only* response he can handle: don’t worry about it. Importantly, “what this disavowal [of unveiled reality] depends upon is the distinction between inner subjective attitude and outward behavior,” i.e., the quelling or internalization of our internal anxieties (either via nihilistic hedonism or naïve messianic

hope) that prevent the internal from being radically transformed or translated into meaningful resistance.

What Fisher emphasizes is that these affective experiences have the potential to strip down the illusion of normalcy that capitalist realism assigns to these forms of crisis, but that these mean nothing if we don't know what it looks like to actually resist adapting to the conditions of capitalist realism. Fisher admits that "there has still not been enough thought about what tactics will work against capital in conditions of post-Fordism, and what *new language* can be innovated to deal with those conditions" (28). This gestures towards the need for a vocabulary of capitalist subversion that's made difficult to retain because of its subsumption by capitalist realism; rather than any overtly oppressive or physically identifiable force combatting subversion, capitalist realism "is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of *invisible barrier constraining thought and action*" (Fisher 16; emphasis mine). This is the predominant way in which capitalism pre-emptively molds and determines our desires, but it also reiterates the ways in which it resists subversion by first regulating internal *thoughts and feelings* to prevent any subversive *action*.

While Fisher offers a crucial theoretical explanation of this process which he defines as "memory disorder" and "dreamwork," what's missing is a demonstration of what that might look like at work in our own quotidian experience. This is a struggle the novel intuits and demonstrates through the narrator's affective experience in response to the impending crisis of a storm that is predicted to be catastrophic.

Chapter 7 of *Capitalist Realism* articulates the process of capitalist realism that distorts our perception of what Fisher distinguishes as the ‘Real’ and ‘reality.’ Capitalism is an inherently precarious system, and as such is bound to face situations in which its vulnerability is exposed, making it difficult for capitalist realism to sustain the illusion that it is the only viable option with no alternatives. This constant process of capitalist realism suppressing any part of reality that contradicts it carries subversive potential, and thus threatens capitalist realism. To resist subversion, capitalist realism thus subsumes these “glitches” by incorporating them into ‘reality’ by “editing out the point of suture” between ‘reality’ and the ‘Real,’ (Fisher 56). Memory disorder is thus the revision of lived experience, a selective amnesia of sorts, that forgets these moments of contradiction as *holes* in capitalist realism’s reality and instead remembers them as *part of* that reality. As such these memories remain but are not transferred into long-term memory because they’re written off as insignificant. This process is one of “accepting the incommensurable and the senseless without question” and “entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment” (54). This is necessary for capitalism to persist since, far from being a system of ‘natural’ order, it repeatedly finds itself in situations that expose just how precarious and intolerable it is.<sup>4</sup>

The question is how and why memory disorder happens—in other words, what is it that convinces one to accept reality as “infinitely plastic,” and to dismiss the obviously disturbing? Part of the reason capitalist realism is so widely accepted is that it’s difficult

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<sup>4</sup> An example Fisher gives is the financial crisis of 2008, but no example is more fitting for the ‘now-time’ of the present than the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic and the recent Texas electrical grid outage, both of which resulted in mass death.

to distinguish between what we remain in control of and what we don't; capitalist realism is produced and encouraged by capitalism, but it comes to life and persists through our active incorporation of it. This is why it's so important that we're able to recognize capitalism as "a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our co-operation" (Fisher 15). For the capitalist realist, to accept reality as "infinitely plastic," means that disasters and crises that expose the 'Real' of the capitalist social order co-exist and are accepted as a part of the 'reality' of capitalist realism. However, in times of crisis the "invisible barrier" upheld by capitalist realism temporarily fails, and thus affects pregnant with possibilities and alternative realities that are "out there, impersonal and circulating" are made visible to us, creating an affective temporal space for imagining alternatives to the present. The question is why we are unable to translate those affects into action, why the process of memory disorder happens at all.

