

# Geographies of Affect in Contemporary Literature and Visual Culture

*Central Europe and the West*

*Edited by*

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# Impersonal Affect and Transpersonal Community in the Totaled City

*Pieter Vermeulen*

## Abstract

The relation between literature and mobility is not only a matter of representation, but also of affects and emotions. Drawing on recent work in affect studies, this chapter argues that literature can engage intractable, non-subjective, even impersonal affects in a way that can enrich existing approaches to translocality. It reads two recent New York novels, Teju Cole's *Open City* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*, and shows how these novels displace a subjective, personal form of emotion by a form of affective mobility that cuts across individuals, communities, and categories. In that way, the two novels illustrate the political potential of such literary affective mobility: they show how the novels' engagement with impersonal affect opens the way to an apprehension of a transpersonal community—a community that is not only made up of full-fledged persons, but also of less easily contained forces.

## 1 Introduction: Textual and Affective Mobility

Mobility and movement are never merely thematic features of literary works; as aesthetic and linguistic constructs, literary texts are themselves occasions of mobility—in the ways they travel through translation, in the ways they refract, repurpose, and remix other texts, and in the ways they affect, touch, and even upset their readers. The focus of this volume on translocality and feeling situates literary texts at the intersection of different forms of movement—as sites where physical, mental, and emotive dynamics interact. In this essay, I pursue the argument that contemporary literature directly engages with vectors of mobility, but refracts and recirculates them in unpredictable and intractable ways. Indeed, I argue that one reason to attend to literature in relation to feeling and translocality—a notion that has mostly been studied in fields such as anthropology, geography, or development studies, and not so much in literary studies—is that literature complicates certain assumptions we often bring to the study of physical and emotive movement.

Two of these assumptions are familiar. First, there is the prevalent idea that our globalized and digital world is marked by borderless and frictionless circulation and hyper-accelerated connectivity; this is an assumption that the paradigm of translocality, by highlighting the ineluctable locatedness of cultural activity, has worked hard to unsettle. Second, there is what literary critic Rachel Greenwald Smith has called “the affective hypothesis” underlying many discussions of emotion and literature: “the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience” (*Affect and American Literature* 1). For Greenwald Smith, there is an unspoken consensus among readers, writers, and critics that “(w)e read works of literature because they allow us direct contact with individuals who are like us but not us; they allow us to feel what others feel; they provoke empathy” (1). Yet such intersubjective transfers do not exhaust the relation between literature and feeling; indeed, as I argue, literature is at least as much about feelings and intensities that *cannot* so easily be predicted, codified, and mapped; literature, that is, also generates and circulates what can be called “*impersonal*” (Greenwald Smith’s preferred term) or “*transpersonal*” (novelist Ben Lerner’s term, as we will see) affects—feelings and intensities that are *not* the properties of readers or characters, but that disrupt the boundaries between individuals and communities. This slightly complicates the focus in the translocality paradigm on the experiences of *human* subjects by underlining that personal trajectories are shot through with unsettling *nonpersonal* forms of affective mobility. Such forms of emotive unsettlement are potentially productive: the power of literary affect to cut across the borders between established constituencies and groups (and even individuals) intimates possibilities for connection and community beyond settled limits. In this essay, I first elaborate my theoretical points about translocality and emotion; in the second half of the essay, I show how two recent New York novels, Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, move beyond customary emotional scenarios in order to intimate a sense of what Lerner calls “transpersonal” community—a connectedness cutting across entrenched divisions.