We see a version of this in *10:04* when an unprecedented and potentially catastrophic storm looms over the city. The narrator describes the threat of the storm creating an "unusual," affective collectivity among the city's inhabitants (Lerner 17). As a result of the storm's threat, "...the city was becoming one organism, *constituting itself in relation to a threat* viewable from space..." (17; emphasis added). In other words, as the crisis of the storm draws near, the veil of capitalist realism falls and the city comes alive as its inhabitants begin to collectively respond to unfamiliar affects, an experience both subjective and collectively shared. In this moment, some of the city's inhabitants experience a shared vulnerability to the immanent storm. As the narrator rides the train to the grocery store in preparation for the storm's arrival, he experiences an unusual but euphoric atmosphere of collectivity; as he explains it, "because every conversation you

overheard in line or on the street or train began to share a theme, it was soon one common conversation you could join” (17). The narrator’s description of the affect/effect the storm has on the city shows that not only does the city become “one organism,” responding to capitalism’s exposed fragility, but, importantly, an *affective* collectivity forms among its inhabitants.

What’s fascinating is the irony of their collective affective reaction to the threat of the storm; the narrator portrays the ambiance of the train as unusually positive, describing it as a “glow of [their] increasing sociability” vibrating with excitement and altruism. For example, as a mariachi band begins to play on the train, everyone stops to listen and the narrator notes that there is an “unusual quantity of pathos in the song” and “an unusual quantity of currency in the hat” (Lerner 17). Not only are people opening themselves up to collectivity and connecting to one another because they’re all in the same danger, but the collectivity is a seemingly *better* one where, as the narrator stresses, abnormal generosity and empathy are cultivated. What would be an anticipated reaction to crises—fear, panic, anxiety, etc.—is replaced with an “air [that] is excited by foreboding”, as if the end of the world entails a relinquishment of the current social organization and the embrace of a new one—as if it opens doors to other possible worlds rather than simply ending one (18). According to Lauren Berlant, this paradoxical sense that the future ensues the end of the world is alive within the “impasse” of the “stretched-out present” (4-5). She describes this particular affective feeling as analogous to Deleuze’s notion of “perturbation,” or “disturbances in the atmosphere that constitute situations *whose shape can only be forged by continuous reaction and transversal movement*, releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries”

(6; emphasis mine). In other words, when the veil of capitalist realism is lifted in times of crisis capitalism's utter abstraction is made visible.

For instance, the perturbation the narrator perceives on the train follows him into the grocery store and alters his perception of reality as he manages to find one of the last tins of instant coffee on the shelf.

The approaching storm was estranging the routine of shopping just enough to make me viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy . . . I held the red plastic container . . . held it like the marvel it was: the seeds inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellín and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Perl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura—the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and highways were starting to close. *Everything will be as it is now, just a little different*—nothing in me or the store had changed, except maybe my aorta, but, as the eye drew near, what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly—in

the passing commons of a train, in a container of tasteless coffee” (Lerner 19).

The storm has upset the normal atmosphere of the grocery store, heightening the experience and transforming his perception just as it did on the train. He sees the coffee tin in an entirely new light now that it stands on a bare shelf and is nearly unattainable, and the temporary insecurity of the coffee allows him to see past the surface of the commodity and into its complex history—a history we normally don’t think about participating in, but that we do—the majesty and stupidity of being connected on the global level by commodities as mundane as a tin of instant coffee. As he expresses, his relationship in that moment to the “social relations” that contributed to that tin of coffee’s ability to be in that store available to him in that moment are revealed to him *because* the commodity—and he—is threatened (Lerner 19). Only now that the city is experiencing apocalyptic fear because of the storm is the narrator able to see the “majesty and murderous stupidity” of capitalism, and for a brief moment he is released from his one-dimensional perception of his world and the commodities within it (Lerner 19).

It is also crucial to note that the narrator emphasizes the suspension of transportation and mobility; cars and planes, the mechanisms that allow commodities to move from place to place, are rendered immobile and useless in this moment. This temporary suspension of the processes of capitalism and their ability to function normally is what allows the coffee tin to be one of only a few left, rather than one among many. The scarcity of the commodity is part of what catalyzes this moment of clarity, emphasizing how vulnerable capitalism is to crises and makes visible all its flaws that are normally concealed by a continuous cycle of production, distribution, and consumption.

This realization allows for ‘many worlds’ to come into view where only one was before, suggesting the utopian possibility of many alternative realities for how the economy and the world functions as opposed to just one.

However, what often occurs is the subsumption of those possibilities, a process Fisher refers to as “memory disorder.” Memory disorder is an instance in which we recognize the inconsistencies in reality but accept and abandon them nonetheless, preventing them from leaving any impressionable and lasting effect. Fisher rightfully reads this process of memory disorder, of releasing the lifeline and letting oneself drown, as particularly unsettling, explaining that

This strategy — of accepting the incommensurable and the senseless without question — has always been the exemplary technique of sanity as such, but it has a special role to play in late capitalism, that ‘motley painting of everything that ever was’, whose *dreaming up and junking of social fictions* is nearly as rapid as its production and disposal of commodities. (Fisher 56; emphasis mine)

What I argue is important to emphasize here is the affective move in between the ‘dreaming up’ and ‘junking’ of these ‘social fictions’ alive in potential affects. As much as these moments contain subversive potential, they're also moments of existential crisis. To seize and hold onto the alternatives they intuit, we must open ourselves to the Real that capitalist realism occludes. Fisher explains that “[i]f the Real is unbearable, *any* reality we construct must be a tissue of inconsistencies,” so accepting the Real requires an acceptance of all that makes the Real unbearable which can only be maintained by a “near-total absence of critical reflexivity” (54-55). This is an affective move—or denial,

really—that we have historically refused, as explained by Benjamin, making these events in terms of change meaningless. Thus, the question remains: How can we consciously resist capitalist realism?

## CHAPTER 3

### SHAME AND AESTHETIC RESISTANCE

As inane as it may sound, no ‘revolutionary’ action or significant change in our world can occur without a real *reason*—one(s) that can resist eradication at the hands of the abstract forces of capitalism. Radical paradigmatic shifts only occur when there is a collective investment in ensuring those visions reach fruition. And collective investment requires that those participating in these movements, in this imagining of something other, believe in the future for which they are advocating. Thus, my contention is that reasons and motivations able to resist capitalist subsumption are necessarily ethical and *affective* investments in the *quotidian act of resistance*. Desire fuels and shapes our actions, which is why capitalist realism is constantly working to pre-emptively shape (commodify) those desires, ensuring our complicity by convincing us that our desires can be, and are, satisfied through accumulation. However, this distorts the affective nature of desire into something material, inevitably leaving behind a residue of dissatisfaction in the wake of constant accumulation—of the craving for something more than what capitalism can offer.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As Mark Fisher explains it, capitalist realism is only able to function as ideology so long as it is “naturalized,” and “it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact. Accordingly, neoliberalism has sought to eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense” (Fisher 16-17). In other words, perspectives are informed by one’s values, so in order for capitalist realism to function as a widespread ideology rather than simply a malleable perspective, it must operate as if it is *fact* that

What this inherent dissatisfaction under capitalism demands is a retrieval of affective and ethical value, which entails liberating commodified objects *and* our commodified internal life—thoughts, desires, and *perceptions*—by either reclaiming or discovering and imbuing their ethical value; this would shatter capitalist realism’s illusory ideology and allow us to instead imagine possibilities beyond/other than capitalism. This seems an overwhelming and impossible task; how can we begin to even fathom what this process looks like? How can we as *individuals* begin to transform this revolutionary concept of liberating a commodified world into applicable practice, a practical pedagogy of resistance? In other words, if the key to productive resistance is affective and ethical investment, what can be done to inspire it?

I suggest—in conversation with Aislinn O’Donnell, Fisher, and Lerner’s novel—that the answer is twofold: first, an affective and ethical investment in liberating a world shaped by commodification requires a fundamental shift in the way we perceive our world and its tolerability—a shift induced by *shame*, specifically. Further, responding to this shift often involves engaging in *aesthetic* forms of resistance. *10:04* intuits the importance of such quotidian, aesthetic resistance and demonstrates the ways in which art and what O’Donnell refers to as “aesthetic moments” can suspend capitalist realism and offer a “utopian glimmer” of alternatives beyond/other than capitalism (O’Donnell 3, Lerner 54).