## 2 Translocality and the Dislocation of Emotion

So how exactly does translocality unsettle the fast and frictionless mobility that is sometimes celebrated under the rubric of globalization? The term “translocality” was coined to overcome the blind spots of popular theories of globalization and transnationalism; it “emerged from a concern over the

disembedded understanding of transnational networks” (Brickell and Datta 3). The research paradigms of globalization and transnationalism tend to emphasize the interconnectedness and mobility afforded by global capitalism and international communication, but, so proponents of translocality argue, they often do so in an abstract and delocalized way; only *national* borders really figure as obstacles in these frameworks, and then only as limits to be crossed. What remains invisible is, first, the importance of *intranational*, or indeed “inter-regional or inter- and intra-urban” movement (Brickell and Datta 4), and second, the local contexts in which international flows are inevitably lived and experienced. By focusing so much on mobility and migration, the notion of globalization threatens to pre-empt an analytical focus on particular sites (such as cities) as overdetermined nodes in which different vectors, forces, and agents of mobility intersect in complex and contradictory ways. In contrast to globalization, translocality makes it possible to home in on “unevenness” and “specific limitations and blockages” (Freitag and von Oppen 1); it affords “an understanding of place-making as a process which depends on transnational as well as on more localized movements,” as it “integrate(s) notions of fluidity and discontinuity associated with mobilities, movements and flows ... with notions of fixity, groundedness and situatedness” (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 376); it promotes a version of what has been called “grounded” or “rooted” transnationalism (Brickell and Datta 9).

This emphasis on how flows of mobility settle in particular places and, conversely, how particular sites can be analyzed through their participation in several overlapping and intersecting movements makes translocality a fruitful methodological lens through which to focus on formations like the city—as this volume does under the rubric of “urban space”—but also, I would argue, on literary works. If we want to understand the way literature engages in and is solicited by the social world, translocality invites us to study literary texts as what Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak have called “articulated moments in networks of social relations” (374). In *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani commends what he calls a “translocal poetics” for balancing local and more encompassing forces; in this way, “a *translocal poetics* [is] an alternative to understandings of the relation [of literature] to place as either rooted or rootless, local or universal” (xiii). “Neither localist nor universalist, neither nationalist nor vacantly globalist, a *translocal poetics*,” Ramazani writes, “highlights the dialogic intersections ... of specific discourses, genres, techniques, and forms of diverse origins” (43). It invites us to consider literature without falling for “[c]elebratory discourses of hyper-mobility and nomadism,” and to capture cultural movement in all its complexity and contradictoriness (M. Smith 189).

Scholarship on literature and space is underwritten by a conviction that literature at its best manages to *represent* cultural movement in complex, nuanced, and often surprising ways. Yet I want to stress that the tension between locatedness and drift, between fixity and flow, not only characterizes literature's representation of cultural mobility, but also its engagement with emotion and affect. In my book *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel*, I locate the ethical and political promise of contemporary literature in its manipulation of affect—which is, as I argue there, not quite the same as emotion. More specifically, recent innovations in the Anglophone novel disable the emotive scenarios through which novels traditionally operate—think of narrative suspense, anticipation of closure, significant and transformative plot events, or psychologically complex characters who invite empathy. Recent literary works such as those by Tom McCarthy, J.M. Coetzee, and Teju Cole deliberately frustrate readers' expectations of such emotions: instead of prompting significant emotional responses, they deliver flat cardboard characters, plots in which nothing happens, or experiences that fail to transform their characters. The result, for the reader, is a frustrated emotional experience. Yet crucially, such a frustrated emotional experience is not quite the same as an *unemotional* experience; instead, I argue in the book, readers are left with an awkward, uneasy sense of affective disorientation; such unpredictable and intractable affects, however, may paradoxically open promising avenues for new kinds of connection and attachment.

One way to describe this movement of feelings is in terms of the distinction between *affect* and *emotion*—a distinction that, I should underline, is never absolute, but that theorists of affect have begun to make under the influence of the work of (especially) the psychologist Silvan Tomkins and the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. While *affects* are non-cognitive and involuntary intensities that take place outside of consciousness, emotions like empathy, grief, or joy have a cognitive dimension, are part of a mental narrative sequence, and are therefore considered as belonging to individuals; they are supposed *to express* the individual's inner experiences. So, while affects, in the words of Brian Massumi, are non-subjective and non-semantic forces that are “narratively de-localized” and “disconnected from meaningful sequencing,” their absorption as part of individual experience makes them “conventional, consensual,” and “functional” (25, 28). When we recuperate bewildering *affects as emotional experiences*, the argument goes, these affects lose their radically nonsubjective character, and therefore also their potential to dissolve the self-contained interiority of the individual and to open it to new connections and recombinations.