### 3.1: SHAME: POSSIBILITIES OF QUOTIDIAN RESISTANCE

Aislinn O’Donnell engages with Deleuze’s political concept of affect in order to

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there is no alternative, rather than opinion. To do so, critical and affective engagement with the ethical value of the capitalist system must be quelled by the insistence that such efforts are futile *because* it is simply fact; nothing can be done.

argue that shame is the specific affect which has the revolutionary potential to allow us to “see”<sup>6</sup> what is intolerable about our world—its history, the realities of the present moment and our relationship to it, and how it e/affects not only ourselves, but ‘Others’ and the world at large. O’Donnell is not naïve to the apparent paradox of shame being a hopeful or inspirational affect; she explains, “Dominant motifs in discourses on shame include the failure or inadequacy of self in acceding to an ideal or to a moral standard set by oneself or others, assaults on self-esteem, social exclusion, and a painful sense of being positioned as object, thing-like or invisible, but some experiences of shame can also invite an ethical orientation to the Other and an opening to a shared world” (O’Donnell 1-2).<sup>7</sup> In other words, shame is not an easily definable affect because of its ability to produce contradictory effects. While shame is typically perceived as a painfully humiliating affect, humiliation and guilt entail that one has glimpsed the state of things and recognized something—about it or themselves—as awry. In other words, one does not experience shame unless they acknowledge, to a degree, that there is something to be ashamed of. A potentially revolutionary mode of shame goes beyond bowing the head or turning one’s cheek in avoidance, and instead confronts the Real and *sees* it as intolerable, thus tearing the veil of capitalist realism. As she explains it, Deleuze

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<sup>6</sup> In the same way one can look but not *see*, listen but not *hear*, one can witness the intolerability of capitalism and the current state of our world without really *seeing* and registering it. O’Donnell emphasis on “*seeing*” stresses a critical reflection and registering of the parts of ‘reality’ that capitalist realism works to mask or subsume—what Fisher refers to as the ‘Real.’ This *seeing* makes the intolerable visible in “moments of disruption,” which can be thought of as analogous to the “glitches in capitalist realism” I discuss earlier.

<sup>7</sup> For further clarification: “Shame is an ambivalent affect that is unreliable, contingent and contextual, and it can, of course, be pernicious and debilitating when we are shamed for who we are or others are ashamed of us. Yet, we can also feel ashamed before the Other rather than for him or her, and we can feel ashamed of the state of our world” (O’Donnell 2).

...thinks that part of the problem is coming to *see, feel* and *sense*, but this is so that we can believe in the world or, as he says, the link between man and the world . . . It begins with the moment that one *sees* the intolerable . . . *If one has fallen short, it is not because of who one is, but because of how one has been blind to others and to the possibilities of life.* In this respect, shame has the potential to be a proto- political and proto-ethical affect because it suspends and precludes the ready invocation of clichés and explanations. Shame reveals ‘how it is’, how this is impossible, but also how from such impossibility, something new may emerge to disrupt the dominant logic. (O’Donnell 7; emphasis mine)

In other words, one does not fall short because they experience shame; we are flawed humans living within a flawed, seemingly inescapable social order. Shame is inevitable. One falls short when they hide from the source of their shame, rather than constantly working to confront and understand it. Shame is experiencing the trauma of the Real, and one must experience the Real in order to imagine alternative possibilities. If the Real is indeed “a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality,” then it is this mode of shame that can allow us to *see* the inconsistencies that make reality intolerable and illuminate the possibility of something ‘other’ than and beyond capitalism (Fisher 18).

*10:04* intuits the intolerability of our contemporary moment but goes further by demonstrating this engagement with shame as a *process* of altering one’s perception of the world. O’Donnell admits that such profound experiences of shame have the power to forever alter the way one perceives the world, but what is important to realize is that a

shift in perception does not suddenly transform one into the ideal revolutionary, nor does it provide one with the solutions or blueprints for change. However, that one *believes* in a world where “everything is as it is now, just a little different” *is* the revolutionary act of resistance. What the novel demonstrates is what this process might look like in the form of quotidian experience through the nameless narrator’s various aesthetic moments with others and art (the latter which I will return to).