Literary works that deliberately sabotage the production of recognizable and codified emotions—empathy, recognition, relief—make room for



unrecognized and unowned affects that operate outside of “the subjective domain of consciously codified emotion” (Greenwald Smith, “Postmodern” 428). They disrupt the alliance between feeling and person, between emotion and individual, and make possible new and yet unimagined forms of connection. Affect, for Vilashini Cooppan, can never be fully captured, but “open[s] itself to potential liberations, escapes, and freedoms” (56); it is a dynamic principle that “passes through but also beyond personal feelings” (Terada 109) and that allows contemporary fiction to explore *impersonal* feelings that more capriciously and less predictably circulate across the divisions that make up individuals and communities. Moving beyond predictable and recognizable emotion, contemporary literary texts release, in Rachel Greenwald Smith’s words, “a wealth of feeling that is poised for connection, for recombination, attachment, and eventual codification” (“Postmodernism” 438).

An important qualification is in place here. It does *not* follow from the distinction between affect and emotion that we can imagine literature as a subjectless zone of pure, unmediated, and freely circulating affect (and however far-fetched the idea of such a zone may sound, it is often entertained by Deleuzian theory). As a *linguistic* construct, literature is by definition engaged with meaning, with cognition, and with the encoding of experience—with the processes, that is, that turn affect into emotion. Yet crucially, literature is not only a linguistic construct—it is also an *aesthetic* operation that tends to undo the stability and meaning it *also* generates. Like all works of culture, literary works are “linguistically based and therefore inevitably codifying” (Greenwald Smith, “Postmodernism” 431), *even if, as aesthetic formations*, they simultaneously generate affects that cut across these codifications. Tracking the emotive dynamics of literary texts is then a matter of tracing the movement between coding and decoding, between emotion and affect, and between the personal and the impersonal—a movement, or so I argue, that is staged quite deliberately in some of the most interesting contemporary fiction. Ultimately, this is why translocality and affect can enrich one another: both paradigms invite us to attend to the movements between fixity and flow and between personal possession and impersonal dispossession in all their contradiction and complexity; they make it possible to see how literature stages the restless dynamic between emotion and affect in order to intimate possibilities of transpersonal connection, recombination, and attachment.

In the rest of this essay, I bring this perspective to bear on two critically acclaimed recent New York novels—Teju Cole’s *Open City* from 2011 and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* from 2014. For all their differences, the two novels, I argue, evoke city life in ways that undermine the reader’s conventional empathy and replace it with more awkward and uncomfortable affects that yet intimate new

possibilities for connection and attachment. While my reading of *Open City* mainly focuses on how its literary strategies sabotage emotional codifications in order to generate an unruly affective dynamic, the discussion of *10:04* shows how that novel more decidedly mobilizes unpredictable affects for the intimation of a transpersonal community, however provisional. Cumulatively, the readings of the two novels do not present a progressive narrative from personal emotion over impersonal affect to transpersonal community; instead, they show that the movements between the personal, the impersonal, and the transpersonal makes up the force field in which these and other significant contemporary fictions operate.