Shortly after the storm, the narrator invites a Zuccotti park protestor to shower in his home, and it is this moment in the novel that initiates the narrator’s progress/process experiencing and engaging with this potentially revolutionary mode of shame. Interestingly, the narrator mentions that the protestor innocently asks him if he “goes to Zuccotti a lot?” only to omit his response to the question; the scene shifts instead to the narrator cooking dinner for the protestor in his kitchen. The reader can assume it is because the answer is no, and identify, almost *feel*, the shame his omission entails. Interestingly, this shame lingers within the narrator, never referred to as such, but glaringly obvious in the moment of introspection he experiences while cooking dinner for the protestor as he showers:

While I stirred the vegetables I realized with slowly dawning alarm that I couldn’t remember the last time I’d cooked by myself for another person—I could not, in fact, ever remember having done so . . . I simply could not recall a single instance in which I had by myself constructed a meal, however rudimentary, for another human being . . . Typically my contribution was just wine, itself the carefully aged work of others . . . I would like to say my recognition of this asymmetry led me to

meditate...on the pleasure I was taking in cooking for my fellow man as he bathed, but I was aware at that point of no pleasure. I would like to say that, at the very least, I resolved to cook henceforth for my friends, to be a producer and not a consumer alone . . . I would like to say that, as the protestor finished his shower, I was disturbed by the contradiction between my avowed political materialism and my inexperience with this brand of making, of *poesis*, but I could dodge or dampen that contradiction via my hatred of Brooklyn's boutique biopolitics . . . Moreover, what did it mean to say that Aaron or Alena had prepared those meals for me, when the ingredients were grown and picked and packaged and transported by others in a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity? The fact is that realizing my selfishness just led to more selfishness. (Lerner 45-47)

In this moment it is the protestor's presence in his home that forces the narrator to confront his hypocrisy and complicity within a system he has claimed to disavow; all of a sudden his shame at realizing the contradiction in his beliefs and his actions reveals to him his naïve methods of tolerating the intolerable in light of the protestor's active resistance to capitalism. In other words, the "slowly dawning alarm" gestures towards the narrator beginning to *see* things he did not before *because* of his shame. We see in this moment, again, the ways in which these moments of disruption/glitches in capitalist realism illuminate the intolerable effects of contemporary capitalism, though there's an important distinction here; in this moment it is not immediate crisis that causes him to look outside of himself, but his unobscured perception of himself *in relation to another*

(the protestor) and *others* in his life. Only then does the narrator realize his privilege and “selfishness.”

The subsumption of this realization by capitalist realism is apparent in the language he uses to describe his selfishness; the lack of intentional care he extends to others is translated into a tendency to consume without producing, stripping this realization of its affective weight. The repetition of “I would like to say” signals the narrator’s ability to see this subsumption in action as he retells this experience in retrospect, how he *should* have reacted to this realization now obvious to him. What he should have *seen* is obvious from his future self’s point of view, but crucially, he confronts the shame of that moment by admitting that these realizations are subsumed and redirected by the “clichés” of capitalist realism. As O’Donnell explains it, in these moments of disruption

Words are hurled like weapons to try to make [the] reader see what is before him or her, yet this is often to no avail as such gestures are rejected when it is easier to obscure exploitation and marginalisation with ready-made explanations, rote responses and platitudes. This becomes even more likely when one is faced not only with the intolerable but also with one’s complicity in its perpetuation . . . Clichés are imposed without sensitivity to context or matter, enabling us to tolerate almost anything. (O’Donnell 6, 9)

The narrator’s shameful attempt to “dodge or dampen that contradiction via my hatred of Brooklyn’s boutique biopolitics” is one such cliché that is then transformed into another; the narrator suddenly feels an intense desire to have a child, only to immediately dismiss

the thought. What the narrator is doing here is projecting the change he knows the realization of his hypocrisy is gesturing towards onto his hypothetical future child, a “cliché” gesture of weak, messianic hope that the narrator immediately recognizes as futile and resists. However, this resistance is an important turn here that identifies what was missing from the scene of the storm, enabling its affects’ erasure. Not only is the narrator able to comment on the flaws of this moment in retrospect, resisting revision, but he is also able to locate the moment in which he confronts his own hypocrisy, and his attempt to excuse and ignore it;

So this is how it works, I said to myself, as if I’d caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household, that almost caricatural transvaluation of values lubricated by wine and song. Your gesture of briefly placing a tiny part of the domestic—your bathroom—into the commons leads you to redescribe the possibility of collective politics as the private drama of the family . . . What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostasizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and co-construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit. (Lerner 47)