### 3 *Open City: Toward Impersonal Affect*<sup>1</sup>

On a superficial reading, *Open City* presents itself as a celebration of intercultural connectedness and mobility. The story is told from the perspective of Julius, an extremely erudite, artistic, and sophisticated young psychiatrist with Nigerian and German roots. Julius's meandering thoughts are loosely organized by two narrative devices: first, his compulsive habit of walking the streets and traveling the public transport systems of New York and Brussels, which generates a number of intense aesthetic experiences as well as a series of encounters with a whole catalogue of storytellers; and second, Julius's memories, which connect the narrative present and the stories of Julius's interlocutors to his and his family's Nigerian and German pasts. *Open City* is clearly anchored in a particular metropolitan location, and it imaginatively opens up that locale by overlaying urban experience with a multiplicity of stories, contexts, and memories. With Julius as the reader's guide, it displays the complexity and contradictoriness of contemporary metropolitan life.

Readers encounter this multilayered experience through the perspective of the novel's extremely self-conscious first-person narrator, who painstakingly captures and filters the events and encounters that make up his everyday life. In the eyes of many critics, Julius's wanderings and ruminations build a perspective that is both intimate and detached, engaged as well as estranged. The many celebratory reviews of the novel did not fail to recognize Julius as an exemplary *flâneur* (see Foden; Messud; Wood). Famously theorized by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, the nineteenth-century *flâneur* was

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<sup>1</sup> My discussion of *Open City* draws on an earlier essay on the book. See Vermeulen, "Flights of Memory."

a leisurely wanderer who was acutely attentive to the spectacle provided by the processes of commodification and urbanization that surrounded him. An aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city *without* fully surrendering to them, the *flâneur* emerges from Baudelaire's and Benjamin's work as a dialectical figure "who presented himself as open to everything but who actually saved himself from the chaos of randomness through his pretensions to epistemological control" (Rabinovitz 7).<sup>2</sup> In this way, the *flâneur* anticipates a cosmopolitan ethos that thrives on intercultural curiosity and the virtues of the aesthetic.

Thus, on the face of it, the novel's controlled and extremely self-conscious perspective affords the reader access to a translocal urban experience. Yet, as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Julius' ratiocinations and self-consciousness also function as a strategy for emotional neutralization. Indeed, this neutralization is so successful that it becomes fairly uncanny, as readers begin to note that for all his intercultural encounters and aesthetic experiences, Julius fails to be touched or transformed by what he encounters. It becomes apparent that, rather than cultivating a sophisticated and reserved distance from the world, Julius suffers from a more drastic dissociation from it, and this makes it increasingly hard for readers to empathize with him. This dissociative disorder manifests itself in Julius' compulsive walking—in which he often only belatedly realizes where he ended up or how he got there. Near the end of the novel, readers, who have only had access to Julius' mind, also discover that this mind is highly unreliable, as they learn that he has seemingly forgotten that he raped the sister of one of his friends years before. This revelation—for the reader, but also, disturbingly, for Julius himself—comes when the girl confronts him after a party in New York. Importantly, this confrontation is the only passage in the book that breaks with the novel's customary rhythm—its casually chronological flow punctuated by frequent excursions into Julius's or his interlocutors' pasts; it is the only sequence, in other words, that ruptures the composure of the *flâneur* that the rest of the novel seems to sustain. To make matters worse, Julius fails to muster any reaction to the girl's accusation. Rather than speaking, he imaginatively converts the river, at which the girl had been staring during her monologue, into an aesthetic spectacle: "the river gleamed like aluminium roofing" (246). Here, what seemed like the novel's studied affectless tone turns into something more sinister; what seemed like emotional neutralization generates an awkward and disturbing affect.

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<sup>2</sup> For critical takes on the figure of the *flâneur*, see Buck-Morss and Wilson.

As I have argued at greater length elsewhere (Vermeulen, “Flights of Memory”), the combination of compulsive walking and a failure of memory has a name: the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* calls it a “dissociative fugue.” This condition is characterized by “sudden, unexpected travel away from home or one’s customary place of daily activities,” and often goes hand in hand with “confusion about personal identity” (523). Ian Hacking, who has devoted a book to the history of this pathology, characterizes it as “impulsive uncontrolled traveling, with confused memories” (77). Julius’s amnesia, his compulsive walking, and his dissociation from the stories and memories he encounters—as well as, we can add, the novel’s thematic engagement with musical fugues from its very first pages—all point in the direction of this phenomenon.

The figure of the *fugueur* emerged in the late nineteenth century as the dark counterpart of the *flâneur*. While the *flâneur* was part of an emerging discourse that exalted mobility and tourism as “exceptional, admired travel, a heightened form of travel,” the *fugueur*’s “ambulatory automatism” served as the shadow side of this new-won mobility (Hacking 52). It was associated with *vagabondage* and the unbearable boredom of modern life. And while *flâneurs* take an acute interest in the world around them in order to enrich the self, *fugueurs*’ compulsive escape from their normal lives is “less a voyage of self-discovery than an attempt to eliminate self” (30). By showing how easily the *flâneur* shades into the *fugueur*, I argue, *Open City* transforms the translocality of the metropolis from an emotional experience that readers are invited to share into an awkward, strange, unnamable unease, a negative affect that readers cannot immediately understand or absorb. Near the end of the novel, Julius disappears as a figure the reader can empathize with; what is left is the bitter aftertaste of a novel that has deliberately sabotaged the celebration of emotive and imaginative mobility it seemed to invite readers to share.

How can we understand these *impersonal* affects that the novel releases in the place of the strong emotional experience that the reader is denied? I have argued that even minor or negative affects—what Sianne Ngai has influentially studied as “ugly feelings”—have the potential to generate new associations and connections due to the very fact that they don’t belong to any one person and that they don’t coincide with any existing collectivity. They are, to cite Rachel Greenwald Smith’s words again, “poised for connection, for recombination, attachment, and eventual codification” (“Postmodernism” 438). *Open City* begins to intimate such larger connections by gradually changing its imagining of the metropolitan locale; rather than only a site of aesthetic transport and intercultural encounter, New York becomes part of a much vaster canvas. One strategy the novel uses is unearthing different layers of the history

of—colonial, imperial, racial—violence that are (barely) buried under the surfaces of post-9/11 New York; another one is connecting New York to global contexts that overdetermine the lived experience of the city. Yet, near the end of the novel, the city's remit is expanded even further. The occasion is Julius locking himself out of Carnegie Hall; he finds himself “on a flimsy fire escape,” and he is surprised to see the stars, as he had not expected to see them “with the light pollution perpetually wreathing the city”:

[the stars'] true nature was their persisting visual echo of something that was already in the past. In the *unfathomable* ages it took for light to cross such distances, the light source itself had in some cases long been extinguished, its dark remains stretched away from us at *ever greater speed* ... in the dark spaces between the dead, shining stars, were stars I could not see, stars that still existed, and were giving out light that hadn't reached me yet, stars now living and giving out light but present to me only as blank interstices. (256; my emphases)

The novel's deliverance from codified emotion makes possible a connectedness to a much larger scale—to “unfathomable,” “ever greater” cosmic dimensions. This signals a form of connection that does not stop at the limits of human life, but also implicates decidedly nonhuman forces. It is here, I argue, by bending the translocal investments of the novel through the power of impersonal affects, that *Open City* delineates the possibility of a community that might be more appropriate to a present in which climate change, species extinction, resource depletion, and mass pollution—all phenomena that are studied under the increasingly popular rubric of the Anthropocene—invite us to imagine forms of connectedness that do not stop at the borders of human life.

#### 4 *10:04: Toward Transpersonal Community*<sup>3</sup>

In this final section, I take up the question of translocality and feeling in another recent high-profile New York novel—Ben Lerner's *10:04*. The (at least) semi-autobiographical novel recounts the life of the narrator, also called Ben, an early-twenty-first-century man, New Yorker, and writer. At the novel's opening, he finds himself overwhelmed by anxieties and commitments. He has just

3 My discussion of *10:04* draws on a more extensive reading of the novel. See Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)?”