This moment is, I would argue, the most important in the novel since it exemplifies precisely O'Donnell's connection between shame as a revolutionary affect that can alter our perceptions and help liberate ourselves from the confines of capitalist realism and begin to actually *see* and imagine alternative worlds outside of/beyond capitalism. In this moment the narrator is almost outside of himself, now able to mock the insanity and irony of his own self's hypocrisy and complicity within a system he has assured himself he actively disavows. He recognizes that his initial affective response to the shame the protestor provokes in him is to "*re-describe* the possibility of collective politics as the private drama of the family," ultimately centering himself as the revolutionary subject rather than considering what a *collective* politics might mean or look like. Instead, he redirects what capitalist realism already attempted to pre-emptively subsume and distort by holding onto what his shame allowed him to *see and* allowing it to fundamentally alter his perception of reality and the truth within it. In other words, he demonstrates here "...that coming to *see* can be part of the experience of shame" (O'Donnell 20).

This shift in perception is the seizing of shame that affectively forecloses all of capitalist realism's clichés and is thus the key to resisting capitalist realism and beginning to imagine alternative futures. The narrator realizes through shame that the politics of revolution is both personal and collective, that he must "harness the self-love" he has projected into the future and instead "let it branch out *horizontally* into the possibility of a *transpersonal* revolutionary subject in the present" in order to "*co-construct* a world" in which these moments of affective engagement and illuminating introspection are liberated from the confinements of commodification. Once this occurs the result is a snowball effect; the subsequent shift in perception—his ability to truly critically engage

with the discontents and crises of the present—is a permanent affect, shredding to pieces the veil of capitalist realism.

### 3.2: BEYOND SHAME: AESTHETIC RESISTANCE AND IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

In an interview on *10:04* Ben Lerner explained the novel’s ambiguity as intentional and vital to its purpose and form, asserting that “novels that pretend to give you all the information to me are very pacifying and facile,” as they offer a “false totality” or answers that they realistically cannot offer (Diacritik 06:47-07:28). This why, for instance, as the narrator parts ways with the Zuccotti Park protestor, he explains that “[i]t felt strange and unsettling to stay on the train as the protestor got off and the doors closed, to continue uptown toward a center for the performing arts,” yet he nevertheless admits, “I never considered altering my plan” (Lerner 50). Lerner is aware of the current impossibility of offering a blueprint of what any futures beyond capitalism might look like, but what he *does* intuit is how revolutionary the narrator’s shifting perception is in and of itself. In other words, it would be facile to have the narrator abandon his novel and join a life of protest and activism, and it would fail to be fiction at all; just as we are meant to imaginatively construct meaning within the novel’s spaces of omission, the novel is concerned with aesthetic forms of resistance that involve discovering and reflecting on “the collective fictions that we tell ourselves as a society that have real effects,” and questioning how “historical circumstances change those fictions, and what’s exciting or terrifying about revisions in the narratives that we use to make sense of our lives” (Diacritik 05:33-05:49).

One of the most profound metafictional stories within the novel that exemplifies the power of perception in altering the ‘fictions’ of reality is the story of Noor, a woman the narrator volunteers with at the Park Slope Food Coop. What begins as small-talk between the narrator and Noor segues into Noor confessing to the narrator her identity crisis; Noor tells the narrator that all her life she had identified as Arab-American because her father was Lebanese and explains that her perceived identity informed many of her life decisions like majoring in Middle Eastern studies, and, crucially, her relation to other people around her (Lerner 99). However, years after her father dies, her mother confesses that her father was not actually her biological father, that he did not want to tell her the truth about her parentage because it was “too late . . . and it would be psychologically damaging” (103). Upon receiving this news, Noor describes bracing herself for the impact of an emotional tide of emotions, only to find herself feeling affectively numb. Instead, what she experiences is a literal shift in reality as her hands begin to “fade”; she explains,

I had always thought of my skin as dark because my father’s skin was dark, because I took after him, because I was Arab-American, and as I sat there looking at my hands, without feeling anything, it was like I could see my skin whitening a little, felt color draining from my body . . . *I started seeing my own body differently*, starting with my hands . . . I still believe all the things that I believed; it hasn’t changed my sense of any of the causes. But my right to care about the causes, my right to have the name and speak the language and cook the food and sing the songs and be part

of the struggles or whatever—all of that has changed, is still in the process of changing, whether or not it should. (Lerner 104-105)