signed a contract for a novel on the basis of “an earnest if indefinite proposal”; he is diagnosed with a heart condition that gives him “a statistically significant” chance of sudden death; his best friend Alex has engaged his services as a sperm donor, without really resolving the issue of his paternal involvement (4–6); and to make matters worse, he is also a particularly self-conscious contributor to anthropogenic climate changes, who imagines the future “underwater” and “wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns” (40, 14). From the outset, then, *10:04*'s New York, like *Open City*'s New York at the end of the novel, is made up of the incongruent interactions of vastly different scales and rhythms: the minute details in which the nervous, intense, careful, and hyper-self-conscious narrator registers his feelings, thoughts, and experiences; the vast, planetary scale of climate change and energy depletion that makes itself felt in New York through hurricanes and black-outs; and the mundane details of a not very exceptional life of friendship and work, desire and doubt.

For *10:04*, the future is first of all a site of insecurity, anxiety, and concern; the text invests most of its experimental energy in imagining literature and art as things that can prefigure a less constraining future—as, in the novel's own words, provisional “forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of [community's] real possibility,” as “the stuff out of which we build a social world” (116). The novel allows literature and art to access what it calls “the transpersonal” by breaking with traditional regimes of narration, meaning-making, and emotional codification. In the same way that the novel presents New York as shot through by dimensions and scales that render it newly vulnerable and vibrant in equal measure, its *formal* innovations break with the traditional protocols through which literary fiction constructs meaning and emotion. In the terms I have been using, this means that *10:04* sabotages personal emotion in order to open itself up to *impersonal* affects that, to the extent that they are not owned by either character or reader, remain “poised for connection, for recombination, attachment, and eventual codification” (Greenwald Smith, “Postmodern” 438)—in, or so *10:04* hopes, a future *transpersonal* community, that is to say, a community not founded on intersubjective encounters *between* discrete persons, but in affective engagement that cut across the borders of the individual.

So, what does it mean, exactly, to break with the notion of the person and the emotional scenarios it promotes? I want to highlight two ways in which *10:04* challenges the traditional emotive operations of the novel genre: its manipulation of characterization and its destabilization of fictionality. The first element that pre-empts the reader's strong emotional identification with Ben, the novel's narrator, is that he is simply too specific to serve as a character and to leave the reader room for imagination. Indeed, Ben's very specificity, his proximity to the book's author, in a sense makes him less of a character. As Catherine



Gallagher has argued, a traditional fictional character never simply refers to an individual, but can instead refer to “a whole class of people in general” rather than to “persons in particular” (342). A character, Gallagher notes, is “at once utterly finished and also necessarily incomplete”: it is “utterly finished” in that it is fully determined by the “finite set of sentences” by which it is described; yet because it is not exhaustively captured by that set, it is also “necessarily incomplete,” and so invites readers to imaginatively complete them (358). Unlike real people, literary characters grant us full access to intimate thoughts, feelings, and motivations, and this unreal access allows readers to imagine familiarity and intimacy with them. This explains literary characters’ “peculiar affective force” (Gallagher 356); it explains that readers engage with characters as more than just sums of textual features. The problem with Lerner’s main character is that he is and is not the writer himself, and that he is, in a sense, too close to the real Ben Lerner to require imaginative completion or allow for fantasies of transparency and intimacy. If traditional fictional characters are, for Gallagher, “enticingly unoccupied” as they bracket reference to particular individuals (351), Lerner’s narrator is, we could say, *annoyingly occupied* by the identity of the actual Ben Lerner (it is hardly possible for the reader *not* to notice the echoes between narrator and author), without, however, fully coinciding with him. There is neither a traditional character nor a real-life person to identify with, which means the novel invites the reader to engage in more awkward and open-ended affective work.