Noor's identity crisis and experience of receiving this traumatic news profoundly demonstrates the ways in which a shift in perception precedes a shift in reality; what Noor cannot put into words—and has perhaps not really processed—is the *shame* she feels upon perceiving her identity as fraudulent. Shocked and unable to verbalize this, she stares, stunned, at her hands which then mirror her self-perception; her corporeal identity is altered as she registers through her body what it means that she is not who she thought she was. The color of her skin begins to fade before her eyes as her perception of her internal identity is altered upon the realization that she has no biological 'right' to identify as Arab-American and thus with the protests and efforts she has pursued. While she still feels affectively and ethically invested in the beliefs which were tethered to her identity, her 'right' to identify and empathize with them, whether she is appropriating this identity by continuing to identify as Arab-American is thrown into question, as is the question of what constitutes one's identity. In response to the narrator's question about whether or not she still identifies as Arab-American, Noor explains that her conception of that is *still in the process of changing*; she is consistently reckoning with her shame and using it to construct an identity and ethics that meaningfully responds to her newfound insights.

This moment resonates with the novel's attempt to articulate a non-violent form of universality/collectivity that both acknowledges the fundamental differences between how different groups of people experience and suffer under the precarity and vulnerability under capitalism, *and nevertheless* attempts to imagine a way not to

empathize with that struggle (as we never really could), but to retain an affective investment in their struggles and participate in a shared, collective resistance against that oppression. For Noor, identity has proved to be a “fiction subject to revision”—what she is attempting to reckon with is how to retain the affective residues of that fictional identity in a way that also fully acknowledges and confronts the devastating realities of that truth, and the shame therein (whether or not she *should* or must feel that shame). What Noor’s story demonstrates both to the narrator and to us as readers is how fully reckoning with the truths and realities of the past—and how they have reverberated into the present—is an arduous and ongoing process of healing and reconciliation, but doing so offers the ability to retain what is of affective value and letting go of false notions of reality; after all, the “psychological damage” that Noor’s father attempted to shield her from took a new form as an unconscious appropriated identity that she had to later reckon with when she suffered the “psychological damage” of the truth. Crucially, the narrator sees the devastating but potentially revolutionary possibilities within Noor’s reconciliation, and wishes to tell her that “Discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all its moments, including those from our present present happened but never occurred” (Lerner 109). Rather than being retrospectively erased and irretrievable, the past *and present* become citable even when we remember it as different than how it was experienced, even when it is constantly being revised.

This sentiment returns to and reconciles the anxiety of narrator in the novel’s sub-story, “The Golden Vanity,” that the “experience of presence depended upon its

obliteration,” that to *remember* a beautiful moment necessarily ensures its erasure (Lerner 81). The narrator within this story can’t decide whether or not he should remain lucid during his wisdom teeth surgery, or opt in for induced amnesia; “I can’t figure out if abolishing the memory of pain is the same thing as abolishing the pain . . . And who knows if the memory is really abolished or just repressed, distributed differently . . . and that could be worse . . . [a] trauma cast out of time, experienced continuously, if unconsciously, instead of as a discrete event” (63-64). This trauma “cast out of time” resonates with Benjamin’s notion of “homogenous empty time,” of a durative crisis/historical trauma that is never reconciled, never fully acknowledged, and thus remains a gaping wound of history, unhealed. The narrator worries that if he takes the drugs he will be “splitting himself into two people:” the person who experienced and lived through the pain, and the one who willfully ignored it, and although he acknowledges the shame inherent in inducing amnesia— “what kind of precedent am I establishing, exactly, if I deal with a difficult experience by inducing amnesia?”— he ultimately takes the drugs (Lerner 64). His justification of this decision is its romanticization; his hyper-awareness of presentism is akin to the glowing ambience of the city during the storm at the beginning of the novel, and the narrator muses that because the induced amnesia of the drugs will erase his memory of this experience, it was all the more beautiful; “he was deeply moved to think this experience of presence depended upon its obliteration” (81). However, like what happens after the storm fails to be catastrophic, the narrator awakens to find himself devastated over the fact that he can remember his drug-induced memories, “which means it never happened” because their beauty and its reality was contingent upon their annihilation (81).

What Noor's story reveals to the narrator is the possibility that the affective value of the past can be retained or discovered from a present which acknowledges the fictions enveloping it. The narrator comes to realize the artistic and aesthetic possibilities that lie athwart our 'fictional' realities that are always open to revision; the beauty of the presentism that the narrator experienced under amnesia is *not* contingent upon its annihilation; this past becomes citable and aestheticized into "The Golden Vanity," and into the novel itself.

### 3.3: CONCLUSION: "APOCALYPSE? UTOPIA?"

There is a moment in the novel that segues from the narrator taking a break from writing his initial novel—an inauthentic novel about "faking the past to fund the future"—to visiting a place called The Institute for Totaled Art (Lerner 123). This Institute displays works of art that the narrator initially assumes have been physically destroyed or damaged, have rather been declared "totaled" of commodified value; these works of art, "after suffering one kind of damage or another, were formally demoted from art to mere object-hood and banned from circulation, removed from the market, relegated to this strange limbo" (129-130). As the narrator describes, despite the fact that some of the 'damage' done to these works of art is barely visible to the eye, they are donated to the Institute of "zero-value" art, free of charge (130). To the insurer, art is only valuable insofar as it adheres to the logic of the market, as its value and worth depend upon its market value. What the Institute's creators, Alena and Peter, are attempting to do is retrieve and imbue the art's *aesthetic* value by liberating them from commodification. The narrator finds himself mesmerized and moved by art's capacity for aesthetic resistance, explaining that

...it was not the slashed or burnt or stained artworks that moved me the most, that made me feel that Peter and Alena were doing something profound by unearthing the living dead of art. To my surprise, many of the objects were not, at least not to my admittedly inexperienced eye, damaged at all . . . [They] had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation—it was the same, only totally different . . . [I]t was incredibly rare—I remembered the jar of instant coffee the night of the storm—to encounter an object liberated from that logic. What was the word for that liberation? *Apocalypse? Utopia?* (Lerner 133).

To “unearth the living dead of art” means that aesthetic and affective value can be retrieved even after it has been co-opted by market logic. However, what the narrator is most in awe of is the artwork that is able to be liberated from commodification without undergoing any visible change. Just as the storm disrupted the logic of capitalist realism long enough for the narrator to glimpse the “majesty and murderous stupidity of the mundane economy,” this artwork and the Institute itself occupy a space liberated from commodification and thus teeming with utopian possibilities. The difference is that while the immediacy of the storm caused a temporary glitch in capitalist realism, the Institute and its artwork constitute a space in which the logic of capitalist realism has no value or rationale. The narrator does not have the vocabulary to define this liberation, but what he does register through this euphoric revelation is that sometime apocalypse and utopia overlap and are thus indiscernible. That these works of art can appear the same, yet be

“totally different” allows the reader to imagine what it would look like to apply that concept to the world; the following page displays two photos, side by side, that appear to be identical—one is captioned “Our world,” the other, “The world to come” (Lerner 135). The narrator is deeply affected by the ways in which art can be used as an aesthetic and affective mode for imagining alternative futures.

This affective register is the key to opening up imaginative spaces that escape the logic of capitalist production and exchange. The narrator’s exposure to these aesthetic and moving moments—located throughout the text during moments of crisis, in conversation with others, and in the juxtaposition of his fraudulent novel against art pregnant with utopian possibility—culminate into a *need* for his own artistic production to be something other than a commodity funding an identical future. What I mean is that the narrator himself experiences a fundamental shift in perception that *then* inevitably challenges his ability to fabricate something meaningless for financial gain; the “possibilities of feeling [that] open up in the present tense of reading” are foreclosed by the lack of affective investment in the story he’s writing. During a writing retreat in Marfa he is still unable to focus on the novel he’s supposed to be writing and instead finds himself channeling Whitman, musing over his belief that he was “looking across time, emptying himself out so that he could be filled by readers in the future” (Lerner 193). Fittingly, the narrator resolves that

I’d been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream . . . Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book you’re reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, *but a flickering between them*; I resolved to dilate my story not

into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures. (Lerner 194; emphasis mine)

There is no universal mode for resisting the abstract forces of capitalism that saturate the present moment, just as there is no blueprint for any of the “multiple futures” the narrator imagines. But the narrator (and/as Lerner) reveals through his artistic decision to write his/this novel, *10:04*, that one way of responding meaningfully to a capitalist order is through quotidian acts of resistance, and imagining the future just “as it is now, just a little different.”

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