A second formal decision that hinders the reader’s traditional emotional investment is the work’s self-conscious self-positioning on the brink of fiction and nonfiction. *10:04* imagines itself as a text where “the distinction between fiction and nonfiction d[oes]n’t obtain”; it is a place “on the very edge of fiction” (237); in this place, “the correspondence between text and world [is] less important than ... what possibilities of feeling [are] opened up in the present tense of reading” (171). Remarkably, *10:04* uses several metafictional elements that are familiar from postmodern fiction, but they are deployed to heighten rather than to subvert the reality of what it describes. The proximity between author and narrator, the explicit reflections on writing, and the inclusion of essays, stories, and poems by the real Ben Lerner as part of the narrator’s stream of consciousness emphatically do *not* serve to expose fiction as pure artifice or expose reality as an imaginative construct; instead, and in marked contrast to postmodern versions of metafiction, they serve to position reading, writing, and living on the same plane—a plane on which they are all equally real; the process of writing literature is part of the reality that is being written, and the reader is intermittently addressed as if they were participating in the construction of that new reality. A good example is a moment when the narrator sits

down to record a particular experience in a particular place, only to coordinate that experience with the moment of writing and the moment of reading: “I remember the address (you can drag the ‘pegman’ icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighbourhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I’m doing that in a separate window now)” (163). Perception, remembrance, and verbalization operate on the same plane, as do experience, writing, and reading. What matters is less the ontological distinctions between reality and fiction than the novel possibilities of feeling and relation. In moments like these, the novel cancels the emotive processes through which readers normally relate to the fictional world and invites them to expose themselves to the possibility of different and unregimented forms of connectedness.

Withdrawing from predictable emotive patterns in order to prefigure a transpersonal future: this is the movement that *10:04* is interested in, and the one it reflects on through the art project of the narrator’s girlfriend Alena, who creates an “Institute for Totaled Art” (the project is based on artist Elka Krajewska’s “Salvage Art Institute”). The idea is simple: Alena collects and displays works of art that have been damaged and that insurance companies have declared to have “zero value.” Objects are “formally demoted from art to mere objecthood” (129–30). The remarkable thing is that this changed status is often invisible. Contemplating a seemingly unharmed Cartier-Bresson print, the narrator reflects how “[i]t 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” (133). The totaling of art liberates the object from the cash nexus: totaled art works are officially withdrawn from circulation, and can never again acquire monetary value. If the late capitalist artwork—or indeed, work of literature—is normally a mere placeholder for future financial gain, totaled art exorcizes “the fetishism of the market,” and is, for the narrator, “a utopian readymade—an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny of price” (134). Withdrawing literary works, emotional investments, and indeed open cities from customary forms of circulation, this suggests, is one way of opening them up to transpersonal connections. It is only when affects are affirmed as radically impersonal, as belonging to no one (like a worthless work of art), that such transpersonal connections become available at all.

The novel ends by imagining a blacked-out New York—an open city, and now also a totaled city. Threatened by Hurricane Sandy, it is the backdrop to Ben’s friendship with the woman who is, at the end of the novel, carrying his baby. New York is called a “totaled city”—a city that, because it has been liberated from customary economic dictates and emotional expectations, prefigures a transpersonal future. On the last two pages, the novel, as it has done a



couple of times before, directly addresses its readers in order to enlist them for the transpersonal connections it forges—for what it calls “the fantasy of coeval readership” (93). It also suddenly shifts to the future tense, as if to signal that this totaled city presents a future that is no longer the threat or the source of anxiety for the narrator it was at the beginning. The two last paragraphs continue to describe the walk in the future tense, and the remarkable thing is that, apart from this shift in grammatical tense, nothing else really changes: events are still described in great, seemingly trivial detail; indeed, the events are so mundane that, the narrator notes, they “would sound improbable in fiction” (239). Yet this is a novel that has totaled the conventions of fictions, and that, even if it still looks and feels like a conventional novel, has made a wealth of as yet unnamed and untamed affect available. The point, it seems, is that the translocal city, or what the novel’s very last lines call “the totaled city in the second person plural” is already a fact, and that the unsettling affective work of literature is one way to make us see that (240).

